

Evolving Still ... And Glad for It!"

A sermon on the relation of science, religion, and faith

Rev. Joe Hoffman

Luke 4:1-3

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This morning I am going to preach a topical sermon about science, religion, and faith. I am doing this along with pastors, priests, and rabbis in all fifty states and 9 different countries – as part of the Faith and Evolution project. In deciding to do this, I have also signed an open letter that has been signed by our 10 thousand clergy across the world. In part that letter reads:

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 a theory among others is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.

I was going to preach this sermon last week – which was the designated weekend because Charles Darwin's birthday is Feb. 12 – did you know that he and Abraham Lincoln share an exact birthday? But due to the possibility of bad weather last Sunday, I decided it better to wait and preach this sermon today. And that means I am preaching this sermon on the first Sunday of Lent – one of the most significant seasons in the church year. However, I really think this theme, the text for today, and this season all go together very well. And I have re-written the sermon to be appropriate for the first Sunday in Lent. Or I hope so at least. You can tell me after the service if it was or wasn't.

Will you pray with me?

Be with us in this time and space O God. Open us to your presence among us, again. Amen.

I grew up in the church – as did many of you. It was very important to me, being part of the church. These were my people. The Biblical stories were my stories. I believed them as being true. And I still do.

But as I grew older, I began to learn that what is true is not always the same as fact. And story is not always the same as history. I came to realize ever so slowly – and that you see, is evolution! – that Natalie Angier’s grandfather, who was a pastor, was right when he told her: “Religion must always accommodate reality. We live in the real world, and we must understand the world on its own empirical terms.” (Canon, p. 149, by Natalie Angier)

I began to learn that science is about evaluating evidence from observations and explorations. And religion is about making meaning from our experiences, from scientific facts and from cultural realities. The two – science and religion - do not work against each other. They are simply different approaches to understanding the world we live in.

Scientists know that the universe came into being about 13.7 billion years ago. That birthing took a lot of exploding stars and such – and eventually – about 4.5 billion years ago – the 92 kinds of elements that came to make up Earth came to be. Life on Earth, according to best estimates, came around 3.85 billion years ago – which was soon after Earth cooled enough to have a solid crust and thus to support the possibility of life. I am told that 23 different kinds of life emerged, with all but 3 being microscopic. The 3 that we can see with our naked eyes – are plants, animals, and fungi.

Animal life began about 540 million years ago. And the first modern humans date back to about 100 million years ago. The first language and culture began about 20,000 years ago. And the first humans in the western North Carolina mountains came about 10,000 BC. – about 12,000 years ago.

And the stories in the Bible go back about 4-6 thousand years ago. Not so long ago when you see the big picture. When I learned the Bible stories growing up, I thought – wow, these are really old stories. But they are not nearly as old as Earth itself. You see, the biblical understanding of how life began was based on theological imagination – how might God have done this? Why did God do this? These are the questions of faith that fuel our imaginations still today.

But these are not scientific questions. It is science that has taught us about the realities of Earth and the universe. The theory of evolution is overwhelmingly supported by scientific evidence. There are literally millions of facts that support this theory, , and according to Richard Dawkins, no facts pointing in the other direction. Natalie Angier, who is a biologist and writer for the New York Times as well as being an author, has said: “Evolution by natural selection is an absolute principle of nature. It operates everywhere, and it is astounding.” (p. 151, The Canon)

And yet, in a recent survey of American adults, only 35% agreed with the statement that evolution is a scientific theory well supported by the evidence. And in the United States, our students rank near the bottom of all measures of scientific knowledge. A comparison of people’s views in 34 countries in 2006 found that the US ranked near the bottom of public acceptance of evolution. Only Turkey ranked lower. (Statistics from Angier, pp 150-51)

So often the resistance to evolution comes from Christians who say evolution is in conflict with our faith stories. But Michael Dowd, a UCC pastor and author of the book Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion will Transform Your Life and Our World says: Studying evolution is like following cosmic bread crumbs back to God. Dinosaur bones and prehistoric artifacts, photos from the Hubble Space Telescope and DNA are here to teach us faith, not to test it.

For me, a non scientist and a person of faith, evolution theory is the best explanation there is for how our world came to be. And it does not mean that our faith stories are wrong. They tell truth in different ways. And yet, understanding evolution makes a big difference in how we begin to understand our place on Earth. And perhaps will shape how we begin to read our own story.

I think it is marvelous that each of us carries the DNA of creation. We carry the life story of the very beginning of time in our bodies. In our cells. You see before you a marvelous example of a 51 year old – right? But, it is all the more amazing when you realize I am really 3.5 billion years old – or some part of me is. Isn’t that wild? And I do not only come from monkeys, which I also think is pretty cool, but I also share cells with mosquitoes and parasites and fish and frogs. And so do you.

This is what science is teaching us. And does that mean that human beings are not special or unique among living creatures? Of course not. In fact, knowing something about the deep origins of humanity only adds to the remarkable fact of our existence. ... we are not separate from the rest of the living world; we are part of it down to our bones, our cells, our genes. (p. 43, Neil Shubin, *Your Inner Fish*)

Our connections run deep.

But there is always temptation to deal with. And our human temptation has often been to place ourselves in the center and say – the world focuses on us. To assume that Earth is here for us to use as we want to. When we don't see the big picture, and how we are all part of the web of life – we lose touch with God. We cannot take our faith and try to carve a personal, spiritual path without knowing we are part of all that is. And that how we live impacts the rest of creation.

You may have heard or seen Tiger Woods on TV Friday morning – apologizing for his multiple affairs, for living with a lack of integrity. He apologized for his irresponsible and selfish behavior. What I thought was most telling was when he admitted that he had believed it okay to enjoy the temptations that came his way because of his fame, that he felt he was privileged and elite and could do what he wanted to.

I think we have lived that way ourselves in relation to Earth and the other parts of creation. We have determined that we are privileged as human beings, that we are the elite of creation. Isn't that how the church has often told the story? Isn't that what our politics in the United States has often been. And don't some of us brag that we are the most Christian nation on Earth – and look at what we are doing.

Evolution teaches us that we must take our rightful place on Earth, and we must use our advanced knowledge not to manipulate our own way – and not to live as privileged above all others – but to notice what Earth is telling us. To notice that Earth is hurting. That creatures are dying. That polar bears are going to be extinct because of how we have used Earth for our own good – and not for the good of all.

Often those who identify as Christian say that we are above the ways of Earth because God has chosen us to be special. And if we endorse evolution, we are denying the miraculous nature of God who can do anything God wants to do. It is as if God is above God's own creation – as if we are so important nothing else matters. I don't know how life began. And scientists say they don't know either. Through my faith I trust that life began in the wisdom and love of the one I call God. My faith also calls me to find my place in creation – not to assume I am more than I am. Not to pretend that I am equal with God in any way.

Isn't this what Jesus was tempted with in the wilderness? To play the role of God for his own benefit, for his own power, for his own selfish desires? To step out of his place on Earth to become something that he was not created to be? To take more than was his to take?

Isn't that what you and I are also tempted with? To forget the connections that bind us together, but to take whatever is within our grasp and assume it to be God's special gift just to us? We cut down trees and mountains and pull crude oil from the depths of Earth and tear off the top of mountains to mine coal –to feed our hunger for energy and power. To feed our way of life.

We live in a very critical moment in the history of Earth. Paying attention to global climate change is no longer just an option – it is absolutely necessary for us to do. There is no bigger issue facing us today than this. The cold and snowy winter we are living through does not prove this theory wrong- but actually shows the theory to be accurate. This is at heart a spiritual issue. It is a temptation to turn away and pretend it is not real. But friends, it is real.

What I love about evolution is that all creation evolves toward life. Natural selection seeks only to select that life which knows best how to live. And right now, human beings are not making decisions that evolve toward life when we continue to live in dependence of resources that are polluting the air, cutting holes in the ozone, and causing Earth to be sick. And as John Brock said so powerfully in a sermon a couple years ago here, it is human life that will cease to exist if we don't change our ways now. We are perhaps one of the most vulnerable of all the creatures.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *An Altar in the World*, says: “What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.” (p. XV) She goes on to say: “To gain wisdom, you need flesh and blood, because wisdom involves bodies – and not just human bodies, but bird bodies, tree bodies, water bodies, and celestial bodies.” (p. 14) In other words, we are all in this together. We carry the wisdom of all time in our very bodies – but we must stop and listen to what they are teaching us.

Do you remember the movie *The Color Purple*? It was based on the novel by Alice Walker and it came out a number of years ago. There is a part where Shug Avery, one of the wise women in the story, says: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.” And don’t you also think it pisses God off if we see how we are hurting Earth and don’t do anything to change our irresponsible behavior and start living in a different way? If we don’t see that this is at the heart of knowing God and walking with God? If we don’t see that this is the temptation of being human as if we are God and can do whatever we choose to do? Because we are special and we get to decide for ourselves?

James Forbes, recently retired pastor of Riverside Church in New York, says: It is time for a cultural revolution of our understanding of where we stand in the universe. Just as Copernicus liberated us from an earth-centered concept of the universe to a solar-centric concept, we need to be decentered from our preconceived place of priority in the universe. (p. 150, *Whose Gospel?*)

Everything evolves – including our ways of thinking and knowing.

Thank goodness 2 year olds who learn to say “No” evolve into 3 year olds who ask why.

Thank goodness for societies who have evolved from discriminating against some folk based on race or sexual orientation or home of origin into communities of love and acceptance and justice.

Thank goodness for scientific knowledge that has improved the ways of medicine – which saved Rob Mikulak’s life on Thursday night when he had a massive heart attack as he waited on heart surgery.

Everything moves – everything evolves – including our understandings of faith.

Thank goodness for “holy” experiences such as the one Paul had on the Damascus Road which opened his eyes and his mind to new understandings. Thank goodness for Jesus who taught us that we can indeed learn to forgive one another, that we can love ourselves and each other – that we can evolve into persons that are more compassionate and gracious.

Some people have asked – if we believe in evolution, can we still believe in God. It is a good question – because we are changing the story – and we have to go back and think more about the meanings that come with this new way of understanding. But my knowledge of God has never been based on distant information. It has been personal. It has been from my own experiences of faith. And as I sit on my deck listening to the birds sing, as I watch trees begin to leaf and flowers bloom, as I pay attention to the wind blowing, as I marvel at the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, as I delight at the birth of kittens or puppies, as I watch a horse frolic in a field – I see the presence of God all around me. As I see people loving each other, caring for each other, and caring for Earth – I see God.

The story is told of a woman who had a baby – she had never been a religious person. Never believed in God. But something changed as she cared for this child. And one day she said – I have come to believe in God. When a friend asked why, she said simply – every morning when I reach into the crib to pick up my baby, I have to have someone to thank.

Paying attention to all that God has made – and understanding that each of us carries a piece of all of life in us – strengthens my faith and increases my joy.

I invite you to ponder these things during this season of Lent. Be aware of the temptations that call you away from life. Evolve toward life in every way you can. And take time to pay attention to the wonder and the awe of God around you. Amen.

Notes:

I have read a lot of material and had many conversations that have gone into my thinking about this sermon. I am very grateful for ongoing conversation with Ron Vinson, who is both a good friend, a teacher, and an advocate for a theology that honors the integrity of Earth and science. I am grateful that Doug Wingeier suggested I participate in this project. John Brock, a gifted scientist and teacher,

has also pushed my thinking with his sermon here a few years back, and with his recent presentation with Transitions Asheville. I am grateful for our Earth Team and for the leadership our team has given to the larger movement of Transitions Asheville. And I am grateful for Bill Nickle, who was the Founder and Director of Narrow Ridge: An Earth Literacy Center in Washburn, TN, for his wisdom and commitment to care of Earth and a theology that supports all the connections of life.

I read a variety of things in preparation for this sermon, which include but are not limited to:

The Canon: by Natalie Angier (especially the chapter on Evolutionary Biology)

Your Inner Fish: by Neil Shubin

An Altar in the World: by Barbara Brown Taylor (various essays)

Whose Gospel: by James Forbes (especially the chapter entitled Critique, Confession, and Ecological Consciousness)

I found the website for The Clergy Letter Project to have wonderful resources, including hundreds of sermons that have been preached on this topic over a number of years. I pulled some information about the timeline of Earth from a sermon by Pat Conover of The Seeker's Church in Washington, DC. I also found a sermon by Rev. Anne Cohen from Feb. 15, 2009 to be helpful in my thinking.

Michael Zimmerman is the head of the Clergy Letter Project – and I got some information from articles he has published – and especially about how poorly the United States is doing in supporting evolutionary theory. He is Professor of Biology at Butler University.

I am happy to discuss evolution and religion, or anything I have shared in this sermon, with anyone who would like to discuss it further. I have found the readings challenging in terms of thinking about my own theology, and look forward to continuing to engage in those challenges.

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