

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church - November 21, 2010

Sermon "Creation and Evolution" - The Rev. Douglas Kendall

Lord God,
Fill us with wisdom from your Word,
from the thoughts of our minds and the minds of this world,
and from your Spirit.
We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

This Sunday is Auction Sermon Sunday.
Back at the time talent and treasure auction in the Spring,
I auctioned off a sermon on the topic of the bidder's choosing.
I also made it clear that the person who won the auction
could tell me what to preach about,
but could not tell me what to preach.
They could give the topic, I would decide on the content.
Beth and Bruce were the successful bidders,
And the topic they settled on was creation and evolution.
Thanks for that one by the way.

I think there are very few theological topics
that have had more air-time in the media over the past century,
than the topic of creation and evolution.
From the flat earth creationists who still maintain that the earth is flat,
And that the description of the "dome of the sky" and
"the waters above the sky" is still valid,
to strict and I would say fundamentalist evolutionists
who hold fast to evolutionary theory as dogma not to be questioned.
This topic has often been centered around the teaching of evolution
in the school system.
In the United States especially this has been a big issue since 1925
with the Scopes monkey trial,
when John Scopes, a high school biology teacher
was charged with teaching evolution to his high school biology class,
which was illegal at the time.
John Scopes was found guilty, but the verdict was overturned on a technicality.

In more recent times the US Supreme Court decided in June of 1987 that
the teaching of creation science in public schools
breached the separation of church and state.
The New atheism, and intelligent design dominated the discussion in the 1990s,
Polarizing people's positions.

In my experience though there are very few people
fall into one or the other of these two side
of creationists or evolutionists.

What ends up happening is that both sides of the debate
characterize the other with half truths and caricatures,
to the point that no one really makes sense anymore.

Strict creationists caricature those who believe in evolution as godless
heathens who have no belief in anything beyond science,
and strict evolutionists caricature anyone who believes in God
or that God has something to do with creation
as mindless morons who only believe
what their church tells them to believe.

It almost becomes a matter of,
if you believe in God you have to be a strict creationist,
and if you are a scientist, or believe in evolution
you can not possibly believe in God.

This dichotomy, this unnatural division has never made sense to me.
I grew up in a family where, as it turned out,
you either became a minister or a scientist.

My brother Stephen is a minister,
My older sister Jennifer is a bio-chemist doing cancer research in Montreal,
And her husband is a PhD bio-chemist.
My younger older sister is a chemical engineer
And her husband is a PhD Chemical engineer.
And as you probably know I am a minister.

The interesting thing is that we are all involved in the church,
We are all people of faith.

Being a scientist does not mean you can not believe in God,
And being a person of faith does not mean that you have to reject science.
Science and faith are not two mutually exclusive areas of thought or life,
They are both a part of who we are as human beings.

There are certain questions that faith cannot answer,
And there are certain questions that science cannot answer.
Science is good with the "how" questions, but not so good with the why.

Let's look at our texts for today.

I have chosen 4 texts today, all of which have to do with creation.
Genesis 1, Genesis 2, Proverbs 8, and John 1.

Now first of all it is not all that surprising
that there are four texts in the bible that talk about creation,

but it is interesting that these four texts do not all tell the same story.
We began with Genesis and the creation of the world in 6 days,

With human beings being created on the sixth day.

***So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.***

A few verses later we hear a different account of the creation of human beings.

***...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed
into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.
So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept;
then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib
that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and
brought her to the man.***

Why would there be two different accounts of creation side by side?

And then we get to Proverbs chapter 8 and we hear another account of creation

Which included lady wisdom

as being created before the rest of creation, and God's delight.

***The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of
long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the
earth.***

***...then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting
in the human race.***

And then by the time we get to John's Gospel we have that wonderful passage
which seems to be inspired by both of the Genesis accounts of creation
and the proverbs account.

It is no longer Lady Wisdom who was pre-existent with God,

But the Word who became flesh.

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word
was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being
through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has
come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The
light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.***

How is it that all of these texts exist in the bible together?

How are we ever supposed to find out what really happened in creation
with all of these different accounts in the Bible

not to mention what we hear about the Big Bang theory

and expanding universes and Darwin's theory of evolution etc.?

Lets take a step back for a moment.

Lets go back to Genesis.

Actually that may not be as far back as you might think.

I am going to tell you something

that ministers don't always take the time to mention,
but that we all learn at seminary.

Biblical Scholars can tell by the style of writing,

That the Book of Genesis was written over many centuries,
By a variety of different authors.

According to the majority of Biblical scholars,

The two accounts of creation we have in Genesis,
come from two different authors,
At two different times in history.

The Genesis 2 account with Adam being formed from the dust,

And God breathing life into him,
and taking his rib to make Eve is the earlier account of creation.

The Genesis 1 passage, with creation happening in 6 days,

Was written down later, most likely during the exile in Babylon.

Now picture the context of life in Babylon.

The Jewish Nation has been overrun by the Babylonians,

The temple has been destroyed,

The brightest and the best have been taken into exile in Babylon.

At that time in history there was a belief that when two nations went to war,

The nation that had the stronger God would win.

Well Israel had lost against the Babylonians, and badly.

So what did this say about their God, the God of Israel and their own identity?

On top of that, the Babylonians had very detailed and dramatic stories of creation,

As did other nations surrounding them.

Most nations of the time had creation stories that involve either sex or violence.

Either creation comes about from two gods mating,

Or there was an epic battle and out of the violence creation
the earth and sky come into being.

The Babylonian's creation story is one of violence.

Marduk the God who represented Babylon killed the God Tiamat

And from her entrails created the earth and the sky.

So that is the context of the writing of the Genesis 1 creation story.

The Israelites are in exile in this foreign land Babylon,

And they keep hearing the story of Marduk and Tiamat,

Every year it is recited on the fourth day of their new year.

As you can imagine people begin to ask about their own creation story,

How do they believe that the world came into being?
How does all of this fit with this violent story of Marduk and Tiamat?

And into his context the Genesis 1 creation story takes shape.

God is not a god of violence and destruction,

God is a permission giving creator.

Some time I will go into more detail about this,

But the starting point in Genesis

is that God does not force creation into being,

God invites creation into being.

“Let there be light” is giving permission for light to appear.

The other thing is that God creates with words, not with violence and sex.

God speaks, and things appear.

This is so much gentler than the Babylonian Creation story,

And more so than most of the nations of the time.

If this is going to be the new story of creation for the Jewish people,

Then what about the other one,

the one about God making Adam out of dust,

and creating Eve out of Adam’s rib.

Remember I said that the other creation story predated the account in Genesis 1.

What to do with the other story?

Keep it too.

It gives another perspective on creation,

A much more intimate and hands on understanding of God.

But they contradict each other don’t they?

Not really, not if you can accept the different understandings of God

that come through in each,

and see it as a “both-and” instead of an “either-or”.

God does not create the world and the universe

with violence or by having sex with some other God,

God creates with words and by giving permission for elements of creation

to come into being.

God is also intimately involved with his creation.

Our Proverbs passage, the one about Lady wisdom helping with creation,

And daily being God’s delight comes out of what is called wisdom literature.

It includes parts of the bible like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and Job and

Some other parts of the old testament or Hebrew scriptures,

that were written at a time when people were questioning

what they believed about God and how God relates to us.

The main idea of the passage from Proverbs is that Wisdom,

Was a part of creation.
That Wisdom was created before everything else,
And wisdom helped God to create everything including people,
And God and wisdom both delight in this creation around us,
And in human beings.
In a strict monotheistic, one God culture of the old testament,
This idea of Lady Wisdom creating everything with God,
Was not a popular notion,
but it lasted, and it was included in the Hebrew scriptures
And in our Bible today.

We see this notion taken a step farther in the Gospel of John,
the most poetic and theologically complex of the Gospels.
The opening of John pulls all of this together in the person of Jesus.
The idea that God creates with words and with love,
That the word was in existence before creation,
And was with God and was God.
Well this sounds like lady wisdom,
But the word we are told has taken flesh
and lived among us full of grace and truth, and this word is Jesus.

Wait a minute now.

We have Jesus, the Word, Lady Wisdom, God
Human beings created in God's image, male and female
or Adam created first and then Eve out of Adam's rib...

How are we ever supposed to keep it all straight
and figure out what really happened in creation?

Well maybe the Bible gives us a hint about what really happened,
By giving us a variety of ways of understanding creation.

Does this mean that the world is not only 6000 years old,
And creation did not happen in 4004 BC?

Those dates were figured out by an English clergyman named John Lightfoot,
Who was bored on a long journey in the 17th century,
And took his bible and tried to piece together all of the dates,
To try to figure out how old the earth is.

Of course this date was estimated before the discovery of many dinosaur bones,
And well before the idea of carbon dating,
And the theory of evolution,
And theories about the big bang and an expanding universe.

In the 17th century, not to mention in biblical times,
they did not know the things we know now through science.

The latest estimates are that the universe is about 13.7 billion years old,
And the earth is about 4.5 billion years old.
This leaves enough time for evolution, and for dinosaurs to come and go.
But where is God in all of this?

Often what happens is that God becomes relegated
to a smaller and smaller role in what is going on in our world,
as science explains more and more about how we got here.
One thing that has fascinates me about the big Bang theory,
Is that according to the Physicists,
The big bang began with a single point
that contained all of the matter that exists in the universe,
in and infinitely dense ad infinitely heavy dot that existed in nothing.

At the moment of the big bang,
Just a fraction of a second after it occurred,
And all the matter in the world was exploding outward,
If it had been exploding just a fraction of a second more slowly,
The mass and the density of the single point
would simply have imploded in on itself.

And if at the moment of the Big Bang,
Just a fraction of a second after it occurred,
All of that matter that was exploding out
had been moving a fraction of a second more quickly,
then there would not have been enough gravity to hold it all together,
and there never would have been planets,
and the earth would never have formed,
and the conditions for life to begin
would never have become possible.

The Universe began by expanding at just the right speed to continue to expand,
And at the same time have enough gravity to pull together galaxies
and planets.

And there must have been something that sparked the Big Bang to start with.

I don't have a problem with the Big Bang theory,
Or expanding universe,
Or the general concept of the theory of evolution,
Or the existence of dinosaurs.

I think they still don't entirely explain the "how" of how we got here,
But they bring us pretty close.

What they do not even begin to touch is the question why,
And that is what we wrestle with in theology and faith,
And that is most of what we see in the bible.

Perhaps the Bible and our faith can help us with the why questions,
And even give us some hints about the “how” of how we got here.
Even more importantly perhaps we can see in the bible the example,
That we do not live in an either or world,
Where one idea has to be right and the other wrong.
Perhaps like the four different ways
of understanding the creation of the world in the Bible,
we can see that there is more than one way to understand who we are
how we got here, and why we are here.
Perhaps we can see that science and religion
are not two diametrically opposed ideas,
but two complementary ways of understanding who we are.

May God grant us the wisdom to delight in creation and in each other,
May Jesus, the word made flesh help us to know God more fully.
And May the Holy Spirit continue to blow in and through us,
Stirring us from our complacency and calming our restlessness.
Amen