

THE CREATIONIST CONUNDRUM

A MESSAGE FOR JANUARY 30, 2005

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Text: Genesis 1:1

Adam was moping around in the Garden of Eden. He was terribly lonesome. God says, "What's wrong, Adam?" Adam responds, "I'm lonely. There's no one to talk to."

So God says, "I will give you a companion, Adam. I will give you a woman. She will cook for you. She will wash your clothes. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag. She will always admit she's wrong in every argument. She will never have a headache. And she will always freely give love and compassion."

Adam queries, "God, what will a woman like that cost?" God replies, "It'll cost you an arm and a leg." Adam says, "What can I get for a rib?" And the rest is history.

Is the creation story history? Or is it parable? Is it a metaphor? Is it imagery? Is it true?

Arguments and battles over the beginning of life are very high profile these days. Seemingly they will simply not go away. Ever since Darwin's book was published in 1859, and ever since the trial of John Scopes in Tennessee in 1925, the arguments persist. The debate goes on.

A zookeeper came across an orangutan reading two books. One was the Bible; the other was Darwin's Origin of Species. "Why are you reading such opposite books?" the zookeeper asked. Replied the orangutan, "Well, I'm trying to figure out if I'm supposed to be my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

Today's school boards, educators and parents clash over this issue—including in the state of Pennsylvania. Should we teach evolution? Should we teach natural selection, random development, genetic movement over eons of time? Or should we teach creationism—a more or less literal reading of Genesis chapters 1 and 2? Or should we teach something called "Intelligent Design?" This is a sort of a "creationism lite." There's no mention of God. We have to be politically correct. But somewhere, somehow, there is a conscious plan for life.

What do you think? Where do you stand on all of this?

I've told you before and I want to say this again: I take the Bible very seriously; but I do not always take it literally. I never have. In particular, I have never taken Genesis 1 and 2 literally. I believe that Abraham and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon were real historical figures. But Genesis 1 and 2 is made up of parables—reverent images. They proclaim a great truth without being history. I believe what they say, but I don't believe they are documented history.

Images have always been at the heart of Scripture. Images are the way our spiritual forebears thought. Jesus knew about this. He told the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). But I don't know that there was actually a true story about such a person. Jesus told about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). But I'm not sure that story ever actually happened as a historical event either. Jesus said that one day the sheep and the goats will be separated, in the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25). But I'm not convinced that actually describes a historical fact. All of these stories of Jesus have profound truth without being recorded history.

The bottom line is that I have never had any internal conflict about creation. Evolution has never really bothered me at all. Let me explain where my faith goes with this. I don't necessarily ask you to agree with me. I simply ask you to hear my faith statement about it.

THE ORDER OF CREATION IN GENESIS 1

I have always been impressed with the "order" of creation in Genesis 1. In the ancient mind, plant life came first, then the rest of life emerged—from the sea. As the Genesis 1 writer tells it, there was earth and sky, and then the separation of the water, followed by the emergence of fish, and then birds and then animals. Finally the greatest mystery of all—humankind.

Interestingly, this is very similar to what science suggests. I remember standing with a friend of mine one day on the Atlantic shore in South Carolina. We talked about some issues regarding fishing and living close to the ocean. He said this to me: "Brian, do you know why people like to retire near the ocean or near water? It's because water is where we all come from originally anyway."

I find it rather amazing that Genesis 1 (written 3000 years ago and in oral tradition before that) and modern science say very similar things.

A HEBREW WORSHIP HYMN

I also have learned a long time ago that Genesis 1 is a Hebrew worship hymn. It is a litany. It is a responsive reading. It is an affirmation of faith.

I invite you to see the litany that is included as an appendix to this sermon on the last page. There is a lot in that reading about light. I am remembering a child's prayer to God that goes something like this: "Dear God, we read that Thomas Edison made light, but in Sunday school they said you did it. I bet he stole your idea."

This story in Genesis 1 is worship, friends. And God is in it all. "In the beginning God..." Ancient people of faith are saying, at the very least, "*There is a current taking us somewhere, and there is a creative, loving intelligence underlying it all.*"

THE POWER OF METAPHOR

Thirdly, the story in Genesis 1 helps me realize the power of metaphor as truth. The creative narratives help me to learn the value of and honor that reality.

One of you here in this congregation asked me recently, "Can allegory and symbolism be used in the same sentence with faith and belief?" For me, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." No one believes more in God the Creator than I do. But I also believe in the power of metaphor.

When I read the parables of Jesus, I don't think about something that happened in history. I listen to a deeper truth. When I read the story of Noah, and tell that story to my grandchildren, I try to listen to the gospel in the story. When I read the stories of Moses, I think about the meaning they convey rather than the historical facts. And when I read the creation narratives, I marvel at their power.

Ancient minds asked the same question we sometimes ask: *Is there a deeper order, an overarching purpose to the universe? Or are we the lucky accidents of evolution, living our lives in a fundamentally random world that has only the meaning we choose to give it?*

The Genesis writer says, "In the beginning always...God."

The creation stories are powerful images on my faith journey. I believe in their meaning and the One who is behind the meaning. I believe it just as the ancient writers did.

I have never puzzled over certain questions like where the garden of Eden might have been located, or what kind of fruit was on the tree of Knowledge, or who Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, ended up marrying (if Adam and Eve were the first and only two people created by God). And I've never asked how old the earth may be.

When I read these stories I think about God, who is the creator of it all. I think about human beings as being God's greatest miracle. There's a wonderful passage in Genesis 2 that says God scooped up the dust of the earth, formed it into a human being, and breathed into that person the breath of life. What a marvelous metaphor for saying we are both the dust of the earth and the breath of God.

When I read these stories I think about how human beings try to take charge. We think we know more than God. We think we know better than God. The ancient story is still the same story in us today. When I read these stories I think about the wonder of it all.

A MYSTERIOUS GIFT

Finally, when I read the creation stories I think about creation as a mysterious gift. You cannot read Genesis 1 and 2 without thinking this way. The writer actually uses two different words that may not immediately catch your attention. Sometimes he uses the word "made." God made this or that. "Made" refers to a marvelous but somewhat comprehensible act. In other places the writer uses the word "create." The use of this word is reserved for the "God only" events. The God only events, according to the Genesis writer, are heaven and earth, the initial life forms in the sea, and human beings. I think he chose his words very carefully.

We need to see creation as a mysterious gift. We moderns have desacralized nature in many ways. For us the issues of the environment are not so much political issues,

but theological issues. We need caution with regard to the environment. But more than caution, we need reverence.

There's an old parable about scientists who were climbing the mountain of knowledge. On the topmost plateau of the mountain they were sure to find the answers to the riddle of life. They struggle up the mountainside, passing through rugged mountain passages and awesome barriers. Finally they reached the top. One of the scientists pulled himself over the top ledge. He looked across and saw a group of theologians sitting around the campfire who had been there for centuries.

Creation is filled with reverent mystery. Our two-year-old grandson Joshua has discovered "The Lion King." I've probably seen bits and snatches of "The Lion King" almost two dozen times in the last few weeks. You may recall that at one point the father lion, Mufasa, says to his little cub Simba, "We are all connected in the great circle of life."

We received an interesting lesson from the tragedy of the tsunami a little over a month ago. The tragedy is that over 150,000 people died. But do you know that almost no animals died? Somehow they knew more than people know. They ran to the hills to escape the coming of the water. That story alone ought to give us pause for reverence.

If you read the creation story the way I do, you come away with profound reverence and gratitude. You have gratitude for the miracle that is life, for ancient people who held creation in reverence. You have gratitude for a story that is deeply moving, the more you read it. You have gratitude for a story that if not literally true, is eternally true—for a story about which believers can be passionate and positive.

Evolution and natural selection are not the enemy. Evolution is only wrong if God is deemed irrelevant to the mix.

I love the opening chapters of Genesis. For me, they do not contradict science or scientific inquiry. Rather they are a witness to the One who is beyond it all. Amen.

Appendix: A CREATION LITANY FOR WORSHIP

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING, THE FIRST DAY.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And it was so.

AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING, THE SECOND DAY.

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together in one place, and let the dry land appear. Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind." And God saw that it was good.

AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING, THE THIRD DAY.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night." God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. And God saw that it was good.

AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING, THE FOURTH DAY.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let the birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."

AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING, THE FIFTH DAY.

(Adapted from Genesis 1, in the New RSV translation.)