

A sermon preached by
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January 8, 2006
Epiphany Sunday

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

HOW INTELLIGENT IS GOD'S DESIGN?

I wonder. I wonder how the wise men would react to our current controversy over intelligent design. I wonder how these sages, who were the educated intellectuals and sophisticated scientists of their day - how would they react to this public tug of war? On the one side are those who see creation as a random process of nature. And on the other side are those who see creation as the intentional plan of a designer God. I wonder if the wise men would find it difficult to reconcile the facts of science with the imagination of faith? Or, would they find a way to embrace both, as part of the mystery of life?

It seems that even Charles Darwin was caught in the ambiguities of faith and science. In 1880, when he published his world changing book "On the Origin of Species," the critics swiftly accused him of apostasy and atheism. Darwin's good friend was Asa Gray, a distinguished Harvard botanist, who was also a faithful believing Christian. Gray quickly jumped to his friend's defense, favorably reviewing Darwin's controversial study. But, in private, the two friends carried on a lively debate. Gray tried to persuade Darwin to accept a "harmony of evolution with a belief in intelligent design." The Harvard professor was convinced that "variation does not always seem an accident, but often is 'guided in certain lines,' as if by an intelligent power." Because Gray was familiar with scripture, he understood - and trusted - the attributes of a benevolent God. And so, he was able to accept the suffering and the evil found in nature as compatible with a loving God. Darwin, on the other hand, interpreted these darker sides of creation as errors, which led to his notion of the randomness of evolution. For Darwin, the chaotic patterns of natural selection led to the survival of some species and the demise of others. And yet the agnostic Darwin was also able to write the following in a letter to his friend:

I can see no reason why a man, or other animal, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws, and that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator...But the more I think, the more bewildered I become.." (James Dao, "Intelligent Design: The descent of a concept; **Wall Street Journal**, date unknown)

Bewildered. That is how I feel much of the time when confronted with the complexity of creation and the complexity of a loving God who *does* somehow allow pain and suffering to exist. Bewilderment. But also wonderment. Wonderment, whenever I find myself teetering on the edge of elegance, teetering on the edge of mystery – whenever I reach a point where my mind can no longer understand where my heart is leading me.

I am not much of a scientist, which has become obvious to many of you over the years. After all the only reason I passed physics in high school was because I finished all my experiments, and put a fancy cover on my lab reports! But I remember clearly the day I experienced an epiphany in my limited realm of scientific wonder.. It was during my sabbatical a few years ago, and I was spending some time in Rocky Mountain National Park. I had driven to the highest point on that breathtaking highway that winds through those magnificent peaks. I stopped to take a walk on the path rising above the Visitor's Center. Suddenly my eyes were drawn toward some small plants blooming on the side of the path – rather homely plants, with squat thick leaves, tiny flowers, hovering, clinging almost desperately to the rocky soil. Why such an odd shape, I wondered? And then I remembered the educational display I had seen in the Visitor's Center, explaining that the thirsty leaves and the deep roots and the low embrace of these plants insure that the flowers will bloom – that they would will the cold brutality of the winter and the dry winds of the summer. Immediately, I felt a jolt of awe. Wow! An utterly unique design, for this particular place and this particular plant. It was only after I experienced the wonder in my heart that I was able to move into the wonder of my mind, and the questions began to bubble up. Why? How? WHO?

The wise men in Matthew's story – *magios* in the Greek - these sages are, according to biblical scholars, astrologers and dream interpreters – which may make them suspect in the contemporary world of science. After all, you and I may secretly check our horoscope every day, but we are smart enough not to give rational credence to what the positioning of the stars predict. But, in first century Persia, studying the patterns and the design of the heavens was advanced science – particularly when a new star or comet or light interrupted the predictable patterns of the past. Our wise men are also steeped in the sacred writings of the both the East and the West perhaps some of the first scholars of world religion. These sacred writings suggest that a new light or star is a portent – a sign pointing to the birth of something, or someone, important. Specifically, though they are non-Jews, the magi are familiar with the Hebrew texts, similar to the one from Isaiah this morning, that predict a star as a portent of the Messiah, of the Anointed One - a sign pointing toward the Mighty One who will come to save the Jewish people and complete God's complex work of creation.

And so, when this spectacular new star actually appears in the western sky, the magi take off. With curiosity and courage they follow the star, utilizing all the intellectual, scientific knowledge they can muster. But, the purpose of their journey is clearly articulated by Matthew. They travel in order to pay homage. They journey – according to Webster's definition of “homage” - to offer “reverence and respect and honor” to whatever or whomever their knowledge has led them. It is there, of course, at the frontier of their intellectual knowing, that the wise men discover mystery. It is there that they discover the Mighty One – the God of Power - enfleshed in the powerless innocence of a baby. Stunned – surprised -unable to understand with their minds, the magi instead seek understanding with their hearts. Bewilderment turns into wonderment. They kneel. They bow down. They worship. They offer love, because logic no longer makes sense.

Tim Shriver is the President of the Special Olympics, part of the Kennedy clan, and the son of Sargent Shriver who served as Director of the Peace Corps during the Kennedy Administration. The senior Shriver is also a victim of Alzheimer's disease, and until recently has been an active member of our Friends Club, the Alzheimer's support group for me that meets four days a week here at Bradley Hills. Because of his cousin Kathleen Kennedy's mental disability, and because of his father's mental diminishment, Tim Shriver has become particularly attuned to the inevitable vulnerabilities of the human condition, which is why through the Special Olympics the human dignity of people with disabilities. In an essay about Christmas, Tim has this to say:

*When intelligent design...seem[s] to be the focus of public religious activism, Christmas is like a celebration from another world. It is difficult, after all, to see a case for intelligent design in Bethlehem. Who would believe that the wise and powerful God of intelligent design would adopt the vulnerability of a shivering infant as his incarnational calling card?...Christmas is more mystery than design, more unintelligent than intelligent, more question than answer... And deep spiritual questions should be the foundation of faith in the public square...Mystery suggests a call to public action in search of God's ways...science, with all its majesty and achievement, has only one thing in common with religion: When it reaches its most profound questions, it, too, yields to mystery. (In the Presence of Mystery, **The Washington Post**, 12/05)*

I have come to believe, in my own journey of faith, that God lives in the questions. I believe that seeking understanding with my mind is the preparation I need to trust with my heart. I believe that faith is the frontier beyond the limits of knowledge. I have started looking for portents - in the sky, in the newspaper, in the textbook, in the science lab, in the hospital room, in the darkness as well as the light. Yes, I have started looking for those signs of a God who is trying to do a new thing. And I have discovered that it is in the process, and in the journey, and in the questions that new knowledge and new understanding is usually found. Specifically in this peculiar American controversy about intelligent design, I have come to believe that evolution *is* intelligent design. And that the Intelligent Designer is the One whom I call God. Yes, it is in the chaos of creation and the unfolding randomness of adaptation and change that God is bringing this world into the fullness of its design.

BUT, this faith claim that I feel in my bones, is exactly that – a faith claim. Evolution is science. The wonder that leads to trust in a benevolent intelligent designer is faith. Science belongs in the classroom. Faith does not – because no curriculum can – or should – define the mystery of the soul.

And so, it is in my personal spiritual journey that I seek to weave together the wonders of faith and science. And I believe that this pattern of natural growth we see in physical evolution, is also the template for spiritual growth – for spiritual evolution. It is in the random events of my life and yours that God is at work – continuing to unfolding our potential and our promise through events and processes that we can neither create nor control. Given this chaotic, unpredictable evolution of the spirit, each of us has a choice. Like Herod we can resist the Providence and Grace of God, clinging to our pretense of

power and control. Or like the wise men, we can follow the star of surprise, trusting in the journey and paying homage to the mysteries we find along the way.

In the world of Celtic spirituality, there is a folk expression, “Heaven is only a foot and a half above the height of our heads.” But according to Quaker writer Edward Hays, “the truth is that heaven is only a foot and a half below the height of our heads; [heaven] is in our hearts. How easily we forget that our world is saturated with the sacred, that the ‘mundane is the edge of glory’! Our God is often a hidden God, and so we wander through life easily missing the Divine Presence.” (**Holy Fools and mad Hatters**, p. 67) It is only when we search, when we journey into the mysterious frontiers of our mind, when we explore the secret places of our heart, it is only then that we find the God who has chosen to become with us, and for us, and one of us.

Let me finish with a story about a rabbi and his son:

One day a young boy came into the house after a game of hide-and-peek, with tears streaming down his face. His father took the child into his arms and asked what was wrong. The child tearfully explained that he and the other children had been playing hide-and-peek and that he had hidden himself, but no one had come seeking him. The father kissed his small son lovingly and said, “My child, now you know how God feels. For God is hidden in our midst and waits patiently for us to begin the search.

Friends, this Epiphany Sunday let us arise and shine. Let us arise and join the magi, seeking the new thing God is always doing in our midst. And in the random wonder of the journey may we worship the mysterious and the mundane – as intelligently and reverently as possible.

May it be so – for you and for me. Amen