

Sermon on the First Sunday of Christmas
St. James Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California
January 1, 2006
by The Rev. Mary Moore Gaines

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 127; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. John 1: 1-3a

A couple of weeks ago at breakfast following the 8 am service we talked about the nature of God and how people in the Bible and in history have experienced and described God in different ways. God, not in the earthquake, nor in the wind nor in the fire, but in the still small voice. God as love. God as judge. God as creator. God as triune – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus experienced such intimacy with God that he addressed God as *Abba* which means Papa. These are just a few of the ways that people throughout Judeo/Christian history have experienced God.

We agreed that day at breakfast that the best way to know God is to trust your own experience, however that might manifest itself. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century mystic wrote, *You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion.* Eckhart experienced God as compassion. In what way or ways do you experience God?

The gospel we heard today, the prologue to the Gospel of John, expresses the heart of our Christian faith. The Word, the Christ, was with God from the beginning of time, that he was God, and that all creation came into being through him. And then, this Word, at a moment in time in human history came to dwell on earth, as a fully human being, Jesus of Nazareth. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory.* The incarnation of the Word in Jesus. This is what Christmas is all about. The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

We Christians believe that God is way bigger than we will ever comprehend. We also believe that all humans are created in the image of God, that a spark of divine is in everyone, and that Jesus is our example of how to live up to and into that divine spark while struggling with our full and messy humanity. And, while we know that God is not a *person*, we demand a *personal* relationship with God. This is just how we are.

Today I'd like to reflect with you about God as creator and how our creation story has been manipulated by those who claim that it is based on scientific evidence and should be taught in our public schools along with evolution. This movement used to be called 'creationism' and now has a new name, 'intelligent design.'

The case, *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* ended the first week of November and was presided over by Judge John E. Jones III in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This was the first case to test whether it is constitutional for public school classes to present the argument of intelligent design alongside evolution.

This was the first in a long history of trials challenging Darwin's theory of evolution (that began in 1925 with the Scopes "Monkey Trial") that actually included scientific testimony. Margaret Talbot in an excellent article in the *New Yorker* wrote, "For six weeks, the courtroom of Judge John E. Jones III was like the biology class you wished you could have taken."

Lawyers spent six weeks posing questions like "What is science?" and "Who was Charles Darwin?" Talbot wrote, "Proponents of intelligent design – the argument that certain features of the natural world are so complex and intricately put together that they must have been deliberately fashioned – claimed that it was a bold new scientific idea that had been unfairly maligned. And the scientists who believe that intelligent design is merely a repackaged version of creationism made a case for evolution that was thrilling in its breadth and satisfying in its detail."

In December, the Judge ruled for the plaintiffs. Intelligent design cannot be taught alongside evolution in public school science classes. Intelligent design is not science. The judge's ruling will no doubt be appealed.

All of this can be confusing for those of us who experience God as creator and who treasure our creation story (actually there are two different creation stories) in the book of Genesis. When polled, half of all Americans say they believe that God created the world.

What brings clarity, for me at least, is to realize that while science and religion are not the same, they are compatible. Many scientific theories are based on the existence of an 'organizing principle' at the heart of the universe. The way we express it is "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." That doesn't sound all that different from the 'organizing principle of the universe,' does it?

The Genesis stories and evolution are ways to describe the unfolding and ongoing story of creation. Both shine light in the darkness of ignorance. God as creator and Darwin's theory of evolution can exist happily side by side. The problem comes when people take the Bible story literally, claim it is science, and insist on teaching it as science.

These are complicated issues and we Christians must be clear in our thinking and in our ability to articulate the symbiotic relationship between religion and science. We must be vigilant when our true and beautiful faith story is being manipulated in inappropriate ways.

It would be wonderful if spirituality classes could be taught in all our schools. Classes that include the study of the world's major religions, so that our children develop a sense of the sacred as part of their history, their life and their education.

Many parents choose our St. James Preschool because we are a faith-based preschool. In chapel every week, we teach our children to pray, to have a sense of God who loves them and cares for them. We tell our stories from the Hebrew scriptures and from the New Testament, while at the same time honoring other faith traditions with classroom celebrations.

As I said on Christmas Eve, if I say just five words, “And they came with haste . . . “ you have the whole story of the nativity, the incarnation, the Word made flesh, in your lap.

We will continue to tell and to treasure our stories, to teach them to our children, to listen deeply as they guide and shape us in ever-new and creative ways.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory.