

A sermon preached at  
the Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ  
Bethesda, Maryland  
by the Rev. Rich Smith

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Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29

## 100,000 Monkeys

The reading from the 29<sup>th</sup> Psalm reminds me of an old story about a bishop who claimed that he had heard God's voice in the midst of a storm, and suggested to a friend that he should go out some stormy night and see if that would happen to him. The friend tried it, but commented, "My only thought was: what a fool I am!" "Well," replied the Bishop, "How much more did you expect to learn about yourself in just one night?"

I would like to suggest that it might be a good idea if Pat Robertson would try it, and he might discover the same thing! He has injected his own voice into the midst of storms more than once this year, most recently suggesting that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was inflicted by God as punishment for "giving God's land to the Palestinians," and earlier warning the good folks of Dover, Pennsylvania that they should not be surprised if disaster strikes them for having "voted God out their city" when they defeated nine school board members who had instituted mention of "Intelligent Design" in science classrooms. The case was further resolved in court, right before Christmas, with U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III ( Bush appointee, and no activist judge by any measure) finding that "Intelligent design" is religion, not science, and while it ought to be studied and discussed, the science classroom is not the place, and it cannot be taught as an alternative to evolution. I agree the *Washington Post* letter writer who said, "My reaction upon reading that (the judge) had upheld the separation of church and state in our schools: There is a God!"

I don't suppose I need to spend any time defending the judge's decision to this congregation. Many of you are scientists, and educators, and thinking people who recognize foolishness when you see it, who can see, as Judge Jones did, that "Intelligent Design" is really "creationism" in a new guise. Stated a bit differently, perhaps, allowing for evolutionary changes in life forms, not necessarily holding to the literal six day creation doctrine of fundamentalists, not even specifically naming God as the Intelligent Designer. But still, a faith-based (and I would say fear-based) challenge to the theory that nearly all reputable scientists accept.

Now of course in addition to being intelligent, thinking people, we are also people of faith, so what I really want to explore is, how can we be both? How can we read the Bible, even call it the Word of God, with its stories of instant creation, and testimony about finding God in the midst of a thunderstorm, how can we sing hymns about God as the creator, "whose Spirit formed upon the earth the first faint seeds of life," and not compromise our scientific principles? How can we keep theology out of the science classroom and not vote God out of our city? How can we legitimately be people of faith and people of science?

Allow me to begin with a brief personal testimony. Before I chose the ministry for my life's work -- or rather, before it chose me -- I was going to be an astronomer, or at least have some sort of career in science. I remember rising -- as a nine-year-old -- at 4 a.m. and getting out the binoculars for a good look at Jupiter, and

then the excitement when for my tenth birthday my parents bought me a reflecting telescope. I still have it, even though it no longer works. A science class field trip to the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, where the planet Pluto was discovered, was the highlight of 1961.

My youthful scientific curiosity led me to do a lot of reading, some experimenting (my Mother could tell you about a few chemistry projects that literally blew up!), and a great deal of wondering. I asked a lot of big, unanswerable questions, like "How far can you go in space?" "How big is the universe?" "What's it like in other solar systems?" "Did Jesus ever go to another planet?" I'm sure I drove my teachers crazy.

Even after the focus of my academic pursuits changed from science to religion, I continued to remain curious and filled with wonder at the creation, even spending a month camping in Death Valley to study geology for college credit.

Some might think the switch from science to religion must have been a cataclysmic event, a sharp change in direction. But for me, it was a natural progression, for I never perceived any conflict between the two. I have always felt at home with the biblical writers who stood in awe and wonder before the mystery and grandeur of God's creation. I have always believed that the more you know and understand about the creation, the more you will be led to the Creator.

As Jimmy Carter writes in his latest book, *Our Endangered Values*, "The existence of millions of galaxies, the evolution of species, and the big bang theory cannot be rejected because they are not described in the Bible, and neither does confidence in them cast doubt on the Creator of it all. God gave us this exciting opportunity for study and exploration, never expecting the Bible to encompass a description of the entire physical world or for scientific discoveries to be necessary as the foundation of our Christian faith."

In other words, it is understanding that religious language is poetry, designed to convey truth that is ultimate, not literal. That is why I recently joined several thousand other clergy in signing "An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science," which reads, in part, "We...believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as one theory among others is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God's gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator....We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth."

Of course not everyone feels this way, as very current events give witness. For those who take the Bible literally, believing it to be an accurate factual account of science and natural history, scientific knowledge becomes a threat. Facts replace faith, and their view of God is not enlarged, but strangely diminished. When these folks get elected to office, scary things happen, as we have seen. It's not just Pennsylvania or Kansas – there are attempts being made in some twenty states right now to mandate the teaching of the Biblical account of creation alongside evolution in the science classroom. Some have tried to remove evolution from the curriculum altogether, and even when it remains, many teachers have been afraid to teach it,

fearful of offending students and confronting parents who believe otherwise. And is a disaster for our country, who now find ourselves lagging way behind other places in the world in the production of scientists.

Someone gave me an editorial cartoon which shows a teacher saying, “Now let us all open our science textbooks to Chapter One, Verse One!”

This is an old debate, going back at least to the time when the Pope censured Galileo for asserting that the earth was round, and not the center of the universe, an action which has only recently been recanted. And the debate may well go back to Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating of the tree of knowledge. The religious establishment has often been uneasy with science and the search for expanded knowledge, as if faith will only be valid as long as people are kept in the dark. The insights of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, and Freud have all met stiff resistance from much of the religious community, which is ultimately diminishing to it. (Note: an article published in the *Washington Post* the morning this sermon was preached takes issue with this point of view – see “The War that Wasn’t” on page 1 of the Outlook section, or go to <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/06/AR2006010602246.html?referrer=emailarticle>.)

It is astonishing to me that eight decades after the Scopes Trial, the issue is still being played out, and Gallup polls show that some 44% of Americans hold to a creationist view, that another 40% are sympathetic to some sort of Intelligent Design hypothesis.

“Intelligent design” is, as I said, really just the latest manifestation of “creationism.” Of course on it’s surface it differs from the old fashioned literal interpretation of scripture. ID allows in fact that an evolution-like process may play a role in creation, but posits that it is purpose driven, that we are not here by chance. Specifically, it says, there are some things in the world, most notably life itself, that cannot be accounted for by known natural causes, and show features that, in any other context, we would attribute to intelligence. Living organisms are too complex to be explained by any natural – or mindless – process. They can be accounted for only by invoking a designer – a very, very smart one!

While there may be something here that appeals to people of faith, who do see God as “creator of the heavens and the earth”, it just doesn’t happen to be very good science. It’s like saying that Shakespeare or Mozart’s work could never have come about by pure chance. As Saleiri exclaims when he first hears the music of Mozart in the drama *Amadeus*, “It was the voice of God!” And for you and me that may well be. But I also recall a story that if you put 100,000 monkeys in a room with typewriters, given enough time one of them would produce *Hamlet*. It would have to be a very long time, of course, but the laws of chance are such that it would happen. And the universe has been around a very long time, indeed, such that if the whole history of time were thought of as one day, the “Big Bang” happening at one millisecond after midnight, *homo sapiens* would not show up on this planet until roughly 11:59 p.m.

Furthermore, saying that there is no way to explain something other than God’s intervention is likewise not very good science or theology. This is what’s known in facts as “the God of the Gaps.” The planet Neptune, for example, has an

irregular orbit around the sun. It was once assumed that whenever it strayed from its normal or expected path that God intervened to set it right again. And then, the planet Pluto was discovered. All kinds of things have been attributed to God's intervention that later were found out to have quite natural explanations. As knowledge increases, the space for God decreases – if that's how one understands God!

If a young person studies science and loses their faith in God, the problem is not with science but with that person's original faith. Perhaps their concept of God was so inadequate that it could be destroyed rather easily. Perhaps they believed in the "God of the Gaps." We've all had our faith challenged -- but rather than surrender it totally when something comes along to question it, or cling to it doggedly, we would be better off to re-examine it, and grow from it. E.g., Have we believed in a God who will work magic, or get us out of every jam? It's like praying to do well on a test you didn't study for: when you fail, will you disavow your faith in God? Will you conclude that God has punished you? Or will you re-examine your faith in a Santa Claus God, realize that God has given you the power to study for that test all along, and will still give you strength to overcome your failure? Or to use another example, I was watching this year's very rainy Rose Parade on TV, which was held on January 2<sup>nd</sup> because New Year's Day was on a Sunday, and one of the commentators observed that it was the first time in fifty years they hadn't had perfect weather for the parade, and that the organizers believed that by never having the parade on Sunday, they would guarantee good weather. In Actuality, not having a Sunday parade stems from the days when they were worried that the passing floats would spook the horses tied up in front of the churches along the parade route, and it was a tradition they simply continued. But what if there was a perceived bargain with God – we won't hold festivities on the Christian Sabbath, and God will hold off the storms, in fact might dump extra rain on Northern California until the parade is over. What kind of science is that? What kind of theology? What happens to that kind of faith when it does in fact rain on the (Rose) Parade? Or is it God's judgment on the floats, or the theme "It's magical", or maybe that for the first time the president of the Tournament of Roses was a woman? Or does it force one to re-examine some rather primitive theological notions?

Ultimately, Intelligent Design, as it is proposed, replaces science with religion, and as a result, does justice to neither. It says, here are two theories – make a choice, when that really isn't necessary.

While the image of God as a designer, an architect, a planner, is very helpful to me, I also know it is very limited, and just the beginning, and I would qualify it by stating that I don't believe God is a micro-manager, that God is something of a gambler and risk-taker, not knowing where it will lead or how it will all turn out – there is the element of freedom, and choice, and randomness, and surprise built in. And God is even bigger than all that – more than the designer of the process, God IS the process. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being – like water to a fish, or air to a bird, or forces of attraction between atoms, or the impetus to human caring and the lure of love.

That, of course, is theology, it is faith. It's an attitude, a perspective, a sensibility, an orientation. It's how I live my life. It's what I do with the knowledge that science provides. But it is not science and that's why it or any other faith perspective should never be taught in a science class room, as an alternative to

evolution or any other scientific endeavor.

There is no conflict, ultimately, between science and religion, for each has its place. It was Einstein who said, "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." That is, we need science to search for truth, wherever that may lead, to seek answers to the questions of "what" and "how." And we need religion to help us choose what to do with our new found knowledge, and to help us glimpse an answer to the question of "why?" Science can teach us to split the atom. Religion will determine whether we use that knowledge to heat a city, or blow it up. Religion without science may give you a flat earth; science without religion may give you no earth at all!

In the end, the question may not be so much about the origin of the universe and human life, but our destiny. Where might evolution be taking us? For if creation didn't happen all at once in six days, but is a continuing process, then it's not over, and we're in the midst of it! And it may no longer be purely by chance, or natural selection, but we will be in some sense the designers, and I pray we are intelligent ones!

What we are to evolve into physically, is not clear: but for our spiritual evolution we are given a clue in the new Adam, Jesus Christ. In him we see vision of our destiny, a human being who brings the spiritual and physical realms into one. Not that we've come very far towards that in 2,000 years, but remember evolution is a slow process, and as Jack Kerowak said, "Walking on water wasn't built in a day."

Albert Einstein, a man of science and a man of faith, breathed a prayer when he said, "I believe in a God revealed in a harmony among all people." That would be where I hope we are heading -- to a greater openness about life, a greater acceptance of one another in all our infinite variety, to greater care and compassion for our fellow human beings, and whatever we may become. Then we may truly see the day when we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks -- something that will take a real partnership of faith and science, indeed!