The people of God
at worship
February Thirteenth ~ Two Thousand Eleven
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Religion and Science Sunday

Call to Worship
adapted from Psalm 19
Leader: The heavens are telling the glory of God;
People: And the firmament proclaims our Creator’s handiwork.
Leader: Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
People: There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
ALL: And yet… their voices go out through all the earth and their words to the end of the universe.

Invocation
In the Majesty that is All Creation, we gather this day to praise the One who is Mystery, Power, Amazement, Wonder, Compassion and Love. Help us to be open to your Eternal Joy for Life, a gift that has been present since the beginning of time.

Morning Prayer
With continually surprising wonder and playful delight ~ your Creation Lord ~ has come into being. As humble passengers on this vast blue jewel of a spaceship, we gather this morning to praise the power and majesty of all we know, all we can dream and all of the mystery we are yet to discover. Be with us as we learn to live together as one Family of Life sharing a sacred journey into each new day. In the Name of the One Who is Love and Peace and Grace we pray ~ AMEN

Scripture
1 Corinthians 3:16-17
Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Matthew 5:43-48
‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon
Evolution of a New Theology or Why Jesus Did Not Die for My Sins
Why tell The Great Story?

VBS 2010
This past August, our Vacation Bible School theme was Galactic Blast and
throughout the week, there were many opportunities to talk to the children about Creation and how the Universe came into existence, about stars, galaxies, super novas, back holes and evolution. It was a great week; we all had a galactic blast!

The very first day, I read to the children the two Creation stories from Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.¹

I told the children these were three thousand-year-old stories, that were told almost like love poems about a God who brought order to the Universe and life into existence.

These stories were creative and beautiful and the people who wrote them down had the best information available at that time to explain how our Earth and life on Earth came into being.

They didn’t have science back then but they did have people who observed the world and then shared what they knew.

I also told the VBS children I believed these stories were divinely inspired which means God inspired the writers and revealed the words and ideas to them.

**AND THEN... A MORE RECENT STORY**

We talked about the Bible stories a little and then, I told them the Great Story² of our Universe ~ from the very beginning ~ 13.7 million years ago to this very moment in time.

I used this fourteen foot section of rope that is on the floor here in the aisle to help me tell the story where each foot is equivalent to one billion years of history.

**SIDEBAR ON A BILLION**

Billion is a number I say so casually but really I continue to have trouble comprehending one billion years.

I remind myself how big these numbers are by reciting a little math game over and over. First I figure out how long one thousand seconds is. The answer: ~ 17 minutes.

And then one million seconds which is eleven days and then one billion seconds which is… anyone want to guess?

One billion seconds is thirty-two years.

I am telling you about these numbers because they are hard for me to understand and I believe they might be hard for many of you to really understand and of course it was nearly impossible for the children to even begin to understand how big this story really is.

**WHY DO THIS?**

When I told people I was planning to tell the VBS kids the Great Story of our Universe, there were some people who said: Why are you doing this Gary? The children can’t really understand the enormity of the story and why tell it in church?

What difference can it make to their faith?

How does science affect our faith anyway?

And even today there are certainly several asking:

Why is it important to have a Science and Religion Sunday anyway?

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¹ At this point, I gave them a pop quiz. I said: Be honest now... I won’t keep any scores ~ how many of you knew there were two Creation stories in Genesis? Not too many raised hands...

² I first discovered this term on Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow’s wonderful educational website www.greatstory.com. In addition, David Christian’s Maps of Time which is a text used in a college course on Big History, provided additional information.
The Evolution of a Faith or Why Jesus Did Not Die for My Sins ~ 3

A Sermon Preached by Gary McCaslin ~ 13 February 2011 ~ First Baptist Church, Painted Post, NY

**No Longer Enough**

One reason for having a Science Sunday is that the Creation stories from Genesis are no longer big enough. As poetic and majestic as those Genesis stories are, they are way too small for all we know about our Universe today… and as we are reminded by Thomas Aquinas:

A mistake about Creation can result in a mistake about God.

When Genesis was written, it had an order and a power that the Creation stories 3000 years ago did not have. The Genesis Creation stories gave an ordered, detailed description of when all life came into the world and how it was named and the purpose of all Creation ~ to serve the humans.

The Genesis stories answered all of the questions people had at the time and the people loved these stories because they were so complete. But today, the stories from Genesis are no longer enough.

**Lots of Science Information**

We are living at the end of a three hundred year period where scientific knowledge has exploded and we now know more about our world and the Universe than my father’s generation could simply not have imagined.

And that science does not just help us understand the Universe. The same science that helps us live longer and better is the same science that is able to help us figure out how old the Universe is, what happens when stars explode and to say with confidence

We are all one interrelated family of life.

No longer are those words just for the mystics. No longer are those words something the wise men and women felt deep in their souls.

We are all one interrelated family of life.

No longer can those words simply be discarded as some kind of New Age psychobabble.

We are related to another and we are related to all life on the planet.

**Deep, Ancient Relationships**

David Sloan Wilson spoke here at First Baptist Church a few years ago on Science Sunday. Wilson is an evolutionary biologist at Binghamton University and has written about the attributes we humans have that are in common with life forms that are millions of years old.

Here are his words

The attributes that make us uniquely human have evolved over a period of roughly 6 million years. Our human attributes modified from the great ape attributes that are roughly 10 million years old, and primate attributes that are roughly 55 million years old, mammalian attributes that are roughly 245 million years old, vertebrate attributes are roughly 600 million years old and attributes of cells with a nucleus that are roughly 1,500 million years old.

If you think it is unnecessary to go that far back in the tree of life to understand our own attributes (and see how we are all related,) consider the humble fact that we share with nematodes (tiny wormlike creatures) the same gene that controls our appetite. At most, our unique attributes are like an addition onto a huge multi-room mansion.

It is sheer hubris to think we can ignore everything but the newest room.3

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3 David Sloan Wilson as quoted in Michael Dowd’s book Thank God for Evolution
The same science that helps us heal and live longer and more productive lives is the same science that allows Wilson to speak with such authority.

The stories of Genesis were and continue to be a celebration of life. The question now for Christians and people of all faiths is

\[ \text{How can we include the wonder and sometimes indescribable majesty of what we now know about Creation into our worship and our faith?} \]

**PLEASE DON’T DIMINISH GOD**

A second reason we need to not only tell this Great Story but to celebrate it is because to not tell the Great Story only diminishes God.

A friend whose children graduated from a local high school told me that there were times when students were given permission by their parents to be dismissed from biology classes because the teacher was going to talk about evolution.

These students were given permission to leave because of their religious beliefs.

Now I believe these students have a legal right to be excused; this is America ~ they may certainly worship as they choose. My problem is that leaving a biology class where evolution is going to be discussed is so sad.

The parents want to protect an old image of God and they do not want their children exposed to any new scientific information that might alter their thinking.

I can only believe this is a sad mis-use of the God-given brain that is so conveniently located right up here between our two ears.

**GOD CAN TAKE IT**

Here’s what I wonder when I hear about these students…

Don’t you think that God ~ who is in every corner of Creation ~ and whose reality we can only understand better by asking questions and learning things our parents could never have dreamed of…

Don’t you think that God wants us to get out there into the world and learn things that enrich our lives?

Why would we think God wants us to keep a 300 year old or a 500 year old or a 2000 year old image of God at the center of our lives?

Do we really think God Almighty is going to be permanently damaged by some new biological history?

**THE CHURCH Responds TO GALILEO**

This is certainly not a new problem; there have always been people who want to protect an old way of thinking.

After Galileo showed the church fathers his telescope in 1511, they offered a statement that I am sure was intended to protect the way they understood God’s relation to Creation.

Along with Galileo’s telescope came a very logical presentation demonstrating that we were living in a solar system where the Earth was one of several planets that revolved around the Sun.

Here’s how the church authorities responded:

Galileo’s theories have cast suspicion on the doctrine of the incarnation. His theories upset the whole basis of theology.

If the earth is only one planet among several, it cannot be that any such great things have been done specially for it as the Christian doctrine teaches. And if there are other planets, since God makes nothing in vain, they must be inhabited;
but how can their inhabitants be descended from Adam? How can they trace back their origin to Noah's ark? How can they have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, our Saviour?  

**SHALL WE GO BACK?**

No one back then could imagine God **not** making the Earth the center of the Universe.

However, no one today would side with the religious authorities who spoke those words. At the same time, people who today skip classes on evolution or who continue to say **humans could never have evolved from lower life forms**, are ~ I believe ~ trying to keep science out of their lives in order to “protect God” and I just don’t think God needs protecting.

Just because there are problems that arise when we try to understand how humans evolved from the life forms that emerged three billion years ago when our fireball that is Earth had cooled off a little is **not** a reason to run away from such an idea.

**CELEBRATE THE HUMAN TEMPLE!**

NO! It’s a reason to dance and sing and celebrate and play the saxophone and tell stories that **praise** our Magnificent God of the entire Universe. You and I are here because of that glorious evolution of Life!

But don’t get too wrapped up with that idea. There are some physicists who have proposed that ours is only one of many Universes, coming into and out of existence.** It’s crazy out there…**

Let’s celebrate the wonder and all that crazy possibility that is you and me.

We now understand how humans evolved and look what we have: a story that explains why no two people are ever created the same.

Never has there been another you and never will there ever be because we are constantly evolving.

Why?

Because God’s Creation is continuing to evolve. New people, new creatures are continually being born… God is alive and at work!**

For me, this new knowledge adds new meaning to the verses from 1 Corinthians 3 that I read earlier.

…you are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you! For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

**LETting Go of the Old Stories**

Finally, of course, we need to tell the Great Story because all of this new knowledge will help us see the Bible in a new light. However, this means we will have to give up a few literal understandings of our childhood faith.

If we celebrate the evolution of humanity over a 7 million year span, we may have to give up the idea of a literal Adam and Eve. And the story of an ark

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4 A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, The War on Galileo; http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/White/astronomy/war.html


6 The problem is we’re just killing the old species off faster than new ones can evolve but that’s another sermon.
holding two of every animal would be hard to reconcile with the evolution of the thousands and thousands of animals species over millions of years.

Unless, of course, you go to the Creation Museum in Ohio where they have now reconfigured Noah’s Ark to include dinosaurs. They had to include dinosaurs because dinosaurs bones and fossils are everywhere.

How does a Bible literalist fit dinosaurs into the Genesis story of Noah?

The Creation Museum directors tell us the ark took baby dinosaurs so they would fit on the ark...

I have to admit it is a creative solution to the problem, but it is certainly not good science.7

Believing these ancient stories are literally true is fine if we lived 2000 years ago in a culture that believed the world was flat but they are not good science or history for today.

**Cosmic Switcheroo?**

And what about the sermon title where I propose the idea that Jesus did not die for my sins? This sermon is in many ways a confession of faith ~ the evolving theology mentioned in the title is definitely my own.

As a result of the questions I have asked in my sixty-two years about God and Life and the more I have learned about the Universe and the history of the Bible and how it was written ~ my faith has evolved to the place where I can not believe in my heart that the words of the rabbi/tentmaker Paul could ever define all of humanity’s relationship to God.

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7 My term “cosmic switcheroo,” also known as “substitutionary atonement,” was first introduced in a sermon entitled Behold the Lamb of God and delivered Sunday 16 January 2005.

8 I know too many people who have rejected religion because of an over abundance of guilt it provides; Jesus took that away.
children. But, over time, that Love only continued to expand until we are challenged by Jesus to love even our enemies.

I don’t believe we can get any more inclusive than that.

**Called to Do What Jesus Did**

I see Jesus calling each of us to a life that honors the sacred Creation present in every life.

Jesus didn’t know anything about genes or evolution or dinosaurs but He lived his life seeing the sacred everywhere he looked, in every person, in the birds of the air and in the flowers of the field.

No… we cannot throw out the Bible, no matter how much the atheists believe it is a waste of time to read but we are called to read it with new eyes.

We are called every day to embrace the lessons of a Love that knows no boundaries and teach them to all our children.

No matter what we continue to learn about our life history or our world or our Universe, we are still invited each day to sing and dance in the knowledge that God will always be a song alive in our hearts. AMEN

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**Publicity for Evolution Sunday prompted a letter to the Editor in a local newspaper. Following was my response.**

To the Editor ~

In response to Robert Wheeler’s letter entitled “Evolution and God are Incompatible” (13 February 2011) it is important to note that instead of using an atheist’s description of evolution as “blind and purposeless,” there are many people of faith who see evolution’s forces in Creation as the sacred reflection of a magnificent, creative and wonder-filled God. These same believers choose not to take literally the 3000-year-old words of people who believed the world was flat. While their words continue to inspire, they are hardly good science for 21st century humans.

In addition, Mr. Wheeler’s comments are very similar to those of the church fathers who said in 1511 that Galileo’s proposed idea that our Earth was only one of many planets which revolved around the sun “would upset the whole basis of theology.” However, human understanding changed and the church survived.

Let’s rest in the assurance that the reality which is “God” ~ present in all time and throughout the Universe ~ will be just fine if a few planet Earth humans alter their understandings of the divine to include evolution.

Robert Wheeler and all interested parties are welcome to discuss these ideas further by attending a gathering that discusses Evolutionary Spirituality on the first Sunday each month at 4pm at the First Baptist Church in Painted Post, NY.