

Epiphany 6 Year B 2009

February 15, 2009

200th Birthday of Charles Darwin

Topic: Science and the Doctrine of Creation

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

This morning's sermon is going to be a little different than the ones you've become used to hearing. I will address the readings very briefly but unlike every other Sunday that I preach they will not be the focus of this sermon.

The Old Testament and Gospel appointed for today are healing stories. Naaman goes to the prophet Elisha in Israel and is told to wash seven times in the Jordan River. And only after he does so, is he cleansed from his leprosy. In Mark's gospel a leper approaches Jesus and begs to be made clean, for in being made clean he can return to his community. Jesus was "moved with pity" we are told. And then he touches the leper and heals him.

We know so much more about the world, so much more about the sicknesses and diseases that afflict God's people now than we did back then. We all know someone who has been healed and someone that even given the advanced state of our knowledge, succumbed to the ravages of an illness. We owe our thanks for the understanding and basis of our present day knowledge and understanding of medicine, healing, the world in general, to a man who was born 200 years ago last Thursday... Charles Darwin, a man who originally studied for the Anglican priesthood, but then was offered a job that would take him to the Galapagos Islands...and as they say, the rest my friends is history.

It is appropriate to talk about Charles Darwin and his contributions today, not only because the readings are about healing, but because we are also still in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation, to suddenly become clear and for the last six weeks we have heard about Jesus coming into the world, of God's light breaking into the world and into humanity. Epiphany is a time when the world, indeed when God, opens up and is understood in a new way and with a new clarity.

And so, at this time of our liturgical year it is very appropriate to speak about revelation and unfolding and to speak about the cultural and religious tension concerning creation, science and the teaching of both.

I'm sure all of you have heard about the court challenges to the teaching of evolution in the public schools. In Texas, Kansas, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, in over thirty states there are court cases trying to either throw out or discredit evolutionary science and in its stead teach creationism, or its more up to date title Intelligent Design.

Intelligent Design states that there are gaps in the theory of evolution and that creation shows such complexity that it must be created by an intelligent designer. This so called "God of the Gaps" is akin to a cosmic watchmaker that started the cosmic clock called creation and left it to its own devices, only to have to occasionally reappear when things were going wrong to try and rewind it.

The issue here is that intelligent design is neither good science nor good theology. Despite the evidence across the disciplines of geology, physics, biology, paleontology, anthropology, archeology and chemistry, Intelligent Design believes that the world was formed 6,000 years ago in six-24 hour periods.

The proponents of this argument also hold that in order to faithfully accept creation you cannot believe in evolution. I read one article where the author stated that if the creation story wasn't true the way it was written then all of Christian belief is a sham.

This argument is being played out on, of all places, our automobiles. Perhaps you've seen the symbol of the fish indicating that the car belongs to a Christian. Then there appeared on cars fish that have sprouted legs and inside the fish is written the name "Darwin." To counter those who would have this type of fish on their car there came an emblem of a small fish with legs and the name Darwin inside, being swallowed by a larger fish with the word 'TRUTH' inside of it.¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion*. (Cowley Pub., 2000) pp.9-10 and in Rev. Jim Burko *Beyond the Fish Wars*, San Francisco Chronical 8/05 www.tcpc.blogs.com/musings

This either/or proposition, this argument that you can have either credible science or faith, this insistence that there is only one type of truth, is fallacious and points to what I believe is a misunderstanding not only of science but of theology and faith as well. To read the first two chapters of Genesis as a scientific treatise or historical account of the earth's formation is to misread not only the stories of creation, and I say stories because there are two creation stories in Genesis, each pointing to a different truth about creation, but also to misunderstand the purpose and roll of the Bible.

In preparing for this sermon I have read quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and different theologians on what is known as the Doctrine of Creation. Now, before your eyes glaze over and your heads begin to bob towards your chest, let me reassure you that I am not going to speak to you today about particles and waves, string theory, or Heisenburg's Uncertainty Principle. I will tell you that reading these disciplines has been fascinating and awe-inspiring and they most certainly deserve a place in any believer's library.

There are really two things I want to talk about today. The first is to speak about how we as Episcopal Anglicans have historically read and considered the Bible and the second is to consider what science is, what faith is and how they belong together in what is called the Doctrine of Creation.

The proponent of Intelligent Design that I mentioned earlier who wrote either you believe in the Creation Story the way it is written or else all the rest of the Christian story is a sham, was really only half-wrong. The Doctrine of Creation is what the rest of our doctrines are based on. It is foundational to everything else that follows in Christian theology.

The Doctrine of Creation states the universe we know, a universe of time and space, matter and energy as well as humanity depends solely on the free will of God.² God created the world for no other reason than love and to share his love with his creation. To believe that does not require that you have to have a literal interpretation of the Bible.

The Anglican faith has never taken the Bible literally. Never. The original writers of the different books of both the Old and New

² Thomas and Wondra, Introduction to Theology, 3rd. ed., 2002 p. 115

Testaments also never took the writings literally. Scripture was and is taken very, very seriously, but not literally. Scripture has always been interpreted.

Before we look at what the Bible is, we must look at what it is not. It is not a science or history textbook. The Bible is not, to quote one of my seminary professors, a book of “Helpful Hints for Happy Living,”³ or a book of right answers or right doctrine, only to be believed and not discerned or otherwise engaged.⁴

The Bible is far more wonderful, profound and mysterious. It is an invitation to come into relationship with the God that lives, loves, saves and redeems us. The Bible is concerned with faithful relationships between God, God’s people and all of creation.

The story of creation and all that follows was meant to convey the confessional and covenantal history of God’s chosen people. Genesis was written to show the other civilizations living in the Ancient Near East along side God’s chosen people that creation was not the result of a duel between their different gods, which was the common belief, but as the result of the love of the one true God, a love that continues to create throughout history.

I have said this before; Scripture is the Living Word from a Living God to a Living People. To read it literally is to relegate it to history. To read it literally is to deny the ongoing revelation and creation of God in the world.

I heard a theologian say, “The Bible always means what it says. It just doesn’t always say what it means.” The Bible is probably the most mysterious, complex and difficult book in the world.⁵ It is not always clear-cut. More often than not it is ambiguous and mysterious. But that is part of its good news! That is why the Bible continues to inspire, provoke, and speak to us thousands of years later.

It has been said that science answers the “how” questions and faith answers the “why” questions. Science is made up of observations about

³ Dr. Donald Armentrout, University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, rev. ed., 1997, p. 121-123

⁵ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Weavings*, vol. XXI, Number 1, Jan/February 2006 p.8

the world around us. It is objective and testable and rests on facts. Faith, on the other hand, deals with the spiritual, the meaning-making, the relationships. It is subjective.⁶ It is known not by observation and reason but by revelation. Both science and faith search for truth and both find it. But I would submit to you that there are different types of truth.

For example, a person could observe that a man by the name of David is often seen with a woman by the name of Doris. The person could also observe that both David and Doris wear gold rings on their left hand, and that there are often two or three boys around them calling one Mom and the other Dad. A person might surmise from these observations that David and Doris are married.

Additional evidence could be obtained by creating an experiment. People who are married usually live in the same house. Calling the house and seeing if David or Doris answers or if one of the children answers to ask if David or Doris is at home could test this hypothesis. As additional evidence is gathered it becomes more apparent that the hypothesis of Doris and David being married is correct. All of the information gathered is true-as far as it goes.

But there is another truth that isn't so readily apparent. None of the information gathered speaks to the "why" of that relationship. None of it shows the deep abiding love David and Doris has for other or why they came together in relationship to begin with. It cannot tell of the intimacy and bonds that keep them together. Yet that too is a truth-a deeper truth that is just as relevant. Together both types of information give a fuller picture than could be had separately.

Science and faith are not mutually exclusive. We should not look to science to confirm our religious experiences any more than we should expect religion to answer questions concerning quantum theory. The intersection of science and faith need not be a place where one must choose between either. It need not be an either/or proposition. You do not have to stand up and proclaim one as truth and the other as null and void.

⁶ Brown-Taylor p. 6

Both truths to which science and faith point are necessary. Both truths give a fuller picture of the world than either one gives separately. This false dualism between science and faith is ironic because it was the development of the Judeo-Christian Doctrine of Creation, that there was a Creator and the creation, which allowed the creation to be seen as not divine and therefore available to be observed, studied and examined.

Albert Einstein knew this. He is quoted as saying, “Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.”⁷ The reason we need to understand both is because Christ became incarnate. Christ came into this world, came into relationship with us physical and earthly creatures and loved us enough to die for us.

Both science and faith leave me in awe. The complexity of this grand universe, the realization that God made us to be a part of it is very, very, humbling. The mystery of the atoms, protons, neutrons and electrons and the mystery of the incarnation are related.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, author and seminary professor writes: “What is harder to believe: that we live in an expanding universe so vast that light from one frontier takes more than twice the age of the earth to reach our telescopes, or that within, beyond, and throughout this vastness there is a compassionate deity who knows each of us by name?”⁸

Perhaps what can be helpful in this argument is a good dose of humility both on the part of scientists as well as on the part of the faithful. Both need “to recognize the limits in their way of knowing and leave room for the other.”⁹ Both need to stand in awe and wonder at the mystery of the physical creation, God’s incarnation in it and humanity’s call to be a part of it.

Science and faith are not enemies of one another but allies in teaching us about creation. William King, a Lutheran pastor at a major research institution, writes of a preeminent scientist by the name of William Bragg, who was a forerunner in the field of X-ray crystallography. Dr.

⁷ *ibid* p. 18

⁸ *ibid* p. 90

⁹ *ibid* p. 18

Bragg was asked whether science and faith were opposed to one another. “Yes,” he replied, ‘but only in the sense that my thumb and forefinger are opposed to one another-between them I can grasp everything.’”¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ William H. King, “Science and Religion: Getting the Conversation Going” *The Christian Century*, 7/2-7/9, 1986 pp 611-614