

**“Purpose”**  
**Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7**  
**March 5, 2017**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

Many years ago, when I served a church in Kansas, the Rev. David Walker, a great pastor who was the Head of Staff at the First Presbyterian Church of Wichita, once told me that he was looking forward to the coming of spring so that he could start his garden. Then he told me that all pastors should be gardeners and that he didn't think he could ever trust a pastor who wasn't a gardener. I was young and impressionable and that made sense to me. Pastors should be people who carefully attend things that are living, encouraging new growth, protecting them from weeds and weather—there are a lot of similarities between being a pastor and a gardener. And so since then I have felt guilty about being a crummy gardener. My thumb is really brown. Maybe I don't have the patience or the vision or the care, but my gardens don't grow too well. My wife, on the other hand is a terrific gardener. We have a front yard at our house and in my view of it, I would have it be a long expanse of grass. Fortunately my wife has taken responsibility for it and there are now several different gardens in our front yard, each with its own plantings, each with its own theme. Once in a while, I wonder if we are ever going to be finished. Is a garden ever done? There's always more to do. And through it all, I've discovered that although I'm not a very good gardener, I do a decent job as a gardener's helper. I can tote those bags of mulch and dig holes wherever she tells me and nod a lot when she tells me that a particular plant or bush needs to be relocated to another part of the yard. And I can push a mower really well.

This is important to me because it helps define the purpose for my life. Did you ever wonder why you are here? What the purpose of your life is? If you have one at all? Maybe your purpose is whatever you decide it is, maybe purpose is self-defined. Or maybe not. Maybe we are born into this world with a purpose from outside of our individual selves. One of the documents in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions is the Westminster Shorter Catechism, whose famous first question is “What is the chief end of man?” Of course this is from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, so we would say, “what is the purpose for

humanity?” And the answer from the catechism is “to glorify God and enjoy God forever.” So according to that belief, our purpose comes from God and not from ourselves. In a way, that's what Jesus affirms when he goes into the wilderness. I think we can say that he goes not just to be tempted but to affirm his purpose. When he is tempted at the end with all the kingdoms of the world if he will only fall down and worship someone other than God, he says it is written: You shall worship the Lord your God and only him shall you serve. That's purpose. To worship and serve. Just as it is ours.

So how do we do that? How do we glorify God? Well, one of the reasons that we read the story today from Genesis is that it gives us some ideas. Traditionally this story is about humanity's sin and how we were expelled from the garden. But I'm interested first in what it says about us and why we were made. Verse 15 says that God took the man and put him in the garden to keep it and to till it. That's the familiar translation of why we were put on the earth, but maybe not the best. The first verb, “to till” is most often translated as “to serve,” while the second, “to keep” also means to preserve or to protect. We are created as part of the earth, part of God's creation and we are here to take care of it. God makes us to take care of the earth itself and to look to its interests not just our own.

One of the rabbis tells a story about creation. He says, “Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, “Why don't you clean up this mess?” So God collected the rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of the clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be . . . just rocks.”

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be . . . just water.”

Then the angels said, “Well God, it's neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered . . . “Nope!”

On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?”

And God answered: “Nope!”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “I am tired now.

Please finish up the world for me . . . really it's almost done.” But the man and the woman said, “We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and the woman asked, “What's a partner?” And God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal.” And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” and God answered, “I don't know. Go ask my partners.”<sup>1</sup>

That's who we are. God's partners. That's what we do. Like I do in our garden at home, God put us here to be the gardener's helper. We help him take care of, protect and finish the world.

---

1 Gellman, Marc. *Does God Have a Big Toe?* New York: Harper Collins, 1989. pp. 1-3.