**“Clearer Vision with Mature Eyes”**

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher**

**Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio**

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* Genesis 2:4-8 When the Lord God made the universe, there were no plants on the earth and no seeds had sprouted, because God had not sent any rain, and there was no one to cultivate the land (v. 4b-5).
* 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am a[n adult], I have no more use for childish ways (v. 11).
* Sermon-in-a-sentence: Science and religion are not in conflict; they are two distinct ways of experiencing and knowing God’s Creation.

I may have shared this with you before; I don’t remember. But I do remember what I thought heaven was—or more specifically, *where* heaven was—when I was a child. To help you picture it, I want you to imagine walking downstairs into the basement of our house. Our basement is not finished, so look up and notice the ceiling. What you see are the joists and bridge pieces that “X” between the joists to stabilize them. You see the bottom of the subfloor lumber. You see lots of nail heads.

If you can picture that, then you can picture what I used to imagine as a child when I thought about heaven. I figured that if you went way out into space—I guess it would have to be beyond the Moon or even beyond the planets—then as you flew through space, eventually you’d come to what looked like the ceiling in my basement: a ceiling of boards and joists and bridge pieces. On the other side of that—beyond the ugly, unfinished side over here—on the other side was heaven. I could see the underside of a storm cellar door like in “The Wizard of Oz.” Leaking around the edges of that door was light, and maybe some puffy cloud stuff. After all, “Heaven was on the other side.” That’s what I used to picture when I thought about heaven… when I was five or ten years old. Heaven had to be “someplace,” and it had to look like “something.”

But with age and knowledge comes progress, and my view of heaven has changed. So now when I look at the night sky I don’t imagine that boarded-up barrier to heaven. I marvel at the images and descriptions of deep space with its quasars and galaxies and black holes at distances far greater than my mind can comprehend. I mean, I think that walking from my home to this church is a significant distance, a little less than 2 miles. But that’s not much compared to, say, traveling between Cleveland and Arizona, where some football game will be played tonight—that trip would take several hours by jet flying at 500 miles per hour. Even then, the distance between Ohio and Arizona is not much of a distance compared to traveling to the Moon, which would take a few days traveling at thousands of miles per hour. And even that distance pales in comparison to the distance to the nearest planet, or to the edge of our galaxy, or to the next nearest galaxy, or to the farthest galaxy we know about.

Yes, with age and knowledge comes progress. This can be illustrated by the images on the front cover of today’s bulletin. The upper image is how the Roman Empire viewed the world. The lower image is how we have seen our own planet from the perspective of space. We know now what we didn’t know then.

So yes, as I’ve matured, my view of heaven has changed. But my belief that there is a heaven has not. What I have learned through science has not undermined what I believe by faith.

I tell you this because it relates to an issue that makes the news now and again, an issue that most people face at some time. The issue is the relationship between science and religion. Can a person trust in science and still be a religious person? Some intolerant voices in society want you to think that science and religion are in opposition to each other. The clearest example of their view of the incompatibility of science and religion usually comes up in the discussion of origins: *Where did we come from and how did we get here?*

For generations, students have been taught the widely-accepted and empirically-demonstrated theory that the universe and this world’s species are the result of an evolutionary process. This theory is widely accepted across many branches of science and has been empirically demonstrated. But some voices argue, “What about the story of the Creation in the Bible?” In some places they have sought to include Creationism—the biblical account of creation—into the public school curriculum. That would be appropriate if they wanted to have it taught in an elective class on biblical studies. But no, they want to teach the biblical account of the seven days of Creation as scientific theory.

Well, what is science and what is religion? Science is the study of the material, processes, and forces of the natural world. Science is empirical—it can be studied, measured, tested, replicated. Science is not about belief; it is about how things work. Religion is about ultimate belief, meaning, and purpose.

The so-called Creationists have been thwarted in their attempts to get Bible study in science class. The courts see Creationism-as-science as a violation of the First Amendment’s “Establishment Clause” because it amounts to governmental endorsement or “establishment” of a particular religious belief. But these repeated legal rebuffs haven’t stopped the creationists. In recent years those who see science as an enemy of religion have modified their approach. Rather than trying to teach the Genesis account of Creation in schools, they have pushed another alternative to the theory of evolution, an alternative they call the theory of “Intelligent Design.’ In a nutshell, Intelligent Design proposes that “the natural world is so intricate that its creatures cannot have evolved, but must instead have been purposefully designed” (“Science, Religion, and the Teaching of Evolution in Public School Science Classes,” The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy, http://www.ucc.org/not-mutually-exclusive/ accessed 1/31/08).

It didn’t take long for the courts to see the Intelligent Design strategy for what it is—another attempt to portray religious conviction as if it were science, just without using the name “God” or referring to the biblical book of Genesis. In 2005 a Pennsylvania court rejected an attempt by the Dover, Pennsylvania Board of Education to pass off instruction of Intelligent Design as science rather than the religiously-based conviction that it is. In the court decision, the judge wrote:

Both Defendants and many of the leading proponents of [Intelligent Design] make a bedrock assumption which is utterly false. Their presupposition is that evolutionary theory is antithetical to a belief in the existence of a supreme being and to religion in general. Repeatedly in this trial, Plaintiffs’ scientific experts testified that the theory of evolution represents good science, is overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, and that [evolution] in no way conflicts with, nor does it deny, the existence of a divine creator (“Science, Religion, and the Teaching of Evolution in Public School Science Classes,” The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy, http://www.ucc.org/not-mutually-exclusive/ accessed 1/31/08).

The court said that the notion that science and religion are opposed to one another is false:

* One can be a person of faith and believe in the findings of scientific research.
* One can be a scientist and embrace the belief in a God who reigns supreme over all of creation.

This false notion that science and religion are in opposition to each other—an idea fiercely promoted by intransigent biblical literalists—this notion has actually been undermined by the literalists themselves. One of the most famous proponents of Creationism found himself admitting that a literal reading of the Bible was unreasonable.

In the famous Scopes “Monkey” Trial in Tennessee in 1925, a public school teacher was tried in court for teaching evolution, which violated a Tennessee state law. Famous lawyer, politician and orator William Jennings Bryan prosecuted on behalf of the state. At one point in the trial, defense attorney Clarence Darrow called his opponent, Mr. Bryan, to the witness stand.

Darrow began his interrogation of Bryan with a quiet question: "You have given considerable study to the Bible, haven't you, Mr. Bryan?" Bryan replied, "Yes, I have. I have studied the Bible for about fifty years." Thus began a series of questions designed to undermine a literalist interpretation of the Bible. Bryan was asked about a whale swallowing Jonah, Joshua making the sun stand still, Noah and the great flood, the temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and the creation according to Genesis. After initially contending that "everything in the Bible should be accepted as it is given there," Bryan finally conceded that the words of the Bible should not always be taken literally. In response to Darrow's relentless questions as to whether the six days of creation, as described in Genesis, were twenty-four hour days, Bryan said, "My impression is that they were periods" (University of Missouri—Kansas City, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/evolut.htm>).

Most Presbyterians do not understand the Bible in a literal sense, either. Our confessional heritage affirms that we are to embrace the Bible as the revelation of God’s being and work, but also that the Bible is to be embraced with our intellects as well as our hearts. In a church statement called “The Confession of 1967” we have acknowledged,

“The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of [people], conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. [The Scriptures] reflect views of life, history and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding (Book of Confessions, 9.29, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)).

Scripture itself speaks to the importance of discerning the meaning behind the words of the Bible. The thirteenth chapter of St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is among the best-known passages in the Bible. I’m sure you know it—it’s the one that says, *“Love is patient and kind…”* and *“…faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”* (v. 4a, 13). Often overlooked in this famous chapter on love is an observation Paul makes about maturity. In today’s New Testament reading you heard Paul say that, as an adult, he is not the same person he was when he was a child—he looks at things differently, feels differently, understands things differently, and even presents himself differently. We would hope that we all do. I hope I don’t still express myself today the way I did when I was seven years old. I hope my love for my wife is different than the love I had for the cowboy boots my grandparents gave me when I was four.

Similarly, as we mature physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, the way we approach the Bible can change, too. At first it may seem like just a big book that everyone treats in a special way. Then when we receive our own copy of the Bible, it becomes especially precious, different from any other book on our bookshelf. As we learn the stories of Jesus, and hear the histories of the ancient Israelites, we may drift toward stories that capture our imaginations because of their vivid imagery, such as the parting of the sea, or the Jesus walking on the water.

Then for most people there comes a point when we realize that the world described by the Bible seems to be at odds with what we see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears. *Could it be that people really did used to live to the age of 400, 700 or 900 years old? Did God really make the sun stand still so Joshua’s army could have the extra daylight it needed to vanquish its enemy? Could God really have created the heavens and the earth in 144 hours and then taken a day off?*

It’s not that we should doubt the truth of scripture, but as we mature our eyes are able to see more clearly that scripture’s truth lies not in a literal understanding of the events it describes. Instead, scripture’s truth is found in how it opens our hearts and minds to seeking God’s will for us today through the testimony of those ancient writers and how they perceived God at work in their world. The Bible is not science. It is theology—it is thinking about God.

For thirty years I’ve been wearing a college ring from my days at The College of Wooster. The ring depicts the college seal and its motto, which is *Scientia et religio ex uno fonte*, Latin for “Science and religion from one source.” Science and religion are different fields of inquiry, but they come from, and point to, one source. This relationship between science and religion was envisioned by astronomer and physicist Robert Jastrow in his book “God and the Astronomers:”

For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries (from God and the Astronomers, cited in The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe, Michael Reagan, ed., New York: Templeton Foundation Press, 1999, p. 35).

Science and religion are not opposed to each other, but they are not the same, either. Each one, in its own way, invites us to open our hearts and minds to the grandeur, glory, and goodness of God.

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