

A NOTE on this sermon on Evolution:
I took a few moments during the announcement
time to explain the sermon title: I have long stated
that all religions are in part an effort to answer the
four BIG QUESTIONS about life

1 ~ Where did I come from?

2 ~ What am I supposed to do
with my life now that I am here?

3 ~ Where am I going after this
earthly life is over?

4 ~ Where are the cookies?

(What makes life meaningful and fun?)

This sermon is an attempt to help answer #1.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

~ SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY ~
FEBRUARY 12, 2006

Bulletin Cover Quote:

Our imagination is stretched
to the utmost, not to imagine
things which are not really
there, as in fiction, but just
to comprehend those things
which are there.

~ Richard Feynman

CALL TO WORSHIP

adapted from Psalms 8, 33 and 104

Leader: O LORD, our LORD how
majestic is your name in all the Earth!

You have set your glory above the
heavens.

People: The LORD looks down from
heaven and sees all humankind.

Leader: God sits enthroned and watches
all the inhabitants of the Earth.

People: God fashions the hearts of them
all, and observes all their deeds.

Leader: God causes the grass to grow for
the cattle, and plants for people to use.
God brings forth food from the Earth, wine
to gladden the human heart, oil to make the
face shine, and bread to strengthen the
human heart.

People: When God's face is hidden, the
animals of the Earth are dismayed; when
God takes away their breath, they die and
return to dust.

Leader: When God breathes, Life is created
and the face of the ground is renewed.

ALL: May the glory of the LORD endure
forever; Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Praise the LORD!

MORNING PRAYER

O God Who Was Present Before Time ~ O
God Whose Majesty and Mystery Knows
No End ~ we gather in humble awe of your
Creation. We are overwhelmed by the
magnificent gift of each life on the planet.
Sometimes we feel so insignificant and yet
we feel your Love in every corner of our
souls. Thank you God for your nurturing
blessings that are ours in every moment we
draw breath and for all eternity.

~ SCRIPTURE ~

Genesis 1: 1-13

¹In the beginning when God
created[£] the heavens and the earth,
²the earth was a formless void and
darkness covered the face of the
deep, while a wind from God[£] swept
over the face of the waters. ³Then
God said, "Let there be light"; and
there was light. ⁴And God saw that
the light was good; and God
separated the light from the
darkness. ⁵God called the light Day,

and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. ⁶And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. ⁹And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

~SERMON~

*Reminders for Answering
Big Question #1
Where Did We Come From?*

*What does it mean to be a Baptist?
What truths do we have to face
when we look at Evolution?*

What does it mean to be a Baptist?
is a question I hear a lot from people who are considering joining the church. After I tell them that we are American Baptists (and claim Martin Luther King and not Jerry Falwell!) I talk to them about *soul liberty* ~ one of the most important distinguishing characteristics that has set Baptists apart from other denominations since our beginning almost 500 years ago.

And what is *soul liberty*? The plan is that you will see it in action today.

Soul liberty simply means that every person in this gathered community has a responsibility to say *what is true about God from his or her heart*. And as we listen to others in the community, will offer clarification where necessary, but always support and respect for every person's relationship to God.

We can attempt to influence one another but will never tell another person how or what to believe. Your soul is at liberty to believe as you are led to believe.

What this means for today is that I speak from this pulpit not as a

representative of your beliefs, *not* representing the beliefs of this church or our denomination ABC-USA ~ but simply offering *my perspective* on a difficult issue of our times.

Hopefully the conversations we have today will further greater understanding and belief in everyone.

To begin, I want to read another conversation to you ~ it is from one of my favorite books entitled: **The Center of Everything**. In this story, Evelyn Bucknow is a young woman coming of age in Kansas back during the Reagan years. Because of complications in her family, Evelyn is being raised in part by her grandmother, whom she calls Eileen, who is a very fundamental Christian and a strong believer in Creationism ~ the belief that all Creation is maybe, at most, 10,000 years old and all came into existence in six days ~ just like it says in the Bible.

On the other side of the equation is Ms. Jenkins, Evelyn's science teacher who has affirmed Evelyn's questioning intellect. Evelyn loves her grandmother Eileen and Evelyn is coming to know and love people like Ms. Jenkins. This conversation is taking place in Evelyn's head just before she is going to a meeting where the principal of Evelyn's high school has arranged a kind of showdown between the parents and teachers who are for and against evolution being taught in the schools. Here is Evelyn ~

I don't want to go to the meeting. I have secretly read the chapter on evolution in my science book, even though we are not supposed to yet, and there are pictures of fossils and skeletons; human bones too old to be Adam and Eve.

I have believed everything Ms. Jenkins has told us this year about mitochondria and ATP and chromosomes and the rain forests in Brazil. She's never lied to us about anything before, and I don't see why she would start now.

But if she isn't lying, then Eileen is. And then that means that maybe Genesis is a story that somebody made up. But if you start to believe that, then you also might think there is a chance that no one is upstairs, wearing headphones and looking out for us, choosing good from bad. Maybe we are just on our own. But then if we aren't on our own and you listen for a minute to what Ms. Jenkins is saying and start to wonder and doubt, and you happen to get run over by a bus just at that moment ~ well then... It would be easier, maybe, if you just didn't think at all.¹

There's a part of me that identifies so much with Evelyn's words. Who needs extra tension in his or her life? Give me a warm fire and a good book or a movie and I can escape as fast as anyone.

The problem is that if we do not discuss issues like evolution and wrestle with the ideas, then we run the risk of letting those who do speak up speak for us. As advocates of *soul liberty*, Baptists

¹ Moriarty, Laura, The Center of Everything, Hyperion Books, New York, NY, 2003, pg 227

have to know before they can make an informed decision.

Another reason we want to know is for our children ~ we want to have some say in the education of our children. We want to be responsible adults when they ask such a beautifully innocent question like:

Who made all this?

And if we answer

God made everything you see...

then we can certainly expect to rapidly follow questions like...

What does God look like?

and

How did God do it?

From the beginning we can pass the buck and say

Wait for your Dad to come home...

or

Ask your Mom

or

talk to the minister...

but eventually we have to answer such questions honestly for ourselves.

As I have come to struggle with these questions, there are some reminders or guidelines that I regularly use that have proven helpful.

The first is

***We cannot use the Bible
as proof for good science.***

For my life ~ even if I wasn't a minister ~ the Bible would be an invaluable tool whose wisdom I will treasure all of my days. However, I will not rely on the Bible for accurate science.

Why not? Well ~ for one reason, when every single story in the Bible was written, everyone thought the Earth was flat and the center of the Universe.

Those verses from Genesis and the words we used in our Call to Worship from the Psalms help us see a world that just about any seven year old would question.

*When we read about God making
a dome called sky to separate the waters
above and the waters below and then
opening the doors of the heavens
to water the Earth*

we are reading about a pre-scientific God written by people who did not know science as we think of science today.

And a little later on we read about God making

*a greater light to rule the day and
a lesser light to rule the night*

we can see this as a beautiful story but hardly accurate science.

These ancient people learned information about life ~ not through an accurate accounting of what happened long ago ~ but through stories.

And the thing about stories is this: they are told to provide lessons for life and if the stories do not grab the people and hold them ~ what happens to the stories and the lessons?

They die.

This fact alone tells us that stories may not always be accurate by today's definition of accuracy.

Did the all stories in the Bible happen exactly like the words say?

Probably not.

Is there truth in these stories?

Absolutely!

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon about the book of Jonah. Jonah is a powerful story about the dangers of national pride and the folly of humans trying to limit God's Love.

There are some who would say:

*for that story to be true,
one must first believe that Jonah literally
survived for three days in the belly of
the big fish or whale or whatever.*

My feeling is that these people are missing the big lesson by trying to validate something that was never intended to be believed literally.

We can let the Bible go as a science textbook and still be good Christians.

The second truth that has helped me is this:

***There will never be enough proof to
make everyone happy; there will
always be questions.***

When Galileo looked through his telescope and saw mountains and craters on the moon (offering proof that it was not a light of its own but only reflecting the sun's light) representatives from the Catholic Church said

*the Devil was putting those images
in the minds of those who looked
through this scandalous invention.*

And it wasn't just the Catholics because Protestants were giving these

scientists a hard time also. Martin Luther called such astronomers fools who wish to

*reverse the entire science of astronomy.*²

And then added:

*Sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua
commanded the sun to stand still,
and not the Earth.*³

In 1992, the Catholic Church finally repealed its ruling of heretic for Galileo. Nonetheless, all those years since Galileo, there have been people who simply did not want to give science any power to reinterpret the meaning of the scriptures.

People figured that if science was allowed to disprove any one thing, then, pretty soon, the whole Bible would be doubted and ridiculed and it wouldn't be of any use to anyone.

From the beginning of the discussion between evolution and creationism, Creationists saw no real threat from evolution; they said that there were too many gaps in the process to prove that life evolved through natural selection.

However, over time, scientists have made more discoveries that have filled in many of those gaps and made evolution a more and more plausible explanation for life on Earth.

²

<http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/White/astronomy/heliocentric-theory.html>

³ Joshua 10:12,13

And now we are at the point where Creationists are encouraged to abandon all their old ideas about the Earth and the Universe being created in six days and jump on the *intelligent design* bandwagon. That way, folks who believe in the Bible can give a thumbs-up to evolution by simply saying God was part of the evolutionary process.

That 's one way to take care of the gaps because wherever there is something that simply cannot be explained ~ these new Creationists can say with enthusiasm:

God took care of that one!

Because there will never be enough proof and there will always be questions, I say grant science all the proofs ~ it doesn't take away from my faith. And anyway ~ I don't want a faith that could be proved or disproved ~ it wouldn't be a faith.

Someone could show me the entire evolutionary process from pond scum to water creatures to critters that crawled out on the ground to apes to humans and let's say the whole thing could be explained scientifically. For me and my belief, that still would not take God out of the picture.

The last truth for me is

***Good science does
not eliminate good religion.***

The people down through history who have continued to ask questions risked the fact that they might find upsetting answers; they risked the

possibility that they might have to adjust their thinking in brand new ways.

That's why I put that quote by Richard Feynman on the cover of our bulletin. I know he was a theoretical physicist and I am betting he was a fan of evolution. That simple challenge from science not to believe in something fictitious, but to believe in what is real is important to remember.

I have heard so many people say about evolution:

It just couldn't happen that way
Hearing these words, I do not know what makes me sadder...

1) the fact that they don't want be open to a new way of thinking or

2) that they are limiting the mystery that ~ for me finally ~ is God.

I want the scientists to keep finding more and more proof of the evolutionary process because I believe more discoveries will only lead to more questions. And in a thousand years, I believe we will still only be able to say:

We have so much more to learn.

Praise the LORD!

*And may the glory of the LORD
endure forever!*

AMEN