

"Missio Dei"

Genesis 3:1-19 and Luke 10:17-24

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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This morning, before I explain that strange sermon title in your bulletin, I want to tell you a story. It too is a little strange. It comes from a report that first surfaced five years ago, in a publication called Neurocase.

Now if you've never heard of it, Neurocase is a journal "specializing in case studies in neuropsychology, neuropsychiatry and behavioral neurology." It's read mostly by professionals working in the field. But five years ago Neurocase reported on the case of a woman called for the sake of anonymity only "AJ."

"AJ" is described in the article only as a 42 year old woman from California. She's a college graduate. She works as an administrative assistant to the manager of a plant. She's a wife and a mother. And while none of that's particularly noteworthy, there is one other fact about "AJ" that is. She has the most complete memory of events that researcher have ever tested.

She can replay decades of her life like a movie. Give her any date, and she can recall what day of the week it was, what the weather was like that day, and what personal events and world events happened that day. Her memory is so thorough that a team of neurological researchers from the University of California had to coin a new word to describe it. They call it "hyperthymestic memory." And they define it as a "memory that goes beyond limits."

Dr. James McGaugh, one of the researchers who worked with "AJ" writes in the journal that "it was with great skepticism and curiosity that I first met AJ." But after years of work, administering batteries of tests to "AJ," Dr. McGaugh is convinced. There is no evidence, he says that "AJ" is using a particular technique to remember, nor is there any evidence to indicate that she is simply a savant. So Dr. McGaugh, one of the world authorities on memory, concludes in his article the only way that he can. "I can provide" he writes, "no explanation at this time for why "AJ's" memory is so complete."

However, at one point in his work with her Dr. McGaugh did ask her an interesting question. He asked her if she thought of her memory as a gift. And her answer, he writes, surprised him. Here's his report on it. "Well," she replied, looking at me with a distant expression, "if I was able to cure a disease, that

would be a gift. But to remember, like, the details about the end of every relationship...that's hard."

And it is hard, isn't it? That's probably why we don't often take time to remember it. But the story in Genesis 3 is a story we need to remember. Because it's a story about the end of a relationship. And the details are important.

That's why, if I could, I would have had the whole story read this morning as our Old Testament lesson. Because the story actually begins before the part we read, back in Genesis 1. "Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals ..."

And we need to remember some important details about those familiar words, two details in fact that we usually forget. We were created, the Bible says, for two purposes. The first was to have fellowship with God.

So Genesis says we were created not only in his image but in his likeness. It means we were created to be like God in all the ways that make a relationship with God possible. In Hebrew the expression being like God implies we were meant to be close to Him. We were created, in other words, not only to resemble God. We were created to be in relationship with God. That's the first reason we were created.

But there's another reason we were created. And because we don't have a memory like "AJ" many of us have forgotten it. It's one of the details we just don't remember. But the Bible says there is a second reason why we were created. We were created, it says, not only for a relationship. We were created for a role. "Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule ..." We were meant, in other words, to play a role alongside God. We were made to join Him in governing and managing His kingdom. We were created to rule over parts of the world God created as His junior partners.

And in the beginning we did. That's what the Bible says. Genesis 2 says "The Lord God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." It means that God gave Adam a responsibility as His co-worker. Adam was given the job of governing the garden.

And Genesis says that later God brought Adam "all the wild animals and the birds to see what he'd name them. And whatever he called them, that was its name." It means God gave Adam full privileges as a junior partner. He gave him

the right to name the creatures He was going to rule over just like He had been named by the God who ruled over Him.

So in the beginning, Scripture says, the vision was clear. We were made for a relationship with God. And we were meant to rule with Him. We were meant to manage creation alongside Him, to share in the responsibilities and the privileges of doing that as God's partners. So in the beginning, God's mission and humanity's mission was one in the same; to care for creation and manage it together as senior and junior partner.

But the partnership came apart. And the story of how it came apart is the story we read this morning. It's a story of betrayal; a betrayal of trust. For God asked of his junior partners only one thing. "You're free to eat from any tree in the garden," He told them, "but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you'll surely die."

It was one command, only one. And it was given because God knew that the knowledge of evil was not the kind knowledge junior partners could manage, not the kind of knowledge whose power they could control. So he gave them a command; not to tempt them, but to protect them.

But there was a creature who wanted to tempt them, Genesis says. And when they were tempted with the thought that they could ignore God's command, the woman and the man betrayed everything. They betrayed their relationship. They betrayed their role. They betrayed their mission. They betrayed their partner.

But their God did not betray them. It's true. The consequences of their sin couldn't be ignored. The original mission of God couldn't be continued. The whole creation would suffer the effect of that. But from the moment He learns of it, the God of Genesis reveals Himself to be a God of not only of judgment, but of grace, amazing grace.

That's why, in Genesis 3, in the middle of the first judgment in the Bible, we also find the first promise. For although the plan of God for humanity and creation could no longer work because of human failure, in Genesis 3, God gives the first hint that he will act in such a way as to rescue and redeem his fallen partners. He will make a new plan. An "offspring" a "seed" will come, God promises the serpent. It will come from a woman into the world. And that "offspring," God promises, will crush the "head" the very source of sin and temptation, and start the redemption of man and creation.

It's amazing, writes Herbert Lockyer, amazing that "the only key to all messianic prophecy lies hanging at the front door of the Bible." But there it is. And the key unlocks for us the truth of the gospel, doesn't it? For from a woman alone, the Gospel says, a woman named Mary, a "seed," an "offspring" came into the world. We've just celebrated his birth. His name is Jesus.

And through him, by putting our trust in what he's done for us, you and I can have our relationship with God restored. For Jesus has made that possible. He's taken our sins on his shoulders and with his blood washed them away from God's sight.

And while that's good news, it's not all the good news. For there's more! For the gospel says Jesus came not only to restore our relationship with God. He came to restore our role in God's kingdom. He came to give us back the opportunity to take part in God's mission. That's why He sent 72 of his disciples out into their world, so they could see for themselves what it would be like to partner with God again in His mission in the world.

And that's where the title of this morning's sermon comes from. You see the English words "God's Mission" come from the Latin words "Missio Dei." And for centuries, since the death of Christ and the dawn of what Paul calls the "new creation," those words have been used by people like Augustine, and Luther, and Calvin to remind Christians of the second part of the gospel that we sometimes forget.

You see when we put our faith in Christ, we not only get our relationship with God restored by grace through faith. We also receive back by that same grace and faith our role alongside God in His mission. We receive back our call to be God's partners, to partner with Him in the work that He's doing in the world. Only this time, the purpose of our partnership isn't management. It's rescue. It's redemption. It's the reconciliation of the world.

And for the next three weeks, as we start to think about living the kind of life that can leave a legacy in God's kingdom, we need to start here. We need to start by thinking some more about the "Missio Dei" the mission of God in our world. Because connecting our lives to the mission of God in our world can make a difference. So let me close this morning with this story.

In July of 2005 Kyle MacDonald was stuck. He was stuck in a dead-end job. so he came up with a plan. He looked at what he had in his desk drawer and picked up one red paperclip. He went on the Internet and traded it to someone who gave him a fish-shaped pen for it.

Next, he traded the pen for a doorknob. Then he traded the doorknob for a Coleman stove. He traded the Coleman stove for an electric generator. And on and on it went. Because Kyle was hooked, hooked on trading in a dead-end life for something better.

To take a long story and make it short one year after he started Kyle MacDonald finally traded what he had in possession; a bit part in a Hollywood movie for a house in his hometown of Saskatchewan, Canada. But that's what can happen when you decide to trade a dead-end life for something better.

And my friends God is offering you and me the same kind of opportunity, the opportunity to trade in the life we have now for the kind of life that can leave a legacy. Are you willing to make that trade?

Let's pray ...