

Searching for the Creator

The serpent lied to Eve and Adam, but not in the way you might think. The serpent said to Eve: *You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* The obvious lie was telling her she would not die, which didn't mean die on the spot, but rather introduced the reality of the dying process...of beginning to die the day you are born. But there was another more subtle, subversive lie going on here. The serpent told Eve that by eating of the fruit she and Adam would be like God, knowing what God knew. But that turned out to be the biggest lie of all.

And that brings us to the point of crisis we read about in this morning's passage. When Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze was their behavior that of people who now knew everything God knew? They were caught hiding because they were naked. If I knew everything God knew, why on earth would I crouch in fear? If I knew what God knew, I would stand confident that I could meet my intellectual equal without any fear and trembling whatsoever. I would stand tall in all my glory and say: *Hey God! What's happening?* One has to wonder where on earth they even got the idea that simply being naked was somehow morally reprehensible and something of which to be ashamed.

And so it must strike us at some point or another that if it is through literal devotion to stories such as these that we believe we are going to find true knowledge of our Creator, we are going to be sadly disappointed. The image of God as this punitive parent lacking in grace and dedicated to imposing hardship on the whole of creation is a troubling one indeed. No one is spared God's wrath—the serpent, Eve, Adam, or even the rest of creation for that matter—in a situation that really, if you think about it, Dr. Phil, or any pastoral counselor worth his or her salt could have resolved differently and with more success. Thus the problem with blindly accepting the stories of ancient cultures that feebly try to explain things they do not understand and then somehow claim that through them we know the mind of God.

This is the sin of Creationism (aka Intelligent Design) in Church and Society today: The belief that through the limited storytelling of an ancient people we think we have in our possession everything God wants us to know. It is like the serpent is saying to us: *Go ahead, partake of this story, believe every word as being the literal truth about anything you want to know: history, morality, gender relationships...you name it. You will not die, because God will see that you now know as much as God knows.* It is the biggest lie we are told and then tell to others.

But the obvious problem we confront is this: If the ancient story is the be-all and end-all of human knowledge, why science? Why would God allow a creation in which we can unlock the secrets of the human genome and learn to cure the most perplexing human diseases, or look up into the cosmos and be naturally moved to wonder who else is out there? When Jonas Salk discovered the polio vaccine, with thousands upon thousands dying or becoming disabled for life, did anyone step up and say that this was wrong, immoral or playing God? Perhaps some, but not enough to change the course of history, thank God. When Nancy Reagan and Orrin Hatch, not exactly liberal firebrands, publicly stated that it was wrong to stand in the way of stem cell research dedicated to the healing of our most perplexing human conditions, do any of us for one minute not believe that what is standing in the way of that is politics, demagoguery, or both?

This Sunday and next, depending upon their schedules, hundreds of predominately mainline churches in America are observing *Evolution Sunday*, and I have chosen to join in that emphasis by preaching on this theme. In addition, I have added my signature to that of over 10,000 ministers who have endorsed what is known as *The Clergy Letter Project*, and I would like to read to you what I signed:

Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. 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 textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible – the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark – convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as “one theory among others” is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God’s loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

I have shared this in different settings, so many of you have heard this in one version or another: As a college student in the 1970's I came to my faith as a major in the philosophy department at Kansas State University. What I mean is the faith that reached me deeply and was able to integrate my heart, mind and soul in a meaningful and spiritually satisfying manner. I had known what faith was growing up the son of a Methodist minister, and had many of those magic moments of spiritual excitement as an adolescent that taught me that faith could be an exciting and uplifting resource in my life. Yet I would have those high emotional times and then walk away from them unsatisfied because it was almost as if I had to put my brain to sleep at such times. I would ask questions that my peers and even my adult leaders would say I shouldn't ask for fear of blasphemy. One older peer even told me that I had to train my mind to keep such questions from even popping up in my head – which seemed to me to be an argument that Jesus can only accept us if we are completely mindless. Ultimately, I graduated from high school and walked away from the institution of the church unsatisfied.

It is funny to say that it was the philosophy department at K-State that saved me. The irony is that except for one adjunct professor in the department whose real job was being a Presbyterian minister, all my professors were either agnostic or avowed atheists. I ran into one of those professors in the local Presbyterian Church one Sunday and asked him about that, and he replied: *I come to humor my wife, she thinks she believes this stuff.*

Even though I was surrounded by this kind of attitude, the department saved me in two ways: First, it gave me permission to ask questions about things that simply did not make sense and to value as well as embrace the gift of the mind that God gave me. Secondly, when it came right down to it, I discovered through my professors that as much as they knew, and some of them to this day are the smartest people I ever met, and as much as the greatest philosophers of the world have ever known, none have had anymore knowledge of unknown things as people of faith did. I came to the conclusion that if we are all destined, in this life anyway, to ultimately not know – that it is our human condition – then I will choose to “not know” with God on my side. And so I went off to seminary and discovered men and women of the faith, theologians every bit as brilliant as the philosophers I knew and studied, who also made that same decision to “not know” about ultimate things in the presence of God.

The greatest argument for trusting science when it comes to seeking to understand this creation in which we live is that science itself continually operates from the official position of not knowing. Don't get me wrong, science is a very human activity, and as in anything human there are arrogant scientists who think they know everything. But the opening assumption of all

science is its saving grace: what we know, or think we know can be completely disproven in the blink of an eye. Knowing that keeps the scientific community humble to a certain degree, yet, as we have noted, having such humility lends itself to making science something of a whipping boy for those who insist on being righteous in their ignorance.

There are not many who have been as maligned and discredited by the religious right in modern times as has Charles Darwin. The irony of that is how completely ignorant these critics are of the man and his science. The first important thing to know about him is that he was not the inventor of the theory of evolution. The theory itself had been seriously considered for almost a century before Darwin was born. Darwin was simply the scientist who took the long voyage, catalogued his findings and showed how they did support what had only been a hypothesis. Secondly, Charles Darwin never said that human beings ever came from monkeys. In fact, his science did not support such a view at all. And finally, Darwin started out at least as a man of faith, and although no one can definitively say if he ever lost his faith, he was so hounded by so-called people of faith in such vicious ways that he finally simply never made public reference to his faith again.

The greatest argument for not trusting religion with the actual facts of the cosmos given to us by God comes from the historical record itself. The Roman Church condemned Copernicus and silenced Galileo even though they were absolutely right. In an ignorant tantrum, the evangelical church to this day continues to discredit Darwin and evolution in a sensationalist tabloid manner; and the process of new scientific discovery for the good of humanity is continually called into question by various Christian factions that incredibly believe that God gave us magnificent minds that we are not supposed to use.

The irony of the story of Adam and Eve was that God's presence had been with them all along, yet they went looking for knowledge elsewhere and when they found that knowledge realized they still knew nothing. God's presence in our lives is a spiritual event and will never be found in the facts of creation, whether conveyed to us by science or by religion through its pet mythology. It is to the credit of science that it tells us this up front whereas religion commits the sin of deceiving the world and itself by claiming that God can be known in the limitation of its expression. But God's presence is found only as we go the journey, unafraid to explore, and investigate, and ask the tough questions about this cosmos in which we live, yet knowing and affirming that God, our Creator, is right there with us. Along the way we will realize things that only our divinely given and inspired minds are capable of discovering.

But context is everything. Scientists long believed that we had the capability of splitting the atom, and believed that when finally achieved marvelous things for the good of humanity would follow. Unfortunately, the impetus for accelerating that research ended up being a world war in which the chief enemies were racing each other to come up with greater destructiveness. Nowadays we hardly ever hear the “playing God” charge about splitting atoms simply because of pragmatism: we fear our neighbors enough that we willingly embrace the situational ethic of arming ourselves to the teeth.

Yet, say the phrase, *stem cell research*, and scores of religious people can't wait to make the charge, “*playing God.*” And my logic is this: before another human conflict comes along that might cause us to use this research in some unimagined evil, destructive way, why don't we set the moral tone now by actually pursuing this knowledge for the purpose of human healing, as opposed to some not-yet-conceived path of destruction?

In our society today the stakes could not be higher when it comes to people of faith embracing God's blessing of this cosmos and the human minds that can properly discern it. I liken the struggle to that of saving the rain forests of the world. We want to save them from governmental and corporate agendas not because we are sentimental “tree huggers” but because we understand what's really hanging in the balance. Environmentalists are racing to save the planet's great air filters, as well as insure the existence of species we do not yet even know exist but which might hold secrets to finding cures for our worst diseases, while those concerned strictly with economic bottom lines cannot rip down the trees fast enough. The contest is between God's created purpose vs. human self-interest, where the very best of faith and science supports the former while the very worst inclinations of both empower the latter.

In the same way, the moral/religious race that seems to be going on right now is between those who believe that the key to better understanding a loving Creator is to understand the real beauty and science of creation, as opposed to that ancient, unhelpful and even destructive image of Adam and Eve forever being banished from the Tree of Knowledge to be sent screaming into intellectual darkness. If these are our choices, then...as for me and my house, I choose God the Creator--the great scientist who shares his knowledge and *not* God the Taliban.

Amen.

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