

# A SERMON FOR SCIENCE & RELIGION SUNDAY

10 February 2013

(also Transfiguration Sunday)

## INVOCATION

O Spirit of Life that fills our souls and pulses through every corner of Creation, come now and fill us again with your power of Love and purpose, your creativity and wonder.

Come now O Spirit of all Life!

## MORNING PRAYER

O God of All Time and Space ~ with continually surprising wonder and playful delight your Creation 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 our sacred journey into each new day. In the Name of the Living Christ ~ the One Who is present throughout the Cosmos ~ AMEN



Bulletin Cover

## SCRIPTURE

**Genesis 3:1-7** The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal God had made. He spoke to the Woman: "Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?" **2** The Woman said to the serpent, "Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. **3** It's only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'Don't eat from it; don't even touch it or you'll die.'" **4** The serpent told the Woman, "You won't die. **5** God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil." **6** When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it - she'd know everything! - she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate. **7** Immediately the two of them did "see what's really going on" - saw themselves naked! They sewed fig leaves together as makeshift clothes for themselves.

**Luke 9:28-43** Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. {29} And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. {30} Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. {31} They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. {32} Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. {33} Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. {34} While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered

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*Evolution Sunday ~ Stone Age Men with a Shave and a Suit ~ 1*

*A Sermon delivered by Gary McCaslin 10 February, 2013 ~ First Baptist Church, Painted Post, NY*

the cloud. {35} Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" {36} When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

### SERMON

#### *Stone Age Men with Suits and a Shave are Not Getting the Job Done*

*What is the job and what needs to be done?*

#### JUST HANGIN' OUT A LITTLE LONGER

Many of you have heard about my decision to retire and how it was really made over a period of time.

Annie and I first thought about my departure when she was making plans for her retirement from teaching. We thought it would be easy to "go out together."

The problem was her retirement came during the time when a group of local Baptist pastors were trying to have my ordination removed which is a polite way of saying they were trying to run me out of the ministry.

Even though, in the end, the decision was made to totally affirm my ministry and this church, one year ago our congregation was in the process of moving from the Living Waters Association to the Rochester Genesee Region. I did not want to retire in that transition phase and possibly send a message that I was leaving this pastorate because I was too beaten up and frustrated by the efforts of these ministers who only wanted me to preach about the Gospel of Love *according to their interpretations* of Jesus and the Bible.

They told me my interpretation of Jesus' Good News was an "ethical

violation" of my responsibilities as an American Baptist minister.

I told them they may have taken the class on Baptist polity but I believed they missed the lecture on *soul freedom* and they got mad at me for that too. It was a contentious time indeed!

#### WHY THE HISTORY LESSON?

I am sharing this bit of history about the timing of my retirement because it was precisely two years ago today ~ on Science and Religion Sunday that I preached the sermon that got me into trouble with those Baptist ministers.<sup>1</sup>

And a second reason I share this piece of history with you is because I simply love Science and Religion Sunday and if I would have retired any earlier, I would have missed my one final opportunity to preach on this Sunday, which was chosen to mark the birth of Charles Darwin and celebrate the evolutionary process that brought each and every one of us to this very moment.

#### THE ZIMMERMAN CLERGY LETTER

In 2006, a biology professor named Dr. Michael Zimmerman sent out an email inviting religious leaders to sign a letter stating that the latest scientific knowledge about evolution did not in anyway demean their faith in God.

Zimmerman was growing frustrated with all of the conservative ministers taking the media spotlight and saying:

*If you believe in evolution ~  
you can't be a person of faith.*

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<sup>1</sup> I will not detail my differences here but would be happy to discuss any of my Science & Religion sermons. All can be found here:

I signed the letter and sent it right back. And when he suggested that communities of faith might do something to show how science and faith can co-exist in a way that enhances each, I said

*Sure! Great idea!!*

And so, every second Sunday in February since 2006, we have had some kind of program that celebrates Science and Religion and ~ most of the time ~ specifically highlighting evolution.

And I am sure that by now, there are some folks who wonder why it is necessary to continue to have such a Sunday each year.

Well, the primary reason I feel it is so important is that I am continually astonished and amazed by the efforts of many Christians who continue to reject accepted scientific facts about our existence.<sup>2</sup>

Especially astonishing is that many of these same people think good science is something like *Creationism* or *Intelligent Design* and should be part of the curriculum in our public schools.

### **THERE'S MORE!**

In addition, there are people who actively support an organization called *Answers in Genesis* which still says the Bible is accurate science and baby dinosaurs could have fit on the Ark.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Rep. Paul Broun said "Evolution, embryology and the Big Bang theory are 'lies straight from the pit of hell' meant to convince people that they do not need a savior." Yahoo News Service, 6 October 2012

<sup>3</sup> [answersingenesis.org](http://answersingenesis.org)  
<http://creationmuseum.org/whats-here/exhibits/#dinosaur-den>

Lack of basic scientific knowledge is somehow okay. A guest on a popular TV News channel this past week explained that the reason Germany's solar industry is so successful is because

*Germany gets more sun than the United States.*<sup>4</sup>

And when the junior US senator from Florida, Marco Rubio ~ who appeared on the cover of TIME magazine this week ~ was asked how old the Earth was, he replied:

*That is one of life's great mysteries.*

Now perhaps, as a good politician, Rubio did not want to offend some of his constituents but the sad truth is many of his constituents probably believe the Earth is only six to ten thousand years old because they would respond:

*That's what it says in the Bible.*

Many Americans today see the science of Creation as irrelevant to their lives or they are trying to "accommodate" religious views along with scientific facts in order not to offend people who hold certain religious beliefs.

### **WE ARE DAMAGING OUR CHILDREN**

The Earth is four and a half billion years old; it is a fact that has been proven and tested by scientists around the world.

Lawrence Krauss, who is a theoretical physicist, believes that by not being *very explicit* about such scientific facts and the reality of such science as evolution, we are literally damaging our children. Krauss has said:

*Technology and biotechnology will be the*

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<sup>4</sup> FOX News The Sun Moves Around the Earth  
<http://samuel-warde.com/2013/02/fox-news-the-sun-revolves-around-the-earth/>

basis of our economic future. And if we allow nonsense to be promulgated in the schools, we do a disservice to our students, a disservice to our children, and we're guaranteeing that they will fall behind in a competitive world that depends upon a skilled workforce able to understand and manipulate technology and science.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT TO DO?

How are we to respond to this situation?

One response lies in a story. There is a movement growing in popularity, not just in this country, but around the world.

The movement is called **Big History** and it is simply telling the entire story of our Universe and using practically every science discipline known.

**Big History** starts with the Big Bang and moves through the formation of the stars and the galaxies and our Earth four and a half billion years ago.

The story tells how life first began and how it evolved over the last three billion years and the story ends right at the present moment with you and me.

It is a magnificent and sacred story and we are the first generation to have the science and be able to explain how everything came to being.

### WHY TELL THE STORY?

Now some people must be thinking *What does this story have to do with you and me? Why should Christians or people of any faith tell this story?*

David Sloan Wilson an evolutionary biologist at Binghamton University who spoke here on Science Sunday a few years ago. He said

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<sup>5</sup> <http://bigthink.com/users/lawrencekrauss>

*There are two roadblocks to accepting the story of evolution. One is rejecting the science and the second is believing evolution does not have any impact on our lives.*

Personally, I believe the second reason is more dangerous than the first. I also believe knowing the story of our Universe affects every life on the planet.

### ONE STORY FITS ALL

**One reason** we need to teach Big History is because it is one story that is common to every person living on the planet today and truly, it is a story that includes every life form that has ever existed on the planet. It also teaches what it calls the rise of humanity ~ how humans became such a dominant species.

Another part of the human story is how religions became such a valuable part of the human story all over the planet ~ which helps us appreciate the diversity of religions in the world.

When I teach the Baptism class, I tell the young people that our Bible has some stories that are as old as 3500 years and it is the story of the people who came to be known as Jews and Christians.

But I also point out that even though the Bible tells a story of where Christians came from, it is only one story from a group of people living in one part of the world.

Way before the Jews and Jesus were working things out in a land we now call Israel, there were dynasties in China, Hindus in India, Mayans in Central America and Native Americans throughout North America.

And you know what? All of those religions and cultures had creation stories that were passed down from generation to generation that were thought to be true

and, like all religions, they helped people understand what was real and important about our lives in those times.

Now in addition to our Christian faith, we have the story of Big History helping us see with brand new eyes what is real and important about our lives on this beautiful planet.

### THE ONE STORY FOR SURVIVAL

A *second reason* to tell this story is that it will help us survive as a species. Right now the primary way we think about life is *unlimited growth*. This way of thinking fuels capitalism and it builds entitlement and greed within the people ~ especially those in the very richest class.

The biggest problem with unlimited growth as our primary way of thinking is that it is stuck in the Ice Age. In addition *unlimited growth* is the operating system of a cancer cell.

The title for this sermon came from an interview with a Canadian writer named Ronald Wright. He wrote a book called The Short History of Progress wherein Wright argues that our bodies are basically being run by our Ice Age minds.

In the most recent Ice Age, Wright says humans gathered all they could, ate all they could whenever they could because no one could say for sure when the next woolly mammoth was going to come along. The mentality was get all you can whenever you can.

Wright points out that human history can be seen as a record of civilizations ~ ancient Sumer, the Mayans in Central America, Rome, Greece and others ~ who were all behaving like cancer cells that were constantly violating the first rule of survival:

*Don't kill off your host.*

### MOVING BEYOND OUR

#### EVOLUTIONARY STATE OF MIND

Wright continues:

*If we continue to refuse to deal with things in an orderly and rational way, we will eventually head into some sort of major catastrophe, sooner or later and if we are lucky it will be big enough to wake us up worldwide but not big enough to wipe us out.*

*That is the best we can hope for. We must transcend our evolutionary history.*

... and here is the part where it where we would do well to understand our Big History evolutionary story.

Wright continues...

*We are Ice Age hunters with a shave and a suit. We are not good long-term thinkers.*

*We would much rather gorge ourselves on dead mammoths by driving a herd over a cliff than figure out how to conserve the herd so it can feed us and our children forever. That is the transition our civilization has to make.*

*And we're not doing that.<sup>6</sup>*

Right now we are being told that if we have energy for fifty or one hundred years in the ground, we would do well to get it out right now.

That is exactly the kind of short-term thinking that is so dangerous because extracting a finite fuel is short-term thinking when there is abundant energy that can be harvested without destroying the Earth.

On an evolutionary scale, one hundred years is barely the blink of an eye. Despite what the person said on the news program, we receive enough solar energy in America in one day to meet all

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.commondreams.org/view/2013/01/14-0>

of our energy needs for a year.<sup>7</sup> And the supply of energy is endless... well, at least for another five billion years.

### ONE SACRED STORY

#### AND TWO WAYS TO TELL IT

*And finally*, the reason we as people of faith need to tell the story of Big History is because it is such a beautiful, sacred and God glorifying story.

And in the process of telling, we will be able to see our Bible stories with brand new eyes.

Michael Dowd suggests that when we look at Bible stories, it is good to note the two ways we humans take in information.

One way is with facts, the objectively real information, that which is publicly and measurably true.

We can call this kind of information our *day language*. It is what we use in normal everyday discourse.

The other way we take in information is equally as valuable and we call this information *night language*. The difference is *night language* is communicated through metaphors, poetry, and vibrant images.

With *night language*, our attention is not focused on accurate facts. Instead, *night language* focused on the question ~

*What does this information mean?*

This kind of information is *subjectively* real, like a nighttime dream, and not *objectively* real. *Night language* is personally or culturally meaningful. It

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<sup>7</sup> <http://solar.calfinder.com/ask/how-much-solar-3> and

<http://www.ecoworld.com/energy-fuels/how-much-solar-energy-hits-earth.html>

nourishes us with spectacular images of emotional truth.<sup>8</sup>

### TAKE TWO BIBLE STORIES

#### AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

Consider the two stories I have listed with this sermon. The Genesis story is about the Garden of Eden, the Serpent and Adam and Eve. The Luke story is the Transfiguration ~ verses we read on the Sunday every year right before Lent begins.

Earlier in my life, I had trouble thinking about these stories because I could not convince myself they were literally true.

Michael Dowd helped me understand that the power of these stories is not in their literal truth. The power comes from the meaning we give to this stories because they are *night language* ~ metaphors, images, symbols for truths about the God.

### GARY'S STORIES

If I came to you and said

*I just had a conversation with a talking snake and some of the things he was saying sounded pretty good ideas...*

*He offering me some tempting ideas about what I should do with my life...*

or perhaps I told you

*I was at the Pinnacle over in Addison<sup>9</sup> and all of a sudden a great light surrounded me and there was Jesus on one side and Charles Darwin on the other and it felt so real...*

I hope your first comment would

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Michael Dowd, Thank God for Evolution, San Francisco/Tulsa: Council Oaks Books, 2007, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> The Pinnacle is nearby mountain top a few miles southwest of Painted Post.

not be:

*Wow... I guess it really is  
time for Gary to retire.*

Instead, I hope you might say  
something like:

*Now these are a dreams you had,  
right Gary? It sounds a little  
like night language...*

### **TELL THE STORY MANY WAYS**

As people of faith, I believe we are called to tell the story of Big History because it is one story that unites us all, it is a story that can save our species and, for me, the most compelling reason is because it is a beautiful, sacred story that glorifies God and this magnificent story is one we can tell in day language. It is all based on observable facts.

An example of this day language wonder is this: every single element in our bodies came from stars that exploded billions of years ago in a supernova and every single element came together here on this planet out of which our bodies and all life came into being. That is a magnificent, mysterious and sacred story because it describes one part of the gift of life we all share and how we each came into being.

That's one way to tell the story. There are so many. Here is one for children entitled

### ***A Short but True***

#### ***Story of You!***

*You are made of star-stuff.  
You are related to every other  
living thing on Earth.*

*You breathe out a gas that  
gives life to plants,  
and plants breathe out a gas  
that gives life to you.*

*You are part of a wonderful  
web of life on a planet  
spinning in space.  
When you die, someday,  
the elements of your body  
will become a part of clouds and crystals,  
seas and new living things.*

*And right now...  
You can think and wonder,  
you can love and learn.  
You have the gift of life.<sup>10</sup>*

The Gift of Life... Isn't that what we thank God for every day we draw breath? Isn't that what we seek in the Risen Christ? May it be so for all our days. ~ AMEN

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, L. C. Brotman. 2004. Kid's book of awesome stuff. ME: Biddeford. Brotman Marsh-Field Curriculum.