

Corresponding with Darwin (Ps. 104.24-30)
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I'd like you to imagine for a moment getting off a train in England. You step onto the platform, the train pulls away, and you look at the sign posted at the station. "Great Malvern," it reads, though it doesn't look that great. It's about as sleepy a train stop as you'll ever see. You walk past the small tea shop and out into a commuter parking lot. There is a road at the edge of the lot, only one road. You walk toward it, wondering which way to go, when you nearly bump into another sign, an old directional post, leaning slightly to the left. "To Town Centre" it advises, with an arrow pointing the way. You follow the arrow and begin to walk the lane, noticing as you go that you are moving uphill on an incline. It is a lovely day in the West Midlands, and, as you walk, you listen to the chirp of the birds – goldcrests, willow warblers, and linnets – and notice the ground ivy and yellow corydalis growing on the stone walls beside the road. Dappled sunlight splashes across the asphalt and a slight breeze brushes your skin.

You continue walking and before long the sign proves its point and you see the town center coming into view. The road steepens into something of a soft climb as you walk past the quaint shops and restaurants of the village on the way to the place you are going. You can see that place from here. It's hard to miss. The spires of the Malvern priory church jut skyward and catch your eye almost instantly. The oldest part of the church was built in the 11th Century, and, though it has had many additions made to it, none of them have been recent. Its stone has long since turned the color of rust, an earthy tone, and it sits nicely against the plateau of the Malvern Hills. The hills themselves rise abruptly just after the churchyard, a thousand feet or more of pre-Cambrian rock, rounded

by the ages and now covered in patches of green and yellow and crisscrossed with footpaths. You stop there at the edge of the churchyard. Behind you lay the fields of Worcestershire, in front of you sit the great hills. You turn to the side and stroll toward the church. And amidst all of this beauty – birdsong, greenery, sunlight, soft breeze – you notice the graveyard beside the church. Old stone markers lean and some have fallen as they decorate the earth with their ancient reminder of our mortality. You stand there for just a moment longer, contemplating the fecundity of life around you and the certainty of death in front of you and hold the two thoughts in tension.

We have come to the Malvern churchyard for a reason. It is a reason particular to this Sunday, which we call Evolution Sunday, because Malvern is one of the most important places in the story of the life of Charles Darwin. To be sure, Evolution Sunday is not all about a single man. Indeed, its broad intent is to celebrate the rich dialogue between religion and science and the ways each contribute to our common search for truth and meaning. This morning we gather to say that religion and science are partners in the search for truth and meaning, not adversaries. As we do so, we should be pleased to know that this weekend we are joined by over 1,000 other churches and synagogues from all 50 states who gather to affirm the relationship between religion and science.¹ As religious people, we learn from the sacred stories of our tradition. But we are also deeply grateful for the truth that science has brought to bear on the knowledge of who we are, including the profound truth that we are kin to all life on Earth, descended from a common ancestor through the unfolding of an evolutionary process that connects us farther up and deeper down than any of us can imagine. Science has added to our

¹ See the Clergy Letter Project, http://www.butler.edu/clergyproject/rel_evolution_sun.htm.

religious vocabularies new expressions of reverence, wonder, and awe that constitute a 21st Century language of praise. Today we gather to affirm that there can be a great correspondence between our religion and our science. But in order to make such an affirmation, we might consider again the story of Charles Darwin. Though this day is not simply about a single man, there was an event in his life that, when considered, cuts to the quick of the human search for truth and meaning. It was a life event that shook him to the core, an event that, I believe, catalyzed his understanding of the world as a place of both ineffable beauty and unspeakable suffering. It happened in Malvern, and if you walk around the churchyard, you can find it there marked.

Somewhere among those crooked headstones, lies the grave of Charles Darwin's beloved daughter, Annie. Annie died in 1851 at the age of ten, most likely of tuberculosis.² After Annie fell ill, Charles took her to a special doctor in Malvern. It was there that he spent her last days tending to her, and, in the custom of a practiced naturalist, documenting the most minor changes in her condition.³ Darwin also wrote frequently to his wife, Emma, during those days. Emma was home eight months pregnant with another child. The letters that Darwin wrote her, delivered by overnight post, contain not only the pertinent medical information, but, as the days went by, they are increasingly defined by a tone of deep, personal anguish as Charles watched his daughter's illness progress and was powerless to stop it. According to his biographers,

² David Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) 113-117.

³ George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 161-162.

Darwin would attend to Annie hour after hour, then he would excuse himself to pen a note home. During the writing of these letters, he stopped frequently to weep.

I offer the portrait of Charles Darwin weeping because it holds within it the human image of a man who, in so many ways, struggled with the questions that have haunted nearly every one of us at one time or another. For this man, who wrote as beautifully as anyone about the extraordinary complexity and diversity of life, his scientific sentences infused with reverence, also felt the great shadow of suffering as it fell on his own shoulders, the earnest indifference of natural law as it affects every mortal one of us. He struggled to make sense of it, but found that in many ways he could not. And while Darwin has been portrayed by his detractors as a godless atheist and his admirers as a champion of clear-headed rational science, I don't read him as either of those things. Darwin was rather one who moved through various theological and philosophical stages, like so many of us have done, like so many of us are doing. We might remember that as a young man he set out on the *H.M.S. Beagle* with the intention of returning home to become an Anglican cleric. His developing naturalism grew out of a romantic sensibility, and there are places in his early writing where you almost think you're reading Shelley or Wordsworth. Darwin emerged as a scientist only after discovering his love of naturalism and his knack for intense, disciplined, and methodical study. (Here is a man, after all, who spent the better part of eight years quietly dissecting barnacles in his study!) But somewhere along the way, he laid down his early conception of the divine as a sort of benevolent deity that could exercise supernatural power. Well, this didn't really just happen somewhere along the way. It happened in Malvern as he sat beside Annie's bed.

When Darwin finally wrote to his wife of their daughter's death, he invoked the name of God three times.⁴ "God bless her," he scratched onto a page, his vision no doubt blurred by tears. The language would have been a kind of comfort to Emma Darwin, who was an orthodox Christian, but it is not clear what the words meant to Charles; it is more clear what they didn't mean. What Charles let go of, once and for all there at Malvern, was the concept of a divine being who could have intervened in the natural process but chose not to do so. Such a god, by Darwin's reckoning, could only be a god of cruelty. What Darwin rejected so vehemently ever afterwards, was any attempt to be consoled by those who would assure him that his daughter's suffering and death was part of some divine purpose, that it had a meaning that was somehow too great to understand or too noble to be glimpsed by the lowly human eye. No, Darwin would not accept such ideas as these. In place of an omnipotent deity who could have but didn't, Darwin put the only thing that matched his experience – the genuine ambiguity that life is both incredibly beautiful and immensely painful. Darwin decided he would rather live with the ambiguity of saying that there is a natural law that is impersonal and indifferent than the much darker certainty of saying that there is a supernatural being who would withhold care from a dying child and her parents. Such a god was too awful for Darwin to imagine, and at this point I place myself right alongside him. I do not believe in a god who could have helped and didn't. You need not believe in such a god either. And you don't have to be a scientist to reach such a conclusion, just a sufferer, just a member of the species.

⁴ Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin*, 116.

Now to say that we do not believe in a god who could supernaturally intervene in natural processes yet chooses not to is a far cry from saying that we need not believe in anything at all or that there aren't deep sources of truth and meaning within our experiences that we can share. But it is a way of saying that some things might simply be too cruel to believe, and, in the name our own humanity, we need not make sense where there is no sense. For one of the deepest religious practices of all is to say that there are many things that we do not understand, there is much that we do not know. Darwin himself, I think, would have been a bit more comfortable on this terrain. Indeed, Darwin never thought of himself as an atheist and he argued strongly against the use of that term, saying that it was far too certain of itself. Rather, he lived in a more ambiguous place, a place made of a lifetime of observations and experiences that were more bitter and sweet than he could say. Philosopher Chet Raymo writes of him thusly: "Darwin unveiled as much of nature's hidden mystery as any person before or after. And having seen as deeply as anyone into the secrets that nature is wont to hide, he knew that ultimate knowledge receded from his grasp. There was no gnosis, no revelation, no church or holy book, that could take him to a place where Annie's death might be ameliorated. But even in his grievous bereavement, he continued to see 'the face of nature bright with gladness.'"⁵

It seems to me that human beings have always struggled with the truth that our experience is both/and. For our world is both beautiful and disturbing, our lives are filled with both meaning and search, and our stories are both enchanting and disillusioning all

⁵ Chet Raymo, *When God is Gone Everything is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2008), 34-35.

at once. This is a world where flowers bloom brightly in one season and die in the next, their minerals returning to the Earth, as ours will do one day. Yet it is all of a piece somehow. The psalmist knew as much. We heard it in this morning's reading, those ancient Hebrew lines that said, in their pre-scientific poetry, "How many are the things you have made...the earth is full...the sea, vast and wide...its creatures beyond number."⁶ And yet, when their breath is taken away, "they perish and turn again into dust" before life on the whole is renewed once again.⁷ To be sure, these lines envision a supernatural deity of the sort that Darwin left behind. But perhaps what they share with him is the slightly more balanced sense that our lives and deaths are simply two sides of the same story, a story that is about much more than ourselves alone. Not everything about this story will be okay with us and not all of its sufferings need to be sanctioned. Indeed, there is no consolation to be offered at the grave of Annie Darwin. But it might also be true that in spite of the tears that will not easily wipe away, the world we have remains a place that inspires our deepest feelings of reverence, wonder, and awe. Perhaps the common ground we find is that of a growing understanding, wrought of both science and religion, that what is sacred is life itself and our shared work is the work of preserving it.

We might just end, then, imagining ourselves back at the churchyard in Malvern. The sun is a bit lower in the sky now and soon night will fall. With Darwin in mind, we could take a deep breath, offer a word of gratitude for the story that he helped to explain, the evolutionary story of life on Earth that makes us kin to each and every living thing. And

⁶ Psalm 104: 24-25, TANAKH translation.

⁷ Ps. 104:29.

then we could walk, in our mind's eye, back down the hill, following the winding stone road past the shops and restaurants, down the hedged lane toward the train station. We might consider, as we go, the ways that all of our stories correspond. For who among us has not been bowled over by the beauty and wonder of our natural home? Who among us has not wept for someone we love now gone? Who among us has not asked what kind of world this is – beautiful or terrible or both – and what our place is to be in it? Who among us has not held the questions close and simply followed the way that they open? For it is the questions, I think, where religion and science are met. And it is from this meeting that we begin, walking down the lane of our lives, to make our first utterances of an answer. May we answer this day by learning all we can about our natural world and working to protect and preserve it. May we answer this day by remembering those who suffer and reaching out to them in compassion. May we answer this day by saying that what we hold sacred is life itself.

In gratitude for Charles Darwin. Amen.