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First Sunday of Advent
Read: Genesis 1: 1-5
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Corinthians 1: 3-9
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John 1: 1-14

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The Four Words Of Advent *God's Creative Word*

“In the beginning, God created...” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Wow! What powerful and awesome words – and words that are appropriate for the beginning of another Christian year. Advent is not only the season of preparation of the birth of Christ, but serves as the beginning of a new Christian year – and it can serve as a time of new beginnings for each of us here today.

In the past years, I have tried to identify four different things related to a single category for the four Sundays of Advent – four women of Advent – four men of Advent – four animals of Advent – four angels of Advent – four gospels of Advent – four hymns of Advent – what have you. Well, this year I decided to focus on the Four Words of Advent as taken from our Upper Room devotional. As it reads, “During Advent we celebrate the Word becoming flesh. This Word speaks of creation, prophecy, salvation, and light.” So today’s message will focus on God’s Creative Word, beginning with the creation story itself from Genesis 1 – “In the beginning God created...”

This is the time when life begins out of the ominous dark. This is the time when God created order out of chaos – and we learn from John’s Gospel, that Jesus was part of this creation.

Some Hebrew scholars have translated verse 1 this way: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth...” This suggests that God’s creation activity is not an absolute beginning point – or that all was created at once, at that time – and that God is still creating.

“Create” is an awesome and magisterial word. It was God who did the ordering – the forming – the shaping – willing – and decreeing of all potential life space. According to St. Paul this is the God who “calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

The message of Genesis 1 is about the sovereignty of God – because God created the universe – and the universe belongs to God – and God has total dominion over all things. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof...,” says the Psalmist. This is what Genesis 1 is all about – this is a very profound theological statement about God and our relationship to God. Actually, Genesis 1 is an early – and very beautiful priestly liturgy that came down through the oral tradition of the Hebrew people. It is one of many Creation Mythologies of that era – like the one in Genesis 2. I want to spend some time clarifying some troublesome issues that we see even in the news today regarding this lesson.

In our scientific, empirical world, we generally think of myth as a falsehood – something that is not true – but this is only because myth does not fit within the definition of empirical – or “exciting the senses.” We cannot see, touch, hear, taste or smell in order to verify its truth claims. Myth is not subject to scientific verification or proof. But this in no way nullifies the truth that underlies such statements. In fact these truths are more powerful and more meaningful – more substantial than empirical truths.

Mythology is an ultimate truth – like a fable. Genesis 1 is descriptive of the very foundation of our universe – and our lives in this universe. It is true throughout all times. And like a fable – one cannot – one dare not put such a belief system within an empirical context or put it to an empirical test. Can you imagine putting one of Aesop’s Fables to a scientific test – like in a CSI crime lab? But that in no way diminishes or rules out the truths of Aesop’s Fables. Can you hear it now ... “Why do you put God to the test?”

Creation refers to the structure of the entire cosmos – addressing the ultimate questions about the world. Therefore, creation mythologies are profoundly theological – not scientific – dealing with such questions as – Who is God? What is the nature and character of this world? What is the relationship between God and the world? And what is our human function within this world? Science, with all of its importance, just cannot answer such questions.

Unfortunately, there are some who place science as ultimate and supreme – “If you cannot see it, it does not exist.” One noted scientist put it this way, “The fundamental assumption of our age amounts to this, that science is to get rid of angels, blue fairies with red noses and **other agents** whose intervention would reduce the explanation of physical events to other than physical terms.” He does not specify what “other agents” means, but we can guess that science for him is essentially atheistic – which I believe is very limiting and rather sad.

My Ph.D. is in a scientific field and I consider myself well trained in the scientific methodology and assumptions – and I am quite comfortable within the scientific world. There are very specific empirical rules that must be adhered to when doing science. This is what advances our scientific knowledge of the universe and keeps us honest with one another.

However, science cannot replace God or theology or religion. In fact many noted scientists are sincere Christians – with no apparent conflict. A belief in God is not necessarily incompatible with an understanding and loyalty to scientific assumptions and methods. When I have a question of “How,” I go to my science text. But when I have a question of “Why,” I will not find the answer in a science text, but in scripture and prayer.

I am aware and sorry that some have tried to make science and religion incompatible over the centuries. Copernicus and Galileo asserted that the earth moved around the sun – not the sun around the earth as clearly indicated in scripture. But people writing scripture had only their limited perspective to write about the wonders of God’s universe as they saw it – and really as we see it today.

If you live in Hardin Co., the world is flat and the sun travels from the east to the west. It makes sense – our senses tell us that. It is only through science that we understand that the earth is revolving around the Sun, but this doesn’t take away any of the majesty and wonder of it all.

It is quite incorrect to try to make Genesis 1 into a textbook of science. It is a textbook of faith. But Genesis 1 tells us that the universe is created, not out of conflict, but in a buoyant ordering. And all science is based on the assumption that the universe is orderly and operates under orderly and lawful principles. Therefore, there is no incompatibility here at all, but we see those who try to see a conflict between science and religion.

We have recently witnessed the issue festering in Dover, PA, where the local school board was composed of Religious Right ideologues who were determined to water down the scientific teachings of evolution within the public schools while promoting the neo-creationist concept of “intelligent design.”

They voted to require all biology teachers to teach intelligent design as an alternative to evolution. However, some of the teachers and parents filed suit to stop this. While the US Supreme Court has already struck down a Louisiana law requiring a “balanced treatment of creationism and evolution” in 1987 – the proponents of intelligent design claimed that their theory was different – and not based on religion.

However, intelligent design remains a theological precept by claiming that a higher power is responsible for the complexity of life on Earth. In essence, they shrink from using the word God, but they offer no other alternative. Again, those who supported intelligent design theory were from the fundamentalist religious group. Their actions basically show little or no respect for the expertise and training of their science teachers – referring to those who opposed them as atheist and consigning them to hell.

In the recent elections, those school board members advocating intelligent design were voted off the board. And my favorite TV religious jester, Pat Robertson, claimed the Dover should be prepared for a major natural disaster for voting God out of their schools.

Those who attack evolution based on their religious beliefs falsely undermine the scientific status of the theory and do a great disservice to science education. To reject this theory is to embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. It is not only bad science, but terrible theology as well.

I believe that we can understand the intersection of the beliefs in religion and science, not just to reconcile them, but to confirm and enhance both beliefs. Religion and theology deal with questions about ultimate meaning and ultimate purpose – while science deals with cause and effect. And because they do different things and deal with different questions, they abide by different rules, and are not directly in competition with each other. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information, but to transform hearts.

While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science text.

Genesis 1 speaks of an astounding universe, which modern science has revealed – a universe of vast galaxies within which our earth and even our sun are but tiny specks – and a universe in which life has been slowly evolving over unimaginable millennia of time. One day is like a thousand years in God's eyes.

The Psalmist put it this way:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

Thanks to scientific inquiry, we realize that our universe is infinitely more magnificent than any human can ever imagine. And hopefully, this bitter controversy between religion and science – mostly pursued by some religion people – will become a thing of the past. Such a connection between nature and grace certainly underscores our Christian responsibility to care for this earth.

For Paul, Christians are called into a community whose boundaries include all earth and heaven. We are part of the holy catholic church – the church universal. We need to remember that God is the source of whatever spiritual gifts that we have. One of God's good gifts is the human mind capable of scientific, critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. God is the ultimate source of our abundance. God gives good gifts in order to sustain us in mutual love. They are

not private matters that elevate us over one another. Our focus of living is not ourselves, but our Lord and Savior – and giving ourselves in service to others.

The prologue to John's Gospel has perhaps had more influence on the Church's doctrine of the incarnation than any other passage of scripture. It affirms, in carefully stated language, the pre-existence of the Word. The Word is identified with and yet distinct from God. The word is the divine agent in creation and at the same time incarnate in the flesh. Jesus is the creative Word made flesh!

Essentially John is saying, “If you wish to see the word of God – if you wish to see the creative power of God – if you wish to see that word which brought the world into existence and which gives light and life to every person – look to Jesus Christ. In him, the Word of God came among us.”

All things are controlled by the Word of God. The Word is power which puts sense into the world – the power which makes the world orderly instead of chaos – the power which set the world going and keeps it going in all its perfect order.

It is John’s great thought that Jesus is none other than God’s creative and life giving – light giving Word – and that Jesus is the power of God that created the world and the reason of God that sustains the world – who came to earth in human and bodily form.

The Word was there from the beginning – it was not created, but part of the creating process – part of the eternity that was there with God before time and the world began. Jesus, as the Word made flesh, is the one, in all the universe, who can reveal to us what God is like. As Christians, we believe that this is our Father’s world, and because of that, we must use all things in the awareness that they were created by and belong to God.

Christmas is first and foremost the celebration of a gracious decision on God’s part to become human in the baby of Bethlehem. We are simply asked to believe that a particular individual – living in a poor, buffer state in the Middle East – powerless before a Roman government – is the one in whom we meet the Creator of heaven and earth. The fact that some genuinely religious people rejected him is not at issue today – because there were many who received him – and today millions around the world prepare for the celebration of his birth.

Thank you God for your Creative Word that became flesh in the form of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.