

***The Evolution of a Faith or  
Why Jesus Did Not Die for My Sins***

*A Sermon Preached by Gary McCaslin ~  
First Baptist Church, Painted Post, NY*

THE PEOPLE OF GOD  
AT WORSHIP

*February Thirteenth ~ Two Thousand Eleven*

*Sixth Sunday after Epiphany*

RELIGION AND SCIENCE  
SUNDAY

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

*adapted from Psalm 19*

**Leader:** The heavens are  
telling the glory of God;

**People:** And the firmament proclaims  
our Creator's handiwork.

**Leader:** Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

**People:** There is no speech, nor are  
there words; their voice is not heard;

**ALL:** And yet... their voices goes out  
through all the earth and their words  
to the end of the Universe.

**INVOCATION**

In the Majesty that is All Creation, we  
gather this day to praise the One who is  
Mystery, Power, Amazement, Wonder,  
Compassion and Love. Help us to be open  
to your Eternal Joy for Life, a gift that has  
been present since the beginning of time.

**MORNING PRAYER**

With continually surprising wonder and  
playful delight ~ your Creation Lord ~ has  
come into being. As humble passengers on  
this vast blue jewel of a spaceship, we gather

this morning to praise the power and  
majesty of all we know, all we can dream  
and all of the mystery we are yet to  
discover. Be with us as we learn to live  
together as one Family of Life sharing a  
sacred journey into each new day. In the  
Name of the One Who is Love and Peace  
and Grace we pray ~ AMEN

**SCRIPTURE**

**1 Corinthians 3:16-17**

Do you not know that you are God's  
temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?  
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will  
destroy that person. For God's temple is  
holy, and you are that temple.

**Matthew 5:43-48**

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall  
love your neighbour and hate your enemy."

But I say to you, Love your enemies and  
pray for those who persecute you, so that  
you may be children of your Father in  
heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil  
and on the good, and sends rain on the  
righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you  
love those who love you, what reward do  
you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do  
the same? And if you greet only your  
brothers and sisters, what more are you  
doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles  
do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your  
heavenly Father is perfect.

**SERMON**

***Evolution of a New Theology or  
Why Jesus Did Not Die for My Sins***

*Why tell The Great Story?*

**VBS 2010**

This past August, our Vacation Bible  
School theme was *Galactic Blast* and

throughout the week, there were many opportunities to talk to the children about Creation and how the Universe came into existence, about stars, galaxies, super novas, back holes and evolution. It was a great week; we all had a galactic blast!

The very first day, I read to the children the two Creation stories from Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.<sup>1</sup>

I told the children these were three thousand-year-old stories, that were told almost like love poems about a God who brought order to the Universe and life into existence.

These stories were creative and beautiful and the people who wrote them down had the best information available at that time to explain how our Earth and life on Earth came into being.

They didn't have science back then but they did have people who observed the world and then shared what they knew.

I also told the VBS children I believed these stories were *divinely inspired* which means God inspired the writers and revealed the words and ideas to them.

### **AND THEN... A MORE RECENT STORY**

We talked about the Bible stories a little and then, I told them the Great Story<sup>2</sup> of our Universe ~ from the very beginning ~ 13.7 million years ago to this very moment in time.

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, I gave them a pop quiz. I said: Be honest now... I won't keep any scores ~ how many of you knew there were two Creation stories in Genesis? Not too many raised hands...

<sup>2</sup> I first discovered this term on Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow's wonderful educational website [www.greatstory.com](http://www.greatstory.com). In addition, David Christian's **Maps of Time** which is a text used in a college course on Big History, provided additional information.

I used this fourteen foot section of rope that is on the floor here in the aisle to help me tell the story where each foot is equivalent to one billion years of history.

### **SIDEBAR ON A BILLION**

Billion is a number I say so casually but really I continue to have trouble comprehending one billion years.

I remind myself how big these numbers are by reciting a little math game over and over. First I figure out how long one *thousand* seconds is. The answer:

~ 17 minutes.

And then one *million* seconds which is eleven days and then one *billion* seconds which is... anyone want to guess?

One billion seconds is thirty-two years.

I am telling you about these numbers because they are hard for me to understand and I believe they might be hard for many of you to really understand and of course it was nearly impossible for the children to even begin to understand how big this story really is.

### **WHY DO THIS?**

When I told people I was planning to tell the VBS kids the Great Story of our Universe, there were some people who said:

*Why are you doing this Gary? The children can't really understand the enormity of the story and why tell it in church?*

*What difference can it make to their faith?*

*How does science affect our faith anyway?*

And even today there are certainly several asking:

*Why is it important to have a Science and Religion Sunday anyway?*

## **NO LONGER ENOUGH**

One reason for having a Science Sunday is that the Creation stories from Genesis are no longer big enough. As poetic and majestic as those Genesis stories are, they are way too small for all we know about our Universe today...

and as we are reminded by Thomas Aquinas:

A mistake about Creation  
can result in a mistake about God.

When Genesis was written, it had an order and a power that the Creation stories 3000 years ago did not have.

The Genesis Creation stories gave an ordered, detailed description of *when* all life came into the world and *how* it was named and the *purpose* of all Creation ~ to serve the humans.

The Genesis stories answered all of the questions people had at the time and the people loved these stories because they were so complete. But today, the stories from Genesis are no longer enough.

## **LOTS OF SCIENCE INFORMATION**

We are living at the end of a three hundred year period where scientific knowledge has exploded and we now know more about our world and the Universe than my father's generation could simply not have imagined.

And that science does not just help us understand the Universe. The same science that helps us live longer and better is the same science that is able to help us figure out how old the Universe is, what happens when stars explode and to say with confidence

*We are all one interrelated family of life.*

No longer are those words just for the mystics. No longer are those words something the wise men and women felt deep in their souls.

*We are all one interrelated family of life.*

No longer can those words simply be discarded as some kind of New Age psychobabble.

We are related to another and we are related to all life on the planet.

## **DEEP, ANCIENT RELATIONSHIPS**

David Sloan Wilson spoke here at First Baptist Church a few years ago on Science Sunday. Wilson is an evolutionary biologist at Binghamton University and has written about the attributes we humans have that are in common with life forms that are millions of years old.

Here are his words

*The attributes that make us uniquely human have evolved over a period of roughly 6 million years. Our human attributes modified from the great ape attributes that are roughly 10 million years old, and primate attributes that are roughly 55 million years old, mammalian attributes that are roughly 245 million years old, vertebrate attributes are roughly 600 million years old and attributes of cells with a nucleus that are roughly 1,500 million years old.*

*If you think it is unnecessary to go that far back in the tree of life to understand our own attributes (and see how we are all related,) consider the*

*humbling fact that we share with nematodes (tiny wormlike creatures) the same gene that controls our appetite. At most, our unique attributes are like an addition onto a huge multi-room mansion.*

*It is sheer hubris to think we can ignore everything but the newest room.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> David Sloan Wilson as quoted in Michael Dowd's book **Thank God for Evolution**

The same science that helps us heal and live longer and more productive lives is the same science that allows Wilson to speak with such authority.

The stories of Genesis were and continue to be a celebration of life.

The question now for Christians and people of *all faiths* is

*How can we include  
the wonder and sometimes indescribable  
majesty of what we now know  
about Creation into our  
worship and our faith?*

### **PLEASE DON'T DIMINISH GOD**

A second reason we need to not only tell this Great Story but to celebrate it is because *to not tell* the Great Story only diminishes God.

A friend whose children graduated from a local high school told me that there were times when students were given permission by their parents to be dismissed from biology classes because the teacher was going to talk about evolution.

These students were given permission to leave because of their religious beliefs.

Now I believe these students have a legal right to be excused; this is America ~ they may certainly worship as they choose.

My problem is that leaving a biology class where evolution is going to be discussed is so sad.

The parents want to protect an old image of God and they do not want their children exposed to any new scientific information that might alter their thinking.

I can only believe this is a sad mis-use of the God-given brain that is so conveniently located right up here between our two ears.

### **GOD CAN TAKE IT**

Here's what I wonder when I hear about these students...

*Don't you think that God  
~ who is in every corner of Creation ~  
and whose reality we can only understand better  
by asking questions and learning things our parents  
could never have dreamed of... don't you think that  
God wants us to get out there into the world  
and learn things that enrich our lives?  
Why would we think God wants us to keep  
a 300 year old or a 500 year old or  
a 2000-year-old image of God  
at the center of our lives?  
Do we really think God Almighty  
is going to be permanently damaged  
by some new biological history?*

### **THE CHURCH RESPONDS TO GALILEO**

This is certainly not a new problem; there have always been people who want to protect an old way of thinking.

After Galileo showed the church fathers his telescope in 1511, they offered a statement that I am sure was intended to protect the way they understood God's relation to Creation.

Along with Galileo's telescope came a very logical presentation demonstrating that we were living in a solar system where the Earth was one of several planets that revolved around the Sun.

Here's how the church authorities responded:

*Galileo's theories have cast suspicion on the  
doctrine of the incarnation. His theories  
upset the whole basis of theology.  
If the earth is only one planet among several, it  
cannot be that any such great things have been done  
specially for it as the Christian doctrine teaches.  
And if there are other planets, since God makes  
nothing in vain, they must be inhabited;*

*but how can their inhabitants be descended from Adam? How can they trace back their origin to Noah's ark? How can they have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, our Saviour?*<sup>4</sup>

### **SHALL WE GO BACK?**

No one back then could imagine God *not* making the Earth the center of the Universe.

However, no one today would side with the religious authorities who spoke those words. At the same time, people who today skip classes on evolution or who continue to say

*humans could never have evolved  
from lower life forms,*

are ~ I believe ~ trying to keep science out of their lives in order to “protect God” and I just don’t think God needs protecting.

Just because there are problems that arise when we try to understand how humans evolved from the life forms that emerged three billion years ago when our fireball that is Earth had cooled off a little is *not* a reason to run away from such an idea.

### **CELEBRATE THE HUMAN TEMPLE!**

NO! It’s a reason to dance and sing and celebrate and play the saxophone and tell stories that *praise* our Magnificent God of the entire Universe. You and I are here because of that glorious evolution of Life!

But don’t get too wrapped up with that idea. There are some physicists who have proposed that ours is only one of many

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<sup>4</sup> **A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, *The War on Galileo*;**  
<http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/White/astronomy/war.html> \_

Universes, coming into and into and out of existence.<sup>5</sup> It’s crazy out there...

Let’s celebrate the wonder and all that crazy possibility that is you and me.

We now understand how humans evolved and look what we have: a story that explains why no two people are ever created the same.

Never has there been another you and never will there ever be because we are constantly evolving.

Why?

Because God’s Creation is continuing to evolve. New people, new creatures are continually being born... God is alive and at work!<sup>6</sup>

For me, this new knowledge adds new meaning to the verses from 1 Corinthians 3 that I read earlier.

*...you are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you! For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

### **LETTING GO OF THE OLD STORIES**

Finally, of course, we need to tell the Great Story because all of this new knowledge will help us see the Bible in a new light. However, this means we will have to give up a few literal understandings of our childhood faith.

If we celebrate the evolution of humanity over a 7 million year span, we may have to give up the idea of a literal Adam and Eve. And the story of an ark

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Greene ~ a physicist proposes the existence of multiple universes in his latest book, **The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos**. You can hear him interviewed by Terry Gross on Fresh Air:

<http://www.npr.org/2011/01/24/132932268/a-physicist-explains-why-parallel-universes-may-exist>

<sup>6</sup> The problem is we’re just killing the old species off faster than new ones can evolve but that’s another sermon.

holding two of every animal would be hard to reconcile with the evolution of the thousands and thousands of animals species over millions of years.

Unless, of course, you go to the Creation Museum in Ohio where they have now reconfigured Noah's Ark to include dinosaurs. They had to include dinosaurs because dinosaurs bones and fossils are everywhere.

How does a Bible literalist fit dinosaurs into the Genesis story of Noah?

The Creation Museum directors tell us the ark took baby dinosaurs so they would fit on the ark...

I have to admit it is a creative solution to the problem, but it is certainly not good science.<sup>7</sup>

Believing these ancient stories are literally true is fine if we lived 2000 years ago in a culture that believed the world was flat but they are not good science or history for today.

### **COSMIC SWITCHEROO?**

And what about the sermon title where I propose the idea that Jesus did not die for my sins? This sermon is in many ways a confession of faith ~ the evolving theology mentioned in the title is definitely my own.

As a result of the questions I have asked in my sixty-two years about God and Life and the more I have learned about the Universe and the history of the Bible and how it was written ~ my faith has evolved to the place where I can not believe in my heart that the words of the rabbi/tent-maker Paul could ever define *all of humanity's* relationship to God.

Paul was the proponent of the cosmic trade of Jesus for our sins; it certainly wasn't Jesus' idea. Jesus did save us from our sins but it was not some kind of *cosmic switcheroo*<sup>8</sup>.

I don't believe in a God who strikes a bargain with the forces of Evil in order to save the souls of believers. Remember ~ according to Paul ~ this cosmic plan of salvation is not for everyone... just the believers.

I do believe is that Jesus "saves us from sin" by showing what a life would be like living without sin. And here I mean specifically living without the

*eternally-condemning,  
can't-ever-get-enough-forgiveness,  
life-and-spirit-killing,  
burden of sin*

so many people carry around in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

### **DON'T THROW IT OUT!**

Please understand: I do not want to throw out the Bible. The first reason is I'd be out of a job. The second reason is we still have too much to learn from the Bible.

I see this book as a continually evolving Love Story. It started at the dawn of humanity, and unfolded with profoundly human stories ~ some that were powerfully compassionate and some that were devastatingly inhumane. We can still learn from both.

God's Love was initially portrayed as exclusive ~ just for the chosen Hebrew

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<sup>8</sup> My term "cosmic switcheroo," also known as "substitutionary atonement," was first introduced in a sermon entitled Behold the Lamb of God and delivered Sunday 16 January 2005.

<sup>9</sup> I know too many people who have rejected religion because of an over abundance of guilt it provides; Jesus took that away.

children. But, over time, that Love only continued to expand until we are challenged by Jesus to love even our enemies.

I don't believe we can get any more inclusive than that.

### **CALLED TO DO WHAT JESUS DID**

I see Jesus calling each of us to a life that honors the sacred Creation present in every life.

Jesus didn't know anything about genes or evolution or dinosaurs but He lived his life seeing the sacred everywhere he looked, in every person, in the birds of the air and in the flowers of the field.

No... we cannot throw out the Bible, no matter how much the atheists believe it is a waste of time to read but we are called to read it with new eyes.

We are called every day to embrace the lessons of a Love that knows no boundaries and teach them to all our children.

No matter what we continue to learn about our life history or our world or our Universe, we are still invited each day to sing and dance in the knowledge that God will always be a song alive in our hearts.  
AMEN

*Publicity for Evolution Sunday prompted a letter to the Editor in a local newspaper. Following was my response.*

To the Editor ~

In response to Robert Wheeler's letter entitled "Evolution and God are Incompatible" (13 February 2011) it is important to note that instead of using an atheist's description of evolution as "blind and purposeless," there are many people of faith who see evolution's forces in Creation as the sacred reflection of a magnificent, creative and wonder-filled God. These same believers choose not to take literally the 3000-year-old words of people who believed the world was flat. While their words continue to inspire, they are hardly good science for 21st century humans.

In addition, Mr. Wheeler's comments are very similar to those of the church fathers who said in 1511 that Galileo's proposed idea that our Earth was only one of many planets which revolved around the sun "would upset the whole basis of theology." However, human understanding changed and the church survived.

Let's rest in the assurance that the reality which is "God" ~ present in all time and throughout the Universe ~ will be just fine if a few planet Earth humans alter their understandings of the divine to include evolution.

Robert Wheeler and all interested parties are welcome to discuss these ideas further by attending a gathering that discusses Evolutionary Spirituality on the first Sunday each month at 4pm at the First Baptist Church in Painted Post, NY.