

“Rewind”

Matthew 13:44-52

Dr. Jim Davis, November 30, 2008

First Presbyterian Church - Kingwood

On this first Sunday of Advent 2008, I'd like to introduce you to two people you may or may not already know. I don't know them personally, but I've read enough about them to be able, I think, to introduce them to you. So let me do that.

The first person I'd like you to meet is a 42 year old woman from California. She's a college graduate who works as an administrative assistant to a plant manager. She's a wife and a mother. But in order to protect her privacy she has agreed to be known only by her initials. You see AJ is unique. She leads a double life constantly; one life is her present, the other her past.

“My memory,” she says, “is on rewind, constantly.” And AJ can remember almost any date or time. She remembers, for example, that at 12:34 p.m. on August 3, 1986, a young man she had a crush on called her on the telephone. She remembers that on March 28, 1992, she had lunch with her father at the Beverly Hills Hotel. She remembers almost everything; world events, feelings, the weather. It's all there.

Her memory is so thorough that a team of neurobiologists from the University of California coined a new term to describe it. They call it “hyperthymestic” which means remembering above any limit. Dr. James McGaugh a member of the team who tested AJ first wrote about her in 2006 in the journal *Neurocase*.

“It was with great skepticism and curiosity,” he wrote, “that I met AJ.” Over five years however, she consented “to being queried and probed about her memory, tested with novel and standardized tests.” As a result, Dr. McGaugh and his colleagues are convinced. AJ's memory is unique, “different from all other cases of superior memory reported in previous literature.”

AJ herself, when asked if she feels her memory is a gift responds, “Well, to cure a disease; that's a gift. But to remember, like, the end of every relationship... it's hard sometimes.” Sometimes her memory of the past consumes her and she becomes almost unconscious of the present. But she also acknowledges that being able to rewind life can sometimes be comforting.

The second person I'd like you to meet this morning, at least in terms of remembering, is the exact opposite of AJ. Still, in order to protect his privacy, he too is known only by his initials, EP.

EP is six-foot-two, with perfectly parted white hair and unusually long ears. He's personable, friendly, gracious. He laughs a lot. He seems at first like your average genial grandfather. But 15 years ago, the herpes simplex virus infected his brain, and caused the death of two large lobes in his medial temporal brain. With those lobes went most of EP's memory.

He has been left with two types of amnesia, one which prevents him from forming new memories and another which renders him unable to recall large portions of the past. In an article in *National Geographic* last November Joshua Foer described his encounter with EP.

"I met EP," he writes, "at his home, a bright bungalow in suburban San Diego, on a warm spring day. I drove there with Larry Squire, a neuroscientist from the University of California at San Diego, and Jen Frascino, the research coordinator in Squire's lab who visits EP regularly to administer cognitive tests. Even though Frascino has been to EP's home some 200 times, he always greets her as a stranger.

Frascino sits down opposite EP at his dining room table and asks a series of questions that gauge his common sense. She quizzes him about what continent Brazil is on, the number of weeks in a year, the temperature water boils at.

She wants to demonstrate what IQ tests have already proved: EP is no dummy. He patiently answers the questions—all correctly—with roughly the same sense of bemusement I imagine I would have if a total stranger walked into my house, sat down at my table, and very earnestly asked me if I knew the boiling point of water."

But then he looks at his wrist, sees a bracelet that's been there for years now, and remarks, "what's this?" The bracelet says "severe memory loss." EP may remember facts, but he has no personal memory. He lives for the moment, literally.

Everything he experiences is constantly new to him. Fortunately it is almost always interesting to him. And EP lives a mostly happy life. "He doesn't have stress," says his daughter Carol, who lives nearby.

So there they are ... two people I wanted you to meet this morning. And the reason I wanted you to meet them is because of what Jesus says in Matthew 13. "Every scribe who's been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

The new and the old; to understand the kingdom, Jesus says, you need both. AJ has the old. She is able to remember the past in a way no-one else has ever been able to do. But as she says, sometimes her memory of the past consumes her present. EP has the present. He lives in it continually, but without the past, each new event has no lasting meaning.

The new and the old; "every scribe who's trained for the kingdom," Jesus says, has both. You need to have both. And advent is supposed to remind us of that.

You see Advent is a season with two eyes. With one eye it looks back and remembers the Old Testament prophecies and the coming kingdom. And it remembers how those prophecies were fulfilled at the birth of Christ. But with the other eye Advent looks forward towards what will one day be new. It looks forward and remembers that one day Jesus will return to fulfill his own prophecies, to bring his kingdom to completion.

When we grasp that, when we realize that Advent is a celebration of two truths; that Jesus has come and is coming, that the kingdom has come and is coming, we become, "scribes of the kingdom," people who are able out of the treasure of our understanding of the kingdom to begin to comprehend what God is doing.

Everything, in other words, comes into focus for us. For the past year we have been concentrating our attention on the Gospel of Matthew, on the kingdom Jesus' first announced and then brought into being. We looked at his mission statement for kingdom people. It's found in Matthew 28. The Great Commission tells us that as "scribes of the kingdom" we've been called into service. We are to go into the world and live as missional people, people who participate each day in through our personal lives in the mission of God.

We looked at the mandate for kingdom people. It's found in Matthew 22. The Great Commandment tells us that as "scribes of the kingdom" we've been called into discipleship. We are to follow Christ and learn how to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.

We listened to Messiah's message for us in the Sermon on the Mount. We investigated Messiah's miracles which were intended, we said, to show us that there is no power greater than the power of the God's kingdom.

But now our year with Matthew has come to an end where it began last year, on the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday I came to worship here in this congregation as your new Senior Pastor. So where do we go from here?

Well, perhaps you've already read in your copy of "*The Journey*" or in "*The Weekly*" which is in your bulletin this morning. If you have then you already know where we are going. In 2009 we are going where Jesus in Matthew 13:52 encourages us to go.

As scribes of the kingdom we're going to try to bring out of our treasure what is old and what is new. We're going to try and look backwards and then forwards from Matthew with a kingdom perspective. We're going to look backwards into the Old Testament at the events that fore-shadowed the coming of Christ and the kingdom. Then we're going to look forwards into the rest of the New Testament and what it tells us about the present and future kingdom. For I believe Jesus wants us as a congregation to know not only the center of the story, to know not only the gospel, but the whole story.

So we're calling the work and worship and study and growth that lies ahead of us as scribes of the kingdom in 2009 by a name. We're calling it "Storyline" and we're awfully excited about it. We believe it will be a time for all of us; children, students, and adults to unpack our treasure, to bring out of it, old things and new things that we have only rarely if ever looked at before. We're asking everyone to become involved, to become a true scribe of the kingdom in 2009 and you can do that by making a gift to yourself and then making a promise.

Beginning today you can give a gift to yourself this Christmas of a *Daily Walk Bible*. It's probably one of the least expensive gifts you'll buy this Christmas. It costs \$12 but of course its value goes far beyond its price tag, particularly if you add to your purchase a promise, a promise you make to read through the whole "Storyline" of Scripture together with all of the rest of us who will be doing the same thing with you in 2009.

Will it be worth it? Well remember Jesus is calling you to discover a treasure. It's like you were to imagine yourself as a farmer, he said, plowing in a field and all of a sudden your plow were to hit something and it turned out to be a treasure buried right there in your field. Would it be worth it to you if that were to happen to have plowed that field? It can happen Jesus says if you're willing to be a scribe of the kingdom. Let's pray

The first parable actually uses the word. It talks about a man who discovers treasure in a field. He isn't looking for it, but he finds it. So he sells all he has and buys it. The second parable's similar, except this time the man's not a farmer. He's a merchant. And he's looking for something ... pearls. But what he finds is more than what he was looking for. It's an extraordinary pearl. So he sells everything and buys it.

The point is there is a treasure. And whether you're looking for it or not looking for it, when you find it, the treasure takes priority. It re-orientes your life around its value.

So what's your treasure? What's your pearl of great price? What takes priority for you? What's the value your life has oriented itself around?

It's a crucial question because the third parable Jesus tells is all about value. It's a parable about the end. And in the end Jesus says it will matter what your treasure is, what value your life has oriented itself around. Goodness will last. Evil will not. It will matter, Jesus says. What you treasure will matter.

The treasure you see is the kingdom. Perhaps you discovered it by surprise like the farmer did. Perhaps you discovered it on purpose like the merchant did. But the treasure is the kingdom. Is your life oriented around God's kingdom or the kingdom of this world?

You see in the end that's all that will matter. The past

And the kingdom matters. For when you live your life with a kingdom focus the can look back or

So what are you doing with it?

Sermon notes for Sunday Nov 28 2008

While it is often acknowledged that only God can truly forget as he forgives, one California woman has taken this axiom to a new level: She can remember key details of her life and the world around her for every day of the past 30 years. And while most people would say they would love to improve their memory, this woman admits that a sharp memory has its down sides.

Recently profiled in the journal *Neurocase*, "A. J." (as she is called to protect her privacy)

has the most astonishing memory scientists have ever tested. She can replay decades of her life like a movie. Give her any date, and she can recall the day of the week, usually what the weather was like, personal details of her life at that time, and major news events that occurred.

After thoroughly testing A. J. over the last six years, Dr. James McGaugh of the University of California at Irvine has decided that she is not using mnemonic devices to memorize data, nor is she a savant with exceptional memory in one area. In fact, this foremost authority on the human memory system is at a loss to explain A. J.'s recall.

"The woman who can't forget" simply says that she intensely feels each day, and remembers trivial details as clearly as major events. Asked what happened on August 16, 1977, she knew that Elvis Presley had died. But beyond celebrity headlines, she also remembered that a California tax initiative passed on June 6 of the following year, and a plane crashed in Chicago on May 25 of the next year.

But a great memory is not all it's cracked up to be. A. J. had to study for exams in school, struggled to memorize dates for history class, and still has to make a weekly grocery list.

When asked if she considered her memory a gift, A. J. said: "Well, if I'm able to cure a disease, it's a gift. But to remember, like, the end of every relationship...it's hard."

Perhaps the ability to forget should be considered a gift as well.

Source: Michelle Trudeau, "Unique Memory Lets Woman Replay Life Like a Movie," NPR's Morning Edition (4-19-06)

Antiques Roadshow is the most popular television program on PBS. The premise is simple: the country's leading auction houses join independent dealers to offer free appraisals of the antiques and collectibles people have sitting around in their living rooms, bedrooms, attics, or garages. In his book *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, author Tim Challies refers to a particular episode in which an elderly man from Tucson, Arizona, brought in an old blanket he had inherited several years ago. Though the man knew the old blanket probably possessed a little value when it came into his possession, he had simply thrown it over the back of a rocking chair in his bedroom. It had remained on the rocking chair until the opportunity arose for him to take it to the experts of the PBS program. Challies writes about what transpired:

With the blanket hanging on a rack behind them, the expert appraiser told the old man that his heart stopped when he first saw it. ... [The appraiser explained] that the item was a Navajo chief's blanket that had been woven in the 1840s. In wonderful condition, it was one of the oldest, intact Navajo weaves to survive to the twentieth-first century, and certainly one of only a tiny handful to exist outside of museum collections. ...

Because of its rarity and significance, the appraiser had no trouble assigning a value of somewhere between \$350,000 and \$500,000. ...

As the man walked out of the convention center...the blanket he had cavalierly carried in with him was now cradled carefully in his arms. He walked out of the building with security guards on either side of him, drove straight to a bank, and placed the blanket in a safe deposit box. ...

What had been "junk," a mere accent to an old rocking chair, had been instantly transformed into a precious treasure.

Challies goes on to offer this word of connection to the work of God in Christ: "When God saves his people, bringing us from death to life, he opens our eyes to love and appreciate the supreme treasure that is Jesus Christ."

Tim Challies, The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment (Crossway, 2007), pp. 30-31;

As Stan Caffy prepared for married life, he and his bride-to-be cleaned out their respective garages and sold everything to Goodwill. Between the two of them, they sold an assortment of clothes, bicycles, tools, computer parts, and a tattered copy of the Declaration of Independence that had been hanging in Stan's garage for the last decade.

Stan's trash turned out to be another man's treasure.

That particular version of the Declaration of Independence was a rare copy made in 1823. A man named Michael Sparks spotted it, and he purchased the document for \$2.48. Sparks later auctioned it for \$477,650.

Not a bad profit.

Caffy, the previous owner, was later quoted as saying, "I'm happy for the Sparks guy. If I still had it, it would still be hanging here in the garage, and I still wouldn't know it was worth all that."

Associated Press, "Sold! One Declaration of Independence Copy," MSNBC.com (3-23-07);