

Transfiguration Year B – Evolution Weekend
Genesis 1:26-31a 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 Mark 9: 2-9

As you can tell from the gospel lesson, today is Transfiguration Sunday. Today is also the Sunday of Evolution Weekend. St. Mark's is one of 457 congregations participating in the Clergy Letter Project of Evolution Weekend. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between religion and science; and to show that religion and science are not adversaries or in competition, particularly as it involves creation. I need to confess up front that I am somewhat at a loss when discussing evolution. You see, I went to public high school in Tennessee. And even though the law that led to the Scopes "monkey" trial in the 1920's was rescinded in 1967, my county school board would still not allow the teaching of evolution.

On the Sundays in Epiphany we have read scriptures of the manifestation, the showing forth, the revelation of the divine in the human Jesus. From these revelations, we know Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, a healer. During Epiphany we proclaim our faith, that in Jesus, God is revealing God's self to all people.

In today's story, God really wanted to get the attention of the disciples, so he had Jesus take Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain. Once they were on top of the mountain, Jesus' clothes became dazzling white – whiter than anything that could be produced by humans. They immediately knew they were in the presence of God. Then Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus. For the Hebrew people there were no prophets of greater spiritual stature than Moses and Elijah. Both had beheld the glory of God on mountains during times of trial; both had been commissioned by God to redeem Israel; and both ascended to heaven in the presence of their communities. They expected Elijah to return to earth to usher in the era of the true Messiah. And just at the point where the disciples were sufficiently terrified, a cloud overshadowed them, and God's voice came from the cloud – "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Immediately after the cloud cleared, Elijah and Moses were no longer with them.

So, what is God revealing in the Transfiguration story? To understand what this incredible episode revealed, we have to look to the immediately preceding verses in Mark. Jesus was with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi when he asked them "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." With the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain, and then their sudden disappearance leaving Jesus

alone with them, God revealed to the disciples that Jesus was even greater than the greatest of the prophets – Jesus wasn't just speaking for God or following God's command, he was truly the Son of God.

When Jesus had asked his disciples back at Caesarea Philippi “but who do you say that I am?” Peter answered correctly – “You are the messiah.” Then, for the first time, Jesus revealed to the disciples that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the Jewish religious authorities, be killed, and after three days rise again. But then Peter rebuked Jesus, saying “this must never happen to you.” Jesus then admonished Peter, saying that he was setting his mind on human things, not divine things. Hence the trip up the mountain to set Peter and the others straight - to make it clear that they were to believe Jesus when he told them that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection would be imminent in his messianic mission. God's resurrection triumph is not to be had without Jesus' suffering on the cross. The way of the cross would be necessary for the disciples, just as the way of the cross is inescapable for all who would follow Jesus now. As Candler Seminary theologian Rodney Hunter puts it: “The way of the cross is a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world's power game of domination, exploitation, greed, and deception. The Transfiguration story is a call to . . . begin living out the way of the cross with all our heart, soul, and strength in the confidence that Jesus' nonviolent way is truly the way of salvation, healing, and eternal life.”

God's revelation to Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus shining dazzling white was dramatic, overwhelming to the senses, and unmistakable. We recognize it as revelation since it is recorded in Scripture – a revelation instructing us to live in the world, but not be of the world, not to be driven by the secular world's values to take the way of the cross.

That brings up the question – does God continue to reveal God's mysteries to us today? I answer with an emphatic “Yes”. Among other means, God has revealed, and is continuing to reveal, wondrous things to us through science. I believe that empirical evidence from scientific enterprise is surely divinely inspired. Evolution research addresses how God created – a question not attempted to be answered in our scripture or religion. Scientists, building upon the principles of evolution, have made the most astounding breakthroughs in understanding of the human genome, leading to medical advances previously only dreamed possible. Among these findings, it is truly amazing that DNA binds all living things together by the arrangement of only four simple proteins, while a new-born baby is comprised of 26

billion cells. Simplicity coexisting with complexity – revealed, yet still mysterious – God’s handiwork.

Hebrew scripture - our biblical scriptures - begin with two differing accounts of the creation story. If Genesis 1 and 2 tell us nothing about how our universe, including humanity, came into being physically, should we downplay that part of Scripture? This question reminds me of the time my mother, who is a very devout life-long Methodist, asked me where the dinosaurs came from, since they weren’t in the Genesis story. I gave her the terse answer that the first 11 chapters of Genesis are just our mythology; it didn’t really happen that way. The next sounds I heard were huge gasps coming from my brother and sister. I knew I had to quickly provide more explanation. I explained that the Hebrews used imagery and poetry to tell much about the nature of creation and the creator, relationships among the created, and the ongoing presence of the creator in their lives. So, we have much to learn from the creation stories in Genesis, even though the Hebrews never intended for it to be a scientific text. In fact, most Jewish scholars are generally amazed that some Christians, only beginning in the nineteenth century, wanted to literalize their poetry.

God reveals much about God, humanity, life on earth, the cosmos, and our connectedness with each other in the two creation stories. First, all of creation is good. This may seem like a trivial statement, but at the time the Hebrews were telling the creation stories, their neighboring cultures believed that creation came about from a power struggle between good and evil. To them, and to many even today, matter is evil, human flesh is intrinsically corrupt, and the physical side of life is sinful. The Hebrews disagreed. No – all of God’s creation is good.

God created the entire universe lovingly. As a result, God cares about all God’s creation. God remains involved with creation, staying close as sustainer. We are connected with all of humanity and the rest of created order. God wants us to live in community, in harmony with each other and the whole of the universe. Humans were not co-creators, so we are to be God’s stewards of the world in which we live. We are to love and take care of all creation.

We are made in the image of God. We have the ability to decide, to think, to choose, to relate, to love. We are to continue to create just as God creates, even though our achievements – as astounding as they sometimes seem - can’t compare with God’s. We are to pursue the “how” questions as scientists and use our findings to the benefit of all humanity and the world.

The tree in the middle of the garden of Eden symbolizes that we as humans live with boundaries. For example, we are to act with justice and ethically. We should not diminish anyone's wholeness by attempting to exert power over others. Power and authority reside in God and God's work. We respect the dignity of every human being.

There is much, much more wisdom to be gleaned from the Genesis stories despite my characterization of them as our mythology. And, science can unlock none of these mysteries. Science cannot answer the "why" questions – questions of meaning, purpose, why we are here, justice, morality, human connectedness, relations among different elements of creation, or our spirituality. We need our faith and religion to address these issues. But our religion cannot tell us how God created the universe or unlock its building blocks. We need both science and religion. Not only are they not in conflict, they are inextricably intertwined. After all, does anyone really know whether we are physical beings having spiritual experiences, or spiritual beings having human experiences?

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February 15, 2015