

The Cry of the Seraphim

I take as my text today, the cry of the fiery seraphim in today's lesson from the sixth chapter of Isaiah: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The universe in its farthest corners (if it have corners) is full of the glory of God. But what is this world, this universe? How did it come to be? In what way is it full of God's glory?

Let me tell you a story.

Long, long ago, the universe was a tiny bundle of unimaginable density and energy. It was The Seed, and the spirit of God hovered about it, joyfully tending it, timelessly.

And God said, "Let there be stuff," and there was stuff—an explosion of such brilliance and intensity that the astonished Seraphim shouted for joy. And the stuff pulsed, and the pulse God called "time."

And God saw that it was good.

And God made the great powers to rule the stuff: gravity, nuclear forces, and electromagnetism. And God established laws and constants and ratios to govern the stuff: thermodynamic laws, the cosmological and other constants such as epsilon, omega lambda, Q and D. But God preserved an elemental looseness, a necessary bit of unlawfulness that had been part of the original seed. So law and necessity and chance existed together at the beginning, and this was the wisdom of God in a material creation.

And God saw that it was good.

Then God's divided the stuff into different kinds of stuff. At first simple stuff—hydrogen, helium and a bit of lithium. And God said, let the simple stuff come together according to my laws, and constants and ratios, and let there be great furnaces from which new kinds of stuff are made. And God called these furnaces "stars." And new stuff, the light and the heavy elements, were formed in obedience to God's laws and constants and ratios.

And God saw that it was good.

Then God commanded some of the great star furnaces to give up their elements in great explosions, scattering across space the building blocks of stuff of even greater complexity. And mighty gravitation drew these elements together in clots, as God had ordained, and great balls

of matter formed. Some of these balls whirled around the star furnaces, according to the powers and laws God had established.

And God saw that it was good.

But the elements and stars and whirling balls and other such things did not entirely satisfy God. These things obeyed God's laws invariably, and this was good. Yet the nature of God is love, and love desires a beloved, a being free to love in return. For love is a dance, partly governed by laws, partly improvised in freedom. Love does not coerce and control, in the manner of a law, but allows for and invites. Love woos.

Thus God caused the balls that dance around the stars to cool and become places for a new kind of dance: the improvisation of life. God gently nudged the elemental matter, and a new thing emerged, a hungry thing with its own goals and imagination.

And God saw that it was good. And God waited for the new dance of life to begin.

In the beginning, the dance was simple, and the dancers improvised hesitantly and clumsily. But God rejoiced, for this was love's beginning. As dance went on, the dancers mingled and new dancers appeared, and finally a great multitude danced on the ball of elements, and a garden of delight sprang up, full of life, with whom God could fellowship in a free give and take.

And God saw that it was good.

But the dance of life required a new thing, a new law—the law of death. In order for life to grow into the great dance God desired, death was necessary to its becoming. Only through the cycle of birth and death could life diversify and adapt and become self-aware. And with death came suffering, which is the price of sentience and self-awareness.

And God saw that the dance of life and love was good, even though... in spite of the fact... the freedom and consciousness of creatures required death and suffering. And God suffered, too, for to love another is to suffer. This is the law of love. For God so loved the world that God opened the divine being to suffering and even to possible rejection. God risked this for the sake of love, in the hope of fellowship.

This is not the end of the story, but it is all we know of it.

The dance goes on. Who knows where? There is more to come.

You might well wonder why today's homily is about God creating through an evolutionary processes. The topic most certainly does not flow naturally from the lectionary texts. So let me explain. Today is Evolution Sunday. Most of you have never heard about this, I imagine. It is the brainchild of Michael Zimmerman, currently a biologist at The Evergreen State College. Beginning in 2006, Zimmerman collected the signatures of clergy who support the compatibility of religious faith and Darwin's theory of evolution. He called his initiative The Clergy Letter Project. This year he is up to over 16,400 signatures. Furthermore, some 240 congregations have agreed to participate in serious discussion of faith and evolution in either sermon or adult forum one time a year, on Evolution Sunday. The point of it all is to make it very clear to the broader society that there are many people of faith who accept the science of our time and understand the Bible's creation stories, not as science, but as poetic vehicles for reflection on God, the world and human identity.

The story I told you is the modern story of cosmic and biological evolution. It is a story that humans have only recently begun to tell. You know the names of the greatest of the new story tellers: Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. Many other men and women who contributed to the story could be named as well. The modern story tellers are the deep-lookers, truth tellers and a number of them are people of faith.

The modern creation story is usually told without reference to God. This is to be expected. God is an immaterial spirit, and no matter how deeply you look in the material world, you will not find God interfering with natural processes. God set the initial conditions for the universe, but then set a self-imposed limit so that the universe would become on its own. Personally, I believe that God is *intimately* involved in the universe, but in a way that preserves its integrity and freedom. I do not believe that God wound the universe up like a clock and walked away, as the Deists do. But scientists sometimes believe that the absence of material evidence for God's existence is evidence of God's non-existence. This is not, I believe, a necessary conclusion. And even scientists who believe in God—and there are many—do their thinking about the material world without supposing this or that aspect of the universe is the result of divine tampering. They see the lawfulness of nature as an expression of God's wisdom and

providence. Without this lawfulness, the universe could not exist. Scientists all assume the universe's lawfulness, but only some of them perceive in it the wisdom of God.

As you know, there are many Christians who reject the modern story of creation preferring instead the story of a world made in six days. They read the Genesis creation stories as scientifically accurate historical accounts. And so they believe that humans descend from a first pair who did not evolve but were made in a moment, fully human. In their view, the world is now as it ever was, an unchanging artifice of the creator. This belief is sometimes called "creationism."

What does your church say about faith and evolution? I used to teach a college course on science and religion, and I found that my students seldom knew the answer to this question. When I told them that almost all the mainline churches have official statements supporting Darwin's theory, many of them were dumbfounded. They had no idea. (I wanted to talk to their catechism teachers.) The voice of creationist Christianity had so overwhelmed the voice of their own faith tradition that they assumed that Darwin's ideas were anti-Christian.

Here's what the Episcopal church teaches about biological evolution:

In 2006, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved a resolution stating:

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention affirms that God is Creator, in accordance with the witness of Scripture and the ancient Creeds of the Church; and be it further,

Resolved, That the theory of evolution provides a fruitful and unifying scientific explanation for the emergence of life on earth, and that an acceptance of evolution in no way diminishes the centrality of Scripture in telling the stories of the love of God for the Creation and is entirely compatible with an authentic and living Christian faith (from Panda's Thumb website)

The affirmation of the theory of evolution among Episcopal theologians dates back to the late 1800s, soon after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species. Lux Mundi*, an important collection of essays published in 1883 by Anglican theologians, clearly and forthrightly affirmed Darwin's theory. More recently, biochemist Arthur Peacock and theoretical physicist John Polkinghorne, both Anglican priests, have written extensively advocating for a

theologically informed integration of evolution and Christian faith. Peacock writes, “The processes revealed by the sciences, especially evolutionary biology, are in themselves God-acting-as-creator. There is no need to look for God as some kind of additional factor supplementing the processes of the world. God, to use language usually applied in sacramental theology, is ‘in, with, and under’ all-that-is and all-that-goes-on.” Wow! Not many theologians so explicitly connect sacramental theology and Darwin’s theory.

What other churches are on board? To name a few, the Methodists, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican II was very clear that evolution was compatible with Christian faith.

Pierre de Chardin, a highly trained Jesuit priest, philosopher, paleontologist and geologist, wrote extensively on Christian faith and evolution. He emphasized that creation is unfinished, on the move. It is more accurate to say, “God is creating the world” than it is to say, “God created the world.” In his book, *The Future of Man*, Chardin speaks of “Earth opening and exploding upwards into God.” He wrote that God is drawing the universe toward a maximum level of complexity and consciousness.

John Haught, a prominent Roman Catholic scholar from Georgetown University, has published a number of books on faith and evolution. Haught says, “Evolution does not destroy but confirms the religious intuition that there is everlasting care at the bottom of things.”

I’ll end with that thought. Darwin’s theory does not conflict with but rather confirms our faith in a God whose everlasting care is at the bottom of things. The seraphim sing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth—the universe!—is full of his glory.” Indeed. And so it is. Amen

[Use as closing if there is time]

“God’s Grandeur,” Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.