

“Worldviews of Creation and Evolution”

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, 2 Cor. 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

First Sunday after Pentecost

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We don't often have the treat of listening to the first verses of Genesis read aloud. People of ancient times also appreciated this treat. Whenever they read holy texts, they read them aloud, even when they were alone. When we hear these imaginative and inspired words here today, in the midst of this congregation, they take on special power. They create for us a way of seeing how God acted and continues to act, a way of looking at the animate and inanimate world around us, a way of understanding our place in it, how we are related to each other, the creation, and to God.

These verses are the stuff of myth. Now among some people, 'myth' is a dirty word. They think it means "something not entirely true," as in the expression "That isn't true, it's just a myth." The writer of First Peter uses this meaning when he writes "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16) This is certainly an acceptable way to use the term, but that's not the way I use it here.

When I say that the first chapters of Genesis are myth, I don't mean that they aren't entirely true. They are. By myth, I have in mind a special way of writing, a literary genre if you will, that uses figurative language to convey realities that cannot be directly described with words. I like Thomas Mann's definition of myth, which goes like this: "Myth is that which never was and always is." "Never was"—historically— as a myth describes a reality that is too profound to be bound by a specific moment in history. We see this in the story of Adam and Eve which appears in the second creation account. Adam and Eve never existed historically, yet they are portrayed as if they did. But Adam and Eve "always are" because what they portray is always a part of human existence and experience. That is why a myth is true. We experience the truth of myth as it reflects our experience and the experience of all human beings. Myth "never was" historically, but "always is" experientially.

Consider another example: The creation account uses a 'day' to mark a chunk of time and what God does within each chunk of time, or day. You are probably aware that much ink has been spilled over whether these 'days' are twenty-four hours in length, or whether they are much longer, such as the time represented by geological eras, each millions of years in length. But in mythic terms, such concerns are ludicrous. Myth is not interested in exact, literal details. Instead, myth paints a picture using words to portray reality. You can certainly think of 'day' as a literal chunk of time, but be assured that the poets who wrote these stories had no such literal idea in mind. Rather, they used 'day' as a brush stroke to demarcate one part of creation from another in an unfolding description from the more simple to the more complex.

Myth also has important social and cultural functions. Whenever anyone in the ancient world asked, "Where did we come from?" the myth provided the answer: "God created us." Whenever anyone asked, "What is our role as human beings?" the myth provided the answer: "Be fruitful and responsible stewards of the creation." Whenever anyone asked a question not directly addressed by the myth, the answer would be: "God only knows."

This way of looking at the world is the traditional worldview. It is a way of looking at the world through myths which provide all of the answers to life's basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? And so on. The traditional worldview is

concerned with answering questions of meaning.

We of the Judeo-Christian tradition still live according to the traditional worldview in fundamental ways. Many still believe that God is the creator of all, that we come from God in our birth and return to God at our death. We still speak of “heaven above” and the “earth below” even though we know that directional words such as these are nonsense given the way we now know the universe to be. We still speak about the sun “rising” and “setting” even though we know that the sun doesn’t really do that.

But there are important ways in which we no longer live according to the traditional worldview. Most of us no longer believe that illness is caused by malevolent spirits called demons. Instead, we believe that germs, viruses, heredity, lifestyle, or a combination of these factors are responsible for most maladies of the body. We no longer believe that the sky is a dome above the earth. Instead, telescopes and satellites and deep-space probes have shown us a far grander, more expansive vision. And so on.

Why have we abandoned important parts of the traditional worldview? Because of science. With the rise of science over the past three hundred years or so, central beliefs of the traditional worldview have been challenged. The challenge has been most effective in explaining how reality has come to be the way it is. Science has replaced a belief in spirits and demons with the concept of ‘nature’. Inanimate forces—like wind, heat, and rushing water, and microorganisms like bacteria and viruses—can now be invoked to explain the world and our experience in it.

And one of the most significant developments that has advanced science as an all-encompassing worldview is evolution. Regarding living organisms, evolution states that an organism’s sole purpose is to reproduce to the next generation. Change occurs randomly over time as an organism adapts to its environment. As the environment changes, the successful organism changes. If not, it becomes extinct. With huge developments in the field of genetics over the past fifty years or so, we now possess more information than ever before about how organisms survive, grow, change, and die. The result, viewed scientifically, is a resounding endorsement of evolution.

With the traditional worldview overlapping with the scientific worldview, how do we live faithfully today? There are several options. First, we can put our heads in the sand, ignore all the exciting developments in science and cosmology, and continue to affirm the traditional worldview only. This is what creationists try to do. They claim that God is still the creator in the old-fashioned way and that evolution is false. More recently and in a more sophisticated fashion, the intelligent design movement has taken up the charge. Funded mostly by the Discovery Institute in Seattle, several scholars promoting intelligent design try to debunk evolution by pointing out inconsistencies in the paradigm. For example, they claim that the eye is too complex to have evolved in piecemeal fashion, herky jerky, randomly, into such a complex organ. Therefore, they conclude, an intelligent designer must have designed it that way.

Intelligent design is an argument based on negation, trying to raise doubts in the evolutionary paradigm. It’s really a philosophical attack dressed up as science. Since it invokes an Intelligent Designer as an explanatory agent, it represents the traditional worldview. This is why intelligent design usually does not get accepted into school curricula, though the movement has been successful in some states presented as an “alternative theory to evolution.” Virtually every mainstream scientist debunks it, and scholars representing intelligent design have not produced any empirical research demonstrating the truth of its claims.

And they won’t be able to, because it is impossible scientifically to prove that something has been designed. Like I said earlier, intelligent design is really a philosophical attack dressed up to

look like science. It's very similar to one of St. Thomas Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God, the argument based on design. Aquinas was not a scientist, but a philosopher and theologian. I'm sure he would be very surprised to learn that someone could prove his philosophical-theological argument by empirical verification!

Moreover, both creationism and intelligent design misunderstand myth in general, and Genesis in particular, by trying to "scientize" that which was never meant to be scientific in the first place. It's like putting the poet Emily Dickinson into a science lab and forcing her to conduct experiments. Even if Dickinson tried to do it, whatever she produced would be poetry, not science.

If, like me, you reject the purely traditional worldview because of the force of scientific truth, and if, like me, you are skeptical of the notion of Intelligent Design, what is left? Well, there is the other extreme— to reject the traditional worldview altogether, and to embrace science as if it were a religion. But I find that unacceptable. A less-extreme stance draws from the philosophical assumption of the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement that birthed modern science. Scholars of the Enlightenment wanted to purge all scientific inquiry from the taint of religion, which it understood, with some justification at the time, to be fanatical and irrational. This position holds that religion and science study separate realms; therefore, they can comfortably co-exist since their presuppositions and methods differ so much.

But I find this position ultimately unsatisfying, largely because of the voices I listen to and how I experience the creation. I hear the words of Jesus, as Matthew report them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . . And remember, I am with you always." I know in my bones that Jesus is authoritative, even today, and is indeed with us always. And I know in my bones, with the psalmist, that God has crowned us with great glory and given us responsibility for the work of God's hands. I cannot see an oriole, flashing orange and black among the sycamores, without seeing God in that oriole. I cannot look up at our wide-open Ohio sky without thinking, with the writer of Genesis, that it is indeed good, the very good of God's creation.

I don't believe we can be so tidy as to keep science and religion so separate. If God created everything, then God is somehow involved with science which tries to explain everything. On the other hand, if science tries to explain everything, then it studies the ways of God if God created everything. This means that I hold to both the traditional worldview and the scientific worldview simultaneously, as messy at this is, and as crazy as it seems sometimes. The traditional worldview's concern with the "why questions" of life is still needed today. The scientific worldview's concern with the "how questions" of life is also necessary. We need both worldviews, but we need to help each one speak in its strongest, most humble, voice.

One way we can do this is to cultivate a loving, tolerable spirit among ourselves. Let's consider again the words of the Apostle Paul that Betty Mae read to us: "Brothers and sisters, . . . put things in order . . . live in peace . . . The God of love and peace will be with you. . . . Greet one another with a holy kiss . . ." In the midst of all our controversies— evolution, creationism, worldviews in surging conflict— we are told to embrace each other in love. And the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, [and] the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" will be with us all. Thanks be to God!