This morning I’m going to start my sermon a little differently. I’m going to show a clip from the movie Moneyball. Let me give you the basics before I show you the clip, I’ll give you more background afterwards. You are witnessing a meeting of the Oakland A’s scouting department in the winter of 2002. They had made the playoffs in 2001, and then lost their top three players to teams from bigger markets. They are trying to figure out how to approach the 2002 season, without their stars, and with one of the small payrolls in baseball.

(Show clip from Moneyball)

The best part of the clip came at the end, but I had to cut it out for sake of brevity. The older guys on the left side of the table were trying to figure out who Fabio was. In case you’re interested, they decided that Fabio must be the shortstop for the Seattle Mariners. For the record, Alex Rodriguez was the Mariners shortstop.

“What’s the problem?,” asks Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt is playing the role of Billy Beane, General Manager of the Oakland A’s. Beane was and continues to be a creative thinker in the world of baseball, and has helped bring about a revolution in how baseball stats and players are analyzed and valued. Sabremetrics is the term used to describe this approach to evaluation, and due in part to Beane’s success in Oakland; this approach has been adopted widely across baseball. It’s also been adapted into the other major sport leagues.

Just as an aside, if you ever make a movie about my life, you can cast Brad Pitt in the role.

I should summarize the plot very briefly before I move on. In 2001, the Oakland A’s, one of the smallest of the small-budget teams in baseball, made it to the playoffs. They immediately lost to the big payroll, big city New York Yankees. Following the season, three of Oakland’s best players left for more money in free agency. One of them, a power hitting first baseman named Jason Giambi, went to the hated New York Yankees.

In the clip you saw the struggle within the Oakland management. Billy Beane keeps challenging his staff, with the question, “What’s the problem?”

And they give different answers ranging from “We all know what the problem is,” to “We have to replace three key players,” “We have to replace these guys with existing guys,” to “We have to replace 38 home runs and 120 RBI’s and 47 doubles.” Because they defined the problem in this limited way, the majority of Oakland management was thinking of replacement, of finding free agents or young players to replace the stars who left. They wanted to keep doing it the way they’ve always done it. They wanted to plug the holes with the same shape that had been there before.

But Beane recognized something they didn’t. He recognized that the game had changed. The A’s couldn’t build teams the way the Yankees did. They couldn’t compete that way. They didn’t have the resources or the glamour. They couldn’t afford the payroll. He recognized that the Oakland market was fundamentally different from the New York market, and that building a competitive team in Oakland would be a very different process than building a competitive team in New York. “There are rich teams and there are poor teams,” says Billy. “Think differently. We are the last dog at the bowl. Do you know what happens to the runt? He dies.” Billy understands that Oakland and New York are completely different contexts, and the A’s can’t do things the way New York does.

How you define the problem shapes where you look for a solution. If the problem is a nail, you use a hammer. But if the problem is that your bread won’t rise, then a hammer’s not going to do you much good. Maybe you killed your yeast. Maybe your yeast is no good. Maybe the room is too cold. Maybe you forgot to add your yeast. One time I did that. I couldn’t figure out why my dough wasn’t rising, and so I warmed the oven and stuck it in there so the dough would be warmer. After it still wasn’t rising, I realized, “Oh look, there’s my yeast mixture still on the counter.”

No one’s ever accused me of being the brightest bulb in the fixture.

How you define the problem shapes where you look for a solution. This statement takes us into Genesis; the first book of the Bible. It is a book of beginnings, it introduces us to God, describes early humanity, and chronicles God’s work through Abraham and his broken, conflict ridden extended family, children and grandchildren. It also introduces us to some major Scriptural themes: Creation, disaster, and re-creation, promise, patience and fulfillment, infertility and blessing. The stories of Abraham and his descendants are told in chapters 12-50, but Genesis 1-11? Genesis 1-11 defines the problem.

Genesis 1-2 sets the stage. It tells us about creation, the order of creation, and that creation (and everything in it) was good. God provided everything that humans and the rest of creation needed to survive. I could preach a long time on those first two chapters, but I’m going to stay focused and jump straight to chapter 3.

It opens with a snake described as crafty, and who manages to convince the man and woman to eat from a tree in the middle of the garden, a tree that they were not supposed to eat from. The serpent is able to get them to change their perspective, as he gets them to stop thinking about everything God has provided, and instead gets them to think about what God is withholding from them. “Why can’t you eat from the tree?” the snake wants to know. “Because God said we would die if we ate it,” replies the woman. “You won’t die” says the snake, which is only a partial truth, “You won’t die, instead your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.”

And here is a key part of the problem. Sin is wanting to be like God.

So the woman took some fruit and ate it, and gave some to the man and he ate it, and the NIV tells us that “the eyes of both of them were opened.” Something changed after they ate the apple.

A slight aside here, because there are times when people give special blame on the woman for being deceived by the serpent, and I don’t think it’s biblically accurate or fair. Vs 6 tells us, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also *gave some to her husband who was with her,* and he ate it.” He was right there the whole time. He was a part of the conversation the whole time, and did not object in anyway.

When I was about eight, I was sitting in the hay loft with a friend and my dad’s bb gun. We were shooting at birds first, little tiny barn swallows, and we weren’t hitting anything. Eventually my friend had the bright idea that we could shoot the dairy cows when they exited the barn. So we did that for the next half hour, and we had a lot more success because they were a lot easier target. We did that until dad came out to check why the cows were so agitated. Well, it was soon obvious why they were so agitated. We were shooting them.

Needless to say we got in trouble, both of us, and my dad didn’t care that I hadn’t came up with the idea. I hadn’t stopped it, and I had participated, and he didn’t care whose idea it was.

So…I didn’t shoot at the cows anymore after that.

After eating the fruit, the man and woman immediately clothed themselves, and hid from the Lord when he came down for a visit. God has a discussion with the man, “Why are you hiding? Why were you afraid? Who told you your were naked? Did you eat from the forbidden tree?”

Now this is the only time in human history this has happened, but the man immediately announced “She made me do it!” Never again has a man blamed a woman for his failures. Right. He passes the blame on to the woman, and she too denies responsibility and blames the snake. But the snake is nowhere to be found. So each of them, as a result of their choices, receive a curse because of their sin. And they are cast quickly out of the garden, never to return.

So what’s the problem here? Well, sin, obviously. A desire to be like God. In fact, the Mennonite Confession of Faith defines sin as “turning away from God, and making gods of creation and ourselves.” That seems to part of the definition, doesn’t it? A desire to be like God is to make gods of ourselves.

But the problem is also about consequences. And what are the consequences of their decision to eat the fruit? One thing that the passage teaches is that humans have real power, that our choices matter, and that our choices have consequences. And our choices have consequences for our relationships, especially for those we love most.

Our choices matter. When they ate the fruit, their relationship with each other immediately changes. They lose their innocence; they realize their nakedness and immediately cover up. He blames her, she blames the snake, and their relationship is not the same. What God had intended to be a relationship of companionship and mutuality now becomes one of domination.

Our choices matter. What other consequences came as a result of their choice? Their relationship with God is changed. They know they blew it, and God’s presence is no longer welcome in the same way. Comfort and intimacy have been replaced by shame and attempted cover-ups. God is now someone to fear. They avoid God, and are unwilling to accept the responsibility for their actions.

Our choices matter. Even creation suffers as result of their choice, as the woman and snake become enemies, and the ground is cursed, and working the ground becomes toil because of the invasive weeds.

Our choices matter. Our choices have consequences. Our choices have consequences on our relationships. And this is the problem at the heart of the story. Sin. And here’s where defining the problem becomes so important. If sin is being lost, then what’s the solution? Getting found, right? Or if we speak of being in bondage to sin, then what’s the solution? Breaking the shackles! If we speak of being enslaved, the solution is freedom. If sin is falling short, then what’s the solution? God fills in the gap. And if sin is disobedience, then what’s the solution? Punishment!

Each one of these descriptions of sin is biblical, and adds nuance to our understanding. But that is not how sin is shown in Genesis 3. Sin destroys relationships. Sin is trying to be like God.

When we sin, we don’t set out to break relationships, but sin is very a slippery slope. *Things happen that we never intended.* The reality of sin is painful: it breaks relationships with God, with our fellow humans, and with creation. This is going to be my primary understanding of sin as I preach through the Bible in 2014. This is primary way I define the problem. Broken relationships.

And if the problem is broken relationships, then what’s the solution? Healing, restoration, reconciliation. In fact the Apostle Paul speaks of God reconciling all of creation to himself, saying in 2 Corinthians 5.17 that “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Or in Colossians 1.22, when Paul writes, “he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.”

As I mentioned, this is not the only way to understand the problem. There are other ways of defining the problem, but this is my starting point for the Year of Bible. I will emphasize what Genesis 3 teaches about sin: that sin is trying to be like God, sin hurts our relationship with God, with others, and with creation. Our choices matter. There are consequences.

The next four weeks I will be preaching on sin. I will be trying to define the problem as outlined in Genesis 1-11, so we can better understand the solution that God brings for us later on in the Bible. Next week will be Cain and Abel, so if you would like to be prepared for the sermon next week, read Genesis 4. Then I will be preaching on Noah and the Flood, and the following week I will preach on the Tower of Babel. Each of these Bible stories gives us a different perspective on the sin problem.

Genesis 3 is the story of a man and a woman who are unable to live in the boundaries set by God, and the consequences of their choice to live outside and above their role in creation. It’s the first illustration we have of how sin breaks relationships, how sin can change relationships with God, with each other, and with creation.

So what’s the problem here? It’s not 38 home runs and 120 RBI’s. It’s the desire for humans to live outside of the boundaries established by God. It’s their tendency to make decisions with little thought to how their choices will affect relationships. It’s their desire to “be like God.”

But the story of God’s people doesn’t end when they are cast from the garden in the last verse of the chapter. The Garden of Eden doesn’t have a happy ending, but neither is it an ending without hope. The story continues. God does not give up. Instead, God leaves the future open for celebration, the future is open for relationships to be restored, for curses to turn into blessing, and for judgment to become grace. The future is open for reconciliation.