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Epiphany 1 B  
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Genesis 1: 1-5  
It Isn't Perfect Yet!

Picture this if you will:

*God is seated on his throne, which in turn is sitting on a big, fluffy cloud in the sky. Standing nearby is a robed angel, trying all at once to hold onto his harp and halo and trumpet and candle and is about to drop everything as God snaps, "Ok, Ok! You are right! I forgot to include pockets! Intelligent Design isn't perfect yet!"<sup>1</sup>*

Intelligent design is the theory, which asserts that the universe is just too darn complex a place to be the result of natural selection and the random processes of evolution. There must have been some kind of overarching intellect at work designing of the natural order—or creation, as scripture calls it.

In principal, Intelligent Design is supposed to be neutral regarding religion pre se because, in theory, the Designer is never named. But, in fact, many of those who advocate teaching the theory of Intelligent Design in public schools are fundamentalist Christians who regard this text from Genesis 1 to be a factual description of the origin of the universe.

Now, let me be clear that although all fundamental Christians are conservative, not all conservative Christians are fundamentalists. Some of us here this morning might consider ourselves among the theologically conservative and may be sympathetic to Intelligent Design Theory but we do not consider ourselves fundamentalists. When one examines the structure of the eye for instance, or the gene for that matter, it is hard to believe these structures just happened to evolve. Lying on ones back on the dessert sands of our great south western late in the night; looking up into a star studded dome of a sky more often than naught, one is moved to awe not to contemplate chaos theory. Whenever we say with the Apostle Creed, "I believe in God the almighty, the maker of heaven and earth," and with the Nicene Creed, 'creator of all things visible and invisible' it may seem to the non-Christian world that we are on the side of Intelligent Design. No designer, no world.<sup>2</sup>

But what we liberals, progressives and non-fundamental conservative Christians have trouble buying is the idea that to accept the existence of intelligent design means one must exclude the possibility of evolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Century, Century Marks, Voices of 2005

<sup>2</sup> Christian Century, *The Debate on Intelligent Design: Creator God*, David C. Steinmetz

When I first heard the theory of Intelligent Design purported, it was hard for me to believe that there were people who still questioned the validity of evolution. I was brought up in a Roman Catholic family and the church taught us that evolution is one of the tools God uses in creating the world. But now I resonated with the Church of Brethren scholar Nancey Murphy when she said, "(from disbelief I have moved to seeing) the adherence of Intelligent Design as tragic. Vast numbers of young people come to the conclusion that evolution and Christianity can't both be true. When they find their way into college science classes and recognize the validity of the evolutionary theory, they think that in order to respect their intellects, they must reject their faith."

Murphy goes on to remind us that Christians have traditionally understood that God acts in the world in at least two ways: 1. By performing special acts (providences or graces as Catholics say, miracles) and 2<sup>nd</sup>, by upholding the processes of nature. But the proponents of Intelligent Design assume that God acts only by the first—through miracles.<sup>3</sup>

Another characteristic that separates fundamentalist from non-fundamentalists of all stripes is our unwillingness to read scripture literally. Though some think that non-literal reading of the scripture is a modern heresy, non-literal reading is as traditional as the church fathers are old. The great Biblical scholar and saint of the 3<sup>d</sup> c. church, Origen, raised doubt in the Christian church about the value of reading this particular story from Genesis literally. Origen insisted that readers of the Bible must learn to distinguish between stories that are true and factual (like the crucifixion of Jesus and the cleansing of the temple) and those that are true and not factual (like the story of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son.) "Was there ever a Jew who was wounded by thieves and rescued by a Samaritan; was there a particular son who left home and wasted his inheritance? Who's to know? More importantly, does it matter? The power of these stories is independent of whether they actually happened in time and space. They are true in as much as they tell us something about human nature and the will of God.

Origen refused to accept that light and darkness existed before there were a sun and moon and stars. He refused to believe that God took an evening stroll in the Garden and that the maker of heaven and earth couldn't find Adam and Eve when they hid from him. Origen believed that these 'absurdities' as he called them, were hints that God wanted these stories to be read in an all together different way, not as history but as "truth in the semblance of history", as he called it. Truth embedded in metaphor, parable, poetry, fiction—true but even if not factual.

I would like to invite you to try something with me. If you are comfortable, close your eyes and try to bring up in your mind's eye the famous DeVinci painting of the last supper. Even if you aren't sure you know it, you probably have a mental picture of the last supper and 99.9% of our imaginative depictions will be informed by this very famous piece of art. So, imagine..

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Century, *Nature's God*, Nancey Murphy, page 20.

We are here in a room, a large, an upper room of a first century house. In the back wall are three windows, the middle one larger than the two that flank it and they look out on the cityscape of Jerusalem. The sky is light with just a hint of pink. What little light there is comes through the window. There are no oil lamps.

Jesus is sitting at the center of a long banquet table, his pale, delicate face seems sad. His arms are extended, left hand open, palm up and he seems to be motioning to a loaf of bread on the table. On either side of him, sitting and standing are 12 men (though one could be a woman) arranged along one side of the table so every face is visible. They all look shaken, at a loss to know which of them would betray him this very night.

Small, plump loaves and silver trays line the length and cups cover the table. (Pause) This is the scene that informs our reenactment of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. It is an old, time-honored piece of sacred art known and loved for what it memorializes.

But, it is not true. DiVinci's Last Supper does not tell the truth. We know from archeological data that the room in which the last supper took place would not have had a view of the city, but was in fact set among other buildings in a monastery within the city itself. The view from that window would probably have been the side of another building. From Jewish tradition we know the Passover feast would not have started until the sun set. There would have been no natural light in the room, no light in the sky at the time of the last supper. We know from the history of the first century that people did not feast at banquet tables, theirs would have been a table set very low, almost to the floor and Jesus would have reclined on a low divan leaning on his left arm, using only his right as is the custom in the middle eastern countries. Only 4 cups are poured at the Passover, no loaves, only matzah, cooked quickly and without leaven to remember the flight from Egypt of their ancestors. This night it becomes their own flight. And the disciple? They most assuredly would have looked Semitic, olive skinned, dark hair, faces unshaven and weary from the journey.

Do these facts make DiVinci's Last Supper any less true for what it tells us about the mood of the meal, the relationship between teacher and his students, the horror that lay ahead? DiVinci's truth rests in what we already know about Jesus and his followers and how we imagine ourselves in the story. DiVinci's truth is held, not in facts, but in the artistic gift that shaped the theology of his time, as surly as it continues to shape the understanding of the church to our time. DiVinci's truth rests only in the hope that we share with him a truth that his art evokes.

I am reminded of a lovely scene in the movie The Lion King there is a moment when three little characters, a meerkat, a warthog and the little lion cub, are lying out under the big night sky, star gazing. Pumba, the warthog begins to theologize when he asks, "Ever wonder what those sparkly dots are up there?" Timon the meerkat brags, "I don't wonder. I know...they are fireflies. Fireflies that, uh, got stuck up in that..uh...big...uh bluish black thing." The Pumba replies, "Gee, I always thought they were balls of gas burning billions of miles away." And the little

lion king believes they are former lion kings who have gone before him and now watch over him.

Three ways of knowing. Clueless Pumba possesses the scientific knowledge that describes the physical reality, as best as science has been able to describe it. Timon has the truth of beauty--the stuff of artists and poets. And Simba, the Lion King, has the truth of faith, a deeper knowing that speaks to a spiritual reality.

I couldn't agree more with my colleague Jennifer Amy-Dressler who argues that we gain nothing and lose too much by pitting theology and science against each other. I don't believe science is the enemy of theology. I don't believe that theology should take the place of science. I believe that theology and science are related, but different, like oranges and apples. I believe that theology teaches us the 'whys' of the world and science teaches the 'hows'. I believe that they offer different kinds of truths both of which are needed for creation to thrive. I believe that scripture's truth is given in many forms and formats: history, poetry, parable, myth, visions, metaphor and always through the lens of life as we know it. I believe that science should be taught in classrooms and laboratories and theology taught in homes and faith communities.

Biblical writers were not interested in documenting nature or history or the history of nature. The authors of our texts, both oral and written, were compelled to keep alive the faith of a people who had come to discern a creator whose love of creation could be known in and through and among the created. A love far more mysterious, far less knowable than even Intelligent Design.

So I would like to suggest that we never fear to know whatever God allows us to know and always distrust restrictions on learning. May we trust enough to liberate the classroom from theology and faithful enough to liberate the Creator from science. And may we always celebrate together (and in the silence of our hearts) the One who is in and beyond science, in and beyond scripture, in and beyond us and all creation. The ineffable one, the giver of life and life beyond life—the God who is greater even than intelligent design.<sup>4</sup> Amen

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<sup>4</sup> *Beyond Intelligent Design*, the Rev. Jennifer Amy-Dressler, Zion United Church of Christ, Poland, IN.

*With Jesus in Jerusalem*, Bragil Pixner, O.S.B. Corazin Publishing, Rosh Pina, 1996.

*Genesis: Interpretation*, Walter Brueggemann