

THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
of PAINTED POST, NY

Gary McCaslin ~ Pastor

THE PEOPLE OF GOD
AT WORSHIP

Science & Religion Sunday

February Fourteenth ~ Two Thousand Ten

QUOTE ON BULLETIN COVER

Tell me a creation story more wondrous than that of a living cell forged from the residue of exploding stars. Tell me a story of transformation more magical than that of a fish hauling out onto land and becoming amphibian, or a reptile taking to the air and becoming bird, or a mammal slipping back into the sea and becoming whale.

Surely this science-based culture of all cultures can find meaning and cause for celebration in its very own cosmic creation story.

- Connie Barlow

INVOCATION

O God Who Was God Before Time.

O God Who Will Be God

Beyond the End of Time

We gather this day humbled by Creation

~ its majesty and creativity,

its abundance and beauty,

its gentleness and power.

Help us live in ways that continually

praise all we have been given.

MORNING PRAYER

O God Who Was Present Before Time ~

O God Whose Majesty and Mystery

Knows No End ~ we gather

in awe of all Creation.

We are overwhelmed by the magnificent gift of each life on the planet. Sometimes

we feel so insignificant and yet we feel

your Love in every corner of our souls.

Thank you God for your nurturing blessings that are ours in every moment

we draw breath and for all eternity.

We offer our prayer your sacred

and holy name ~ AMEN

SCRIPTURE ~ Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

~ SERMON ~

***The Oldest, Newest,
Greatest Story We Know***

Why is the Great Story so good?

INTRO: A BAPTIST DISCLAIMER

It is important that I begin this sermon with what I hope has become a familiar Baptist disclaimer. Today we are participating in a time honored Baptist tradition ~ sharing a personal belief as openly and honestly as possible. Actually we do this every time the preacher stands in this pulpit ~ but the process is highlighted a little more today because the subject is controversial.

As Baptists, we believe in *soul freedom*, which simply means each person of faith is responsible for how his or her faith is constructed. Baptists revel in the reality that we are all different and we celebrate this fact in our worship and education.

Real learning comes when we get below the “surface talk” of our lives and share a little of our faith ~ and maybe some doubts ~ even though our beliefs may differ.

The worst thing we could do is have a Baptist Church where everyone had the same beliefs. It’s impossible to do any way but ~ we certainly know churches who try.

My responsibility is to share the words and ideas God has given me. Your responsibility is to take those words in and wrestle with them and determine how the ideas affect the nature of your faith. As Baptists, we believe we can all grow closer to God ~ and closer to each other ~ in the process. Please join us.

THE OLD CONFLICT

This past week, Alex McInroy ~ a young friend of mine who knows my views on evolution ~ told me about a group on *facebook* called “Let’s Find One Million People Who Believe in Evolution by June.” I found the group and added myself as a fan.

The very next day I got an email from my daughter Amanda in Boston telling me that one of her roommates Sarah noticed on her *facebook* account that I had become a fan of this evolution group; Sarah knew that because we are *facebook* friends.¹

Sarah mentioned this to Amanda as a comment that just passed in a casual conversation. But Ashley, a friend from college, was visiting for the weekend and as she walked through the living room, she heard Sarah and Amanda talking. Ashley said in disbelief...

*Amanda... I thought your dad
was a minister...*

Manda said

He is.

Incredulous, Ashley asked:

*But, if he is a minister, how can
he believe in evolution?*

Amanda told me she almost didn’t know how to answer and simply said:

He’s a minister who believes in evolution.

Still confused Ashley said:

*But atheists are the only ones who can believe in
evolution. Christians are Creationists.
They believe in the Bible and the Bible
says God created everything.*

¹ If you are having any trouble with this *facebook* terminology, please contact any teenager as soon as you are able for complete explanations.

This particular conversation went on for a little while but then ended the way a lot of my daughter's discussions on religion end: she gets on the phone, calls me and says:

Dad, will you please send me a few of your sermons on evolution?

I'll let you know how these future Boston apartment discussions go.

SCARY QUESTIONS

I called Amanda and asked for permission to tell this little story because I believe it highlights the conflict between religion and science present in the minds of many people and not just conservative Christians.

While we have only met and talked with her a few times, I do not doubt the sincerity of Ashley's confusion. This is because when any Christian says he or she believes in evolution, it immediately raises many questions that can be very upsetting to a person's faith. Questions like...

If God did not create everything, what did God do?

and

If everything in Creation can be explained by science, what do we do with the Bible?

Do we stop teaching those Creation stories to our children?

If you and I just evolved from a process scientists call evolution ~ where is God in the process?

AN INVITATION

The invitation to live happily and honestly with science and religion in our lives means that some old ideas about God, and certain things we believe about the Bible, are going to have to change...

and you know what we humans think of change. Sometimes there is a little resistance.

But my proposal here this morning is that *The Great Story of How We Got Here* invites us into a way of thinking about science and religion in a way that is so totally transforming, it can alter how we see every single aspect of our lives.

BIG HISTORY

The primary inspiration for this sermon is a college course I just heard on a set of CD's entitled:

BIG HISTORY: *The Big Bang, Life on Earth and the Rise of Humanity*²

Professor David Christian of San Diego State University has been teaching this class for almost twenty years.

In **BIG HISTORY**, Christian attempts to tell ~ with the most recent research in a wide variety of fields ~ the entire story of our Universe from the very beginning right up to the present moment.

Yes, it is a course taught in colleges, but for me, it was a kind of spiritual experience, as I was able to see for the very first time what a truly, magnificent story we all share. This was especially so as I allowed myself to step back and see and understand all of the forces that have led to this point in our evolutionary history.

How does hearing this story encourage a transformation to take place?

² Available from THE TEACHING COMPANY, Chantilly, VA, www.TEACH12.com

The answer is simply a new kind of awareness that comes from knowing the events, circumstances and forces that brought us from the Big Bang to the present.

ONE OF MICHAEL'S BUDDIES

Some of you may remember way back on July 6th, 2008, the evolutionary evangelist Michael Dowd came here to First Baptist and talked about Evolutionary Spirituality.

I have been a fan of Michael's for a long time and have continued to keep up with his work through the Internet. On his website, I recently discovered a colleague of Michael's named Tom Atlee.³

AWARENESS I ~ WE ARE STARDUST!

On Tom's website, he described a time he had just come from a workshop with Michael Dowd and his wife Connie Barlow. Tom was sitting in his office as he was

listening to Connie explaining evolution as a sacred, meaningful story and claiming that if we understand this story deeply enough, it will transform how we think, feel, and act in the world.

Atlee said:

I expected to become better informed ~ but I didn't expect to be transformed. ...Connie explained to a group of teachers how all the hydrogen atoms in the water that is everywhere in and around us were all created

³ Atlee, Tom ~ REFLECTIONS ON EVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISM: *Essays, poems and prayers from an emerging field of sacred social change.* Tom's book downloaded for free or purchased in quantity at <http://evolutionaryactivism.com>.

*shortly after the Big Bang
13.7 billion years ago. That's old!
I looked at the water bottle on my desk.
It seemed different somehow, vaguely miraculous,
filled with the most ancient things in the universe.
I took a drink, and remembered that
my body is about 70 percent water.
The idea that that much of me is directly
connected to the Big Bang gave me a very
strange feeling. Connie continued:
The original hydrogen was thinly spread
throughout space and gravity slowly pulled each
cosmic cloud of hydrogen closer and tighter
together until some of them suddenly
burst into atomic fire as the first stars.
She said it was the red giant stars that have been
using hydrogen for billions of years to forge more
atoms – like carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen.
Connie explained how all the heavier elements ~
like calcium and magnesium, iron ~ were made
when these supernovas exploded –
each star as bright as a whole galaxy.
When each star exploded ~ it hurled those
tiny atomic building-blocks of planets and life
across millions of miles of space.
Dying red giant stars and supernovas, like giant
cosmic seed-pods bursting, are our ancestors ~
that's where every single element of our bodies
and all life on Earth came from.
Based on these facts, Connie calmly pointed out,
with a glint in her eye, that we are all,
scientifically speaking, stardust.
There's no secret mystery or trickery about it.
We are made of the stuff of stars ~ we are all
echoes of the Big Bang ~ and so is everyone and
everything around us. Ancient stars had to live
and die before our Earth could be born.*

THE UNIVERSE IS YOU AND ME

Tom Atlee then looked out his office window and thought

When I look out and see the world ~

*my entire me is seeing and not just my eyeballs.
With great enthusiasm, Connie was saying the
same thing about each person
in relation to the Universe:
we humans **are** the Universe,
we are the unfolding story of evolution itself,
newly aware of itself, peering at itself through our
eyes, through our telescopes, through layers of
fossils and rocks, we are awe-struck
and full of wonder...*

Finally Atlee said,

it suddenly hit him...

*One moment I was watching and listening to
Connie say all these things and then ~ I can't
explain what happened next except that my body
and chair and computer and desk and house and
neighborhood and city and world
became stardust ~ not static specks ~ but
a slow-motion, incredibly complex and changing
wave of evolving "star-stuff" unfolding into
tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...*

*There was no separation
between me and everything else.*

*... and in every cell of my body and mind I
could feel an urge to become more alive, be more
conscious, more responsive and engaged, to join
whole-heartedly, whole-spiritedly in this great
wave of evolutionary unfolding of which I was
suddenly, a conscious part...*

Now I cannot promise such a transformation experience for each of you like Tom Atlee's but I believe the new perspective offered by this new understanding of stardust that is you and me and a part of the Great Story can make a difference in any life.⁴

⁴ There are two short videos available on the web that summarize the entire 13.7 billion year journey from exploding stars to human life. One is from the website <http://thankgodforevolution.com>. In the upper right hand corner, play the "Trailer for the book **Thank God for Evolution.**" The other video

When we begin to see our species as stardust living lives that include opera and airplanes and cell phones and medicine and movies and dreams and pizza and cinnamon buns and grasshoppers and kangaroos...

how can we look at this story and not be overwhelmed with wonder?

And if we are truly filled with wonder, how can we not see our own lives and the life of every other human as sacred?

AWARENESS II ~

THE EARTH IS NOT FLAT

We could deny or just ignore the science of this story of our journey from the Big Bang to the present. We could deny that we evolved from single cell organisms but if we did that, I believe we would not be true to ourselves ~ which is to learn and grow and try new things at every opportunity.

That creative drive and burning desire to know and explore new ideas is exactly what allowed our species to evolve into the complex world we have today.

Michael Dowd suggests that to deny this story is to employ a flat-Earth way of thinking. By that I do not mean we actually believe the Earth is flat.

What I do mean is that we would be using the same science and understanding of our Universe as the people who wrote the Bible and they

is from the website

<http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>

Click on the window that says

"History of the World in Seven Minutes."

certainly believed the world was flat.⁵ They were doing the best with what they knew but their world was flat and we have moved far beyond that thinking.

FLAT EARTH MEDICINE?

Why is it that in every aspect of our lives, we want the best and most recent ~ whether it be doctors, dentists, lawyers, psychologists, pharmacists ~ we want the most up-to-date technology ~ but still we find those who are satisfied with two thousand year old science and history as it is presented in the Bible?

Do we believe that revelations from God ended when the Bible was written?

Michael Dowd also suggests that *scientific facts are the language of God* and ~ in this way of thinking ~ God is constantly being revealed in more and more dramatic and exciting and mysterious ways everyday we are alive.

AWARENESS III ~ THE STORY OF BIG HISTORY IS OURS

When we consider the people here in this sanctuary this morning and all of those alive on the planet today, we come to realize we are the first generation to know this Big History story as well as we do.

Once we know it, we have to tell it to as many people as we are able.

Why?

Because it is one story that can bring together the diverse populations and cultures of the entire world.

⁵ This idea is from Michael Dowd's book **Thank God for Evolution**, pages 64-67 entitled: *Flat-Earth Faith vs. Evolutionary Faith*

As an example, think about all that is good and wonderful about a Baptist Church such as this one.

Don't think about the squabbles people have or all the things the pastor forgets or the building that seems to be in constant need of repair.

Just think about the community into which you are welcomed when you join. The people of the church become your family.

From that moment of joining, the stories of the members you grow close to will join with your stories.

In addition, the more you see yourself a part of this church, the more you will also begin to see the stories of Christianity as yours ~ from this moment all the way back to the days Jesus walked on the Earth.

Now imagine the story of Big History being told all around the world. Here is one story... one beautiful, practically unbelievable story that holds inside of it ~ not only every Christian story ever conceived ~ but also the stories of all religious faiths, all cultures, all beliefs of every single person that has ever existed and will ever exist. Now that's a big story and worthy of celebration everyday we draw breath!

My prayer is that from this day, the Great Story of Our Existence will begin to be yours and not just in your head, but in your heart and in your life.
AMEN