

“Evolution Revolution,” March 8, 2009

Message part 1

I found the clip from *Inherit the Wind* to be quite interesting. I don't know if you realize it, or not, but that film was made in 1960, and it is the retelling of what has been called the “Scopes Monkey Trial” that took place back in 1925. Apparently there was a law in Tennessee that outlawed the teaching of evolution in the classroom. It was said that to do such a thing denied the story of divine creation as told in the Bible, and asserted that human beings were descended from a lower order of animals.

According to some reports, this trial was a strategically designed attempt to put the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, population of 1726, on the map by giving it a lot of publicity. However, what the trial actually did was to reveal a growing chasm in American Christianity between science and religion that then began to escalate. To my complete amazement, some of that same kind of thing continues to exist even today!

I say I'm amazed by it simply because I don't get it. I fail to understand how any thinking person can continue to debunk science and assert that the creation story is the factual story of how the earth and humanity came into being.

I suppose it has to do with how one reads and understands the Bible. As some of you may have heard me say in the past, to see the Bible as literally true in every single word is to minimize the universal truths that can be found there; it's to deny the depth of understanding that is intended in the myths and stories.

Our Bible passage for this morning is the Message version of the first creation story—and please notice I said first creation story. There are two—the 7-day story which is this one, and the Adam and Eve story, the second one. They actually come from two different sources and are two ways of trying to tell the same story, and they are also based on other ancient Near-East myths that were known at the time these versions of the story came along.

They are simply ways in which human beings were trying to figure out how the earth came into being, but they were never intended to be taken as fact, or as true stories. They were stories that were intended to point to God as the inspiration behind creation, but not intended to tell all the details about how life came to be. As one Southern Baptist preacher, Henry Green, put it, “I believe God created, but I just happen to believe that the scientists have it right in understanding that creation.” What he's talking about is the process of creation that brought the world as we know it.

One thing I did not realize, until doing some study and research for this message, was that a biologist and dean at Butler University here in the city, a man by the name of Michael Zimmerman, actually organized an

“Evolution Weekend” four years ago to show how many pastors embraced science. Zimmerman was quoted as saying, “With clergy weighing in, it should become clear that the issue is not a fight between religion and science, but that most religious leaders were on the same side as the scientists. And the fight was between different religious groups.”

The story of the Evolution Weekend was on NPR, and noted that recently Jewish rabbis have been part of it. One rabbi from a synagogue in Illinois remarked about how the creation story itself goes in a progression—from water to light, then plants and animals, and then human beings—a progression from the simple to the complex, very much the kind of process scientists have identified.

Even in the South, widely recognized as the “Bible Belt,” church people and non-church people are beginning to move from the more literal interpretation of the Bible. One Texas pastor said that it had to do with the many oil fields that exist in his area. He commented. “These people have been sitting on top of oil and fossils and the evidence of the carboniferous period all of their lives. They know it. They kick over fossils daily. They see ocean water that is 200 million years old coming out of the ground daily as new wells are drilled. They've had a hard time all their lives putting all of that many, many million-years-old evidence into 4,000-year-old stories.”

Science doesn't really contradict God, but rather, in my view, enlarges God. Why can't both evolution and God be true? Maybe God chose to use evolution to create the world. Maybe it all began in the mind of God, and science is beginning to unfold the mystery—maybe, just maybe, but there's always more to wonder about.

Message part 2

I don't know about you, but I certainly have a lot more questions than I have answers, and that's probably why I resonate with the words of both of the songs we've just sung. Even in the midst of all our knowledge and all the ways we have to acquire knowledge, there is so much that's unknown. While science can supply us with so many of the intricacies of say, our DNA, and can do such wonders, there are still so many unanswered questions.

Furthermore, each day we're confronted more and more with the mystery of life. Just looking at a newborn child fills me with awe, and I'm certain that will be even more true when we hold our soon-to-be born granddaughter in our arms. How did that little miracle come into being? Even when we're older and reflecting on our lives, we often ask why we went this way, and not that way? Why did it turn out like this, and not like that? Is God at work in our lives, or are we left to muddle through on our own? It really is all a mystery.

Message part 3

I've come to believe that science and spirituality need to walk hand in hand. Martin Nowak, a Harvard professor of mathematics and biology—in other words a scientific sort, noted the following: “Science and religion

provide analogous functions. They allay human suffering by offering guidance through a mysterious world, while simply occupying different 'ecological niches in the brain.' Science and religion are two essential components in the search for truth. Denying either is a barren approach."

Nowak, in my opinion, was able to identify how our faith can help us in ways that science cannot. He noted that the intellectual/scientific life is unable to answer the kind of questions that faith can—questions like the meaning of life, questions that are at the very heart of what life is all about. While we may begin to understand some of the science connected with life, the questions about the meaning and purpose of life—our own lives and life in general still often seem like a mystery. "Why are we here?" We wonder and we wonder....

It is in and through asking those profound kinds of questions that we begin to bridge the gap that some believe exists between science and spirituality. There is so much we don't know in either, as we continue to live this mystery we call life.

However, I'll tell you what I believe—for whatever it's worth. I'm convinced that science and religion are closely aligned to one another. God has given us brains to use to learn, to grow, to explore, to discover. Science may tell us the how's, but I believe that God is the "WHO" behind and beyond everything. God is the one who has given us the capacity to dream and imagine and create, the one who has given us the curiosity to ask questions and explore new possibilities, the one who gives us the courage to put one foot after the other and move forward in life. God is the one who, no matter what we face in life, is before us, behind us, within us around us. God never fails us...I'm sure of it.

Closing:

Albert Einstein once said, "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is lame." We need both to make life complete.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we know in our hearts, minds and spirits that, in the midst of it all is the Source of Being, the Creator, the Lover of us all—God—and God is that someone saying "I love you, and you're not alone.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.