

Faith and Science

Psalm 19:1-6, Genesis 1:1-25

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” Genesis 1:1

The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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This morning, I begin a sermon series on three sets of relationships that are particularly tempestuous: the relationship between faith and science, the relationship between religion and politics, and the relationship between Christians and Jews. Because these are challenging topics and because of worship plans already in place, the first sermon in the series will be presented today. Then, we will have a bit of a break and pick the series up again for the last two Sundays in May.

Why I am addressing these topics is no mystery. These are three of the major tensions of our times. Our nation is engaged in an intense conversation over issues related to the role of religion in public life; indeed, today has been designated Justice Sunday by Evangelicals around the country who are convinced that judicial nominees are being discriminated against on the basis of their religious convictions. Everywhere you go, people are discussing the Terri Schiavo case, the constitutionality of faith-based initiatives, the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, and the teaching of creationism (and what is called “intelligent design”) in public schools. What guidance can Scripture and our Reformed faith tradition give us as we think through these controversies, both individually and as a society?

The concern about Christians and Jews has come to the forefront for Presbyterians because of two decisions made last summer at General assembly. One was to vote for the continued funding of a congregation in Pennsylvania whose purpose is to evangelize Jews. (That congregation has recently been denied permission to continue by its Presbytery for reasons having nothing to do with the General Assembly action). Also, our General Assembly voted to begin the process of divesting from corporations whose products are used by Israel in its conflict with Palestine. Some Presbyterians view that decision as a faithful advocacy on behalf of the oppressed in that violence-torn region of the world; others challenge the singling out of Israel when there is culpability on all sides. With the rise of Christian Zionism in the United States and a fresh outbreak of anti-Semitism in Europe, it is important to re-examine what our theological tradition teaches about Christians and Jews.

The struggle between faith and science has been in the forefront of our consciousness here in Georgia since the latest round of debate between believers in creationism and proponents of biological evolution broke out in Cobb County several months ago. Challenges to the teaching of evolution have been mounted in forty-three out of fifty states. Here is the question: Does one have to choose between the Bible and biology? Is it either/or? Despite the clamor all around us, much of it generated by the religious right, there is growing evidence that the historic standoff between faith and science has reached a new point of cooperation in recent years. Dialogue

between theologians and scientists is more frequent, more creative, and more respectful than ever in history. To be sure, a look back reveals a less than inspiring picture.

In 1632, Galileo published his famous dialogue concerning two chief world systems, in which he contrasted the conventional wisdom of the day, which was that the earth was the fixed center of the universe, with the view of Copernicus, the Polish astronomer who dared to assert not only that the earth moved, but that it moved around the sun. Galileo was clearly in the Copernicus camp. With the newly discovered telescope, he had explored the heavens, an endeavor that had resulted, by the way, in his discovery of the existence of mountains on the moon and satellites encircling Jupiter. (1) The Catholic Church summoned Galileo to appear before the Inquisition, where he was forced to get down on his knees and read a statement that had been prepared for him renouncing what he had just discovered. Remember, this was 1632! It wasn't enough for the Inquisition. They sentenced him to life in prison, though Pope Urban VIII later commuted the sentence to house arrest. For the remainder of his life, Galileo was required to listen to the reading of seven penitential psalms every day. He remained a believing Christian until the day he died. It was not until 1999 that Pope John Paul II acknowledged that the church had erred in its condemnation of Galileo.

It would be easy at this point for Protestants to get puffed up about all of this, but the truth is that John Calvin and Martin Luther lived in the 16th century, and they disliked Copernicus and Galileo as much as the Catholics did. It has been said that one thing the Protestants and Catholics agreed on during the entire Reformation period was that only the Bible ought to be relied on for help in answering all questions about worship and the universe.

Fast forward now 230 years, to the year 1859 when the *Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin's seminal work, was published. The same war, different battle. The enemy was the idea of evolution by natural selection, a process that appeared to directly contradict the Genesis account of creation. While Charles Darwin's body might be dead and buried in Westminster Abbey (it is close, interestingly enough, to the final resting place of Sir Isaac Newton), Darwin's legacy is alive and well and sending shivers up and down the spines of Biblical literalists in the 21st century.

In the United States, we remember last century's famous Scopes trial of 1925 which pitted Clarence Darrow against noted orator and Presbyterian elder William Jennings Bryan, a fierce believer in the literal interpretation of the creation story. Dayton, Tennessee, schoolteacher J.T. Scopes had been arrested for violating a state law that prevented the teaching of anything but the Biblical story of creation. Scopes was found guilty and fined. The verdict was later overruled by a higher court.

My favorite story surrounding the conflict between evolution and the Bible comes from England, where one year after the publication of *Origin of Species*, biologist Thomas Huxley was challenged to a formal debate by an Anglican bishop. The bishop inquired of Huxley as to whether he had descended from an ape via his grandmother or his grandfather. Huxley replied that he would rather have an ape for an ancestor than a bishop unwilling to face the truth. (2)

Are science and religion destined to be always at one another's throats, vying with one another for the right to explain the universe? I want to suggest that they have never been the natural enemies that they have been assumed to be for the past 400 years. After all, it was the ancient Hebrew tradition that put forth the view that God created human beings with the capacity to ponder, explore and be satisfied with nothing than the truth. The Christian tradition put forth the idea that God is to be loved with mind as well as heart.

It has been said that science came into being because of the Judeo/Christian concept of the world as creation. Because the world was created by God and is not itself God in any sense, it can be investigated with impunity. And because the world is God's good creation, it is entirely worthy of study and exploration.

When we turn to the Scriptural account of creation, we need to remember that there is no scientific information in the Bible. (3) There is poetry, prophesy, gospel, and history; but there is no science, if one defines science as "an interconnected series of concepts that have developed as a result of experimentation and observation..." (4) What then, are the first few chapters of the first book of the Bible? It is worship material! The creation story was written in the 6th century BC during the Babylonian exile to encourage and reassure an oppressed and homesick people that contrary to all appearances, their God, not the Babylonian gods, was ruler of all. The beginning of the book of Genesis is a work of celebration, an affirmation of the sovereignty of God over all things, the power of God to bring order out of chaos.

While the first verses of Genesis contain some of the most memorable and influential words ever written, there has been much debate as to how they are to be translated. The problem turns on the first word of the text – the Hebrew word that means "at the beginning of things." The King James Version reads, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth..." This rendering offers an absolute statement, "In the beginning, God," indicating that creation is an absolute act of God. The NRSV reads "In the beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth..." Both renderings depict God operating on an already-existing primordial mass and offer no answer to the question of the origin of the chaos. Obviously, the writers of the story had no curiosity about that question. (5) The chaos was simply there. The more important question has always been, "Where did God come from?" On that point the story is clear. God has no origin, no antecedent. God simply is. Out of God's own will comes the motivation for the act of ordering the universe and clearing space for viable life to exist. God begins work on this project for God's own reasons and God does it by means of the "wind of God." The word is "ruach" meaning breath, wind, spirit. The Spirit of God blows the chaotic waters back.

Then, in the third verse God speaks for the first time. God's voice is reminiscent of a ruler on a throne. "Let there be light." Is there any question that there will be light? Indeed, not. Of course, there was light. That light exists at all is all God's doing. What a strange substance out of which to bring light – out of darkness – but God, who is omnipotent, can do anything. The Book of Romans will later declare, "God and God alone can call into existence things that do not exist." Note, though, that darkness is not banned from creation. God separates the light from the dark, calling the light day, the darkness night. In the beginning, reality is so ordered that a balanced, reliable world of springtime harvest, of cold and heat, of day and night can come into being. (6)

Should we try to reconcile the story of creation with scientific understandings of how the world came into being? Should we try to squeeze the billions of years it took for the earth to evolve into a habitable place for human beings into one, six-day Biblical week?

Perhaps one of the intellectual giants of the 20th century can help us here. Theologian Karl Barth had a niece who went to college. She became troubled by a biology professor who insisted that, since the Biblical account of creation could not be squared with the Theory of Evolution, one must be right and the other must be wrong. So Professor Barth wrote a letter to his niece in which he said, “Has no one explained to you in your seminar that one can as little compare the Biblical creation story and a scientific theory like that of evolution as one can compare, shall we say, an organ and a vacuum cleaner? There can be little question of harmony between them as a contradiction.”(7)

A Christian who decides that he must choose between science and religion will cut himself off from one of the most important avenues to God and to the wonders of the universe that God created. A scientist who dismisses religion as irrelevant myth-making will be left without an overarching framework of meaning or ethics. All of which is to say that science and religion need one another. As MIT physicist Alan Lightman puts it, “Science can push back the equations of modern cosmology to less than a nano-second after the big bang, but it cannot tell you, ever, why there is a universe. Science can explain human behavior in terms of bio-medical processors in the brain, but science can never determine what is the right thing to do.”(8)

You have no doubt seen or seen a picture of Michelangelo’s fresco *The Creation of Adam* that adorns the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. God, surrounded by angels, reaches out to newly created Adam, awakening him to consciousness. The Creator is alive with energy. The fingers of Creator and creature are outstretched toward one another but do not quite touch. And so it is that the Giver of life is always just beyond human grasp. We, the human creature, keep reaching out for the Mystery. The good news is that the Mystery is reaching towards us, too!

I close with food for the heart. Poet Mary Oliver wonders at the creative force behind the fashioning of all things as she contemplates, of all things, fish bones at the foot of the waves on the shore:

Fish Bones

Maybe Michelangelo
or Picasso
could have imagined
these dream shapes,

these curves and thongs,
snow-needles,
jaws, brain-cases,
eye sockets—

somebody, anyway,
whose mind
was in some clear kind
of rapture

and probably
in the early morning
when the sun
or its invisible muscle

was rising
over the water.
I don't think
it was just a floundering

in the darkness,
no matter
how much time there was. . . (9)

Remember what the ancient Psalmist said? "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." So do the fishbones and everything else in this grand and glorious reality we call the universe. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: God of love and mercy, in the quiet peace of morning we have gathered in this holy place to sing our praises to you and to be touched by your gentle Spirit. We offer grateful thanks for the gift of Sabbath rest and renewal. We pray that through our worship we have been recreated in your likeness once more, that our negative thoughts have been transformed into expressions of beauty, reflecting your uncompromising love. Let our gifts bear fruits of compassion and mercy. We pray in the name of our redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- (1) John Polkinghorne, *Science and Technology*, Fortress Press, 1998, p. 5.
- (2) Ibid., p. 6.
- (3) Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996, p. 317.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 97.
- (6) Ibid., p. 98-99.
- (7) As quoted by Eugene Bay in “Two Men on a Bench,” The Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, PA, October 17, 1999.
- (8) Alan Lightman, “In God’s Place,” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 19, 1999, p. 97.
- (9) Mary Oliver, *House of Light*, Beacon Press, 1990, p. 50-51.