

“I believe in God the Father almighty, **maker of heaven and earth.**”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Sermon: “*Creation, Evolution and Awe*”

Apostles Creed series: “I believe in God the Father almighty, **maker of heaven and earth.**”

Text Genesis 1:1-2:3 “*In the beginning God created . . . and it was very good.*”

Almost every religious tradition makes some attempt to explain the **origins of the world.**

Who has not gazed at the wonders of the universe with a mixture of awe, curiosity and even fear?

Who among us today does not have that sacred place where you feel close to God?

And when lost in wonder who has not then looked to their belief system to provide an explanation of how this majestic world with all its magnificent mysteries came into being?

Hymns speak powerfully to this feeling:

*O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds their hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed...
then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee,
How Great Thou Art! How Great Thou Art!*

I am from the **Pacific Northwest**—one of the last regions settled by European immigrants. Washington did not become a state not until 1889. In elementary school we learned the Native American myths about how the region was created. They had wonderful stories that explained everything from the abundance of salmon on the Columbia River to the dismal dreary weather. They had stories to explain the eruption of the areas volcanoes and to comfort parents coping with the death of young children.

All peoples, in all times and all places, have a **hunger for explanations** that **reassure** them as they deal with the complexity of life. Such explanations have enabled humanity to cope with the **unbearable** and **unmanageable events in our lives.**

In the Apostles' Creed we confess belief in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

One of the things you study in seminary is the development of the Bible as a series of documents.

It is very clear that ancient Israel did not devote much attention to the beginnings of the universe, as did other peoples in the ancient Near East. In comparison with its neighboring peoples who created numerous and elaborate myths and stories about the emergence of life and the placement of the stars, the people of Israel scarcely gave any attention to matters of the world's beginnings.

It is only in about **900 BC**, when the people of Israel had established their place in the city of Jerusalem under their own King, that they began to contemplate the origins of the world. The faith of early Israel was not concerned about the **formation of the world** but about the **formation of a people** in relationship to God. Early Israel was constantly reminding itself in its worship and its festivals and feasts that this mighty and powerful God had called them **from obscurity** and **made them a great nation.** When they fell into slavery in Egypt, God's mighty hand had **delivered them** out of bondage. God had given them a **special place** to live and prosper. Only after people were settled in their homeland, did they give serious consideration to explaining how the **God of Abraham and Sarah,**

Jacob and Joseph, Moses and Aaron, Deborah and David was **also the God who created the heavens and the earth.**

The Paper Tigers are reading Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize winning book, "**Germ, Guns and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies.**" Diamond gives a description of the patterns of development in human societies. A pivotal one, well known to laypeople, is the movement from primitive societies that subsisted as "HUNTER-GATHERERS" to the more advanced state where they have domesticated plants and animals and live as FARMERS.

If you continue to the Garden of Eden you see that this story **assumes** the evolution of society from a hunter gather culture to one where farming is established. When Cain kills Abel, he is cast out east of the pristine garden where he is then destined to struggle to make the earth produce adequate crops. The Garden of Eden describes the presence of fruit trees, from which the forbidden fruit is eaten. This represents an advanced stage of agricultural development. Scientists can date the story: 4000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent.

If you want to read the Old Testament in the order in which it was written, you should start with Genesis 12. Here God calls Abraham and Sarah and starts the formation of a people that will reach its high point in the establishment of a kingdom under Saul. Then go back and read what Biblical scholars call the prehistory of Genesis 1-11. But read Genesis 1-11 **not as a scientific description of the beginning of human history**, but as intentional **theological statements** about how this world was created good, how it became corrupted by human disobedience, and became in dire need of God to form a people to set it right.

The best statement of the intended purpose of these creation stories was offered by Marcus Borg. They "*describe things the way they never were, but always are.*" These are timeless stories of why God created the earth, why humanity has the problems it does, and how God through Christ and through his followers, are renewing it.

Unfortunately, many sincere people, even today, read all parts of the Bible as if it is a "historical record." As Christians we have always professed a belief in God as the loving creator, who created men and women in God's glorious image. Because of this central belief, some of the implications of Evolution are very unsettling

Walter Bradley, Professor at Texas A&M says, "*I think people who believe that life emerged naturalistically need to have a great deal more faith than people who reasonably infer that there is an intelligent designer.*"

The emergence of modern science in mid-1800's showed the world to be much older than the Bible assumes. Science also produced convincing evidence that plant, animal and human life developed into their current forms over millions of years. This undermined the fundamental tenet of creation at the time, "The Stability of the Species," which held that all species had been created in their present, unchangeable forms.

At this point, some Christians who held to a literalistic reading of the first 11 chapters of Genesis started bemoaning that Science was undermining the very basis of their faith. Many others sought to harmonize science with the idea of a six-day creation by suggesting that the 24-hour days were really geological ages that may have spawned millions of years. In recent years, these old ideas with new names like "*intelligent design*" have attempted to reassert the Genesis accounts as historically reliable

and scientifically credible explanations of how the world came into existence. Although I disagree with attempts to have creation texts taught alongside the theory of evolution, I understand the motivations behind the effort.

I will offer the following analogy that expresses, in some sense, the great discomfort felt by those who hold to a view of literal creation in 6 days.

A few years ago the venerable Wall Street firm of Goldman Sachs gathered about 25 freshly minted MBA's who were entering the Investment Banking Department, for a “*getting to know you*” session. Each new associate was asked to tell the group a little about his or her personal background and to share how they got to Goldman Sachs.

One guy, obviously a little older than most of his colleagues, stood up and gave his rather impressive background. He had been a Ranger in the Army and had led a brigade that had taken over Noriega's palace in Panama. He was actually injured in the raid and received a purple heart. He had retired from the military, made a run at a congressional seat, but had lost. He then decided to go to business school, and now he was at Goldman.

The next guy stands up and after the usual “that's a tough act to follow” line, said that, “Basically, I have watched TV all my life. But now, the way I see it, I'm in the same position as he is,” pointing to his decorated colleague from the Army.

If you wanted to raise children to believe in God, to seek to live a purposeful life, and to work hard, from which story would you want them to learn? The account of the diligent and decorated veteran, or the other account affirming the fact that life is random and there will be good fortune for the privileged slackers?

Adding to the discomfort and antagonism between science and some Christians is that some scientists have not learned humility. Some of the estimated 60% of scientists who are not believers have not developed a sufficient appreciation of the limits of science.

What are the things science does not know and cannot know? Some vocal scientists do not acknowledge that other modes of knowledge—philosophy, literature, and theology have also taught us a great deal over the ages about human nature, social behavior, ethical principals and practices. Yes, there are even non-scholarly, non-professional sources of knowledge that do not come within the purview of science that can lead us to wisdom and common sense.

I was recently reminded that some eminent scientists in Darwin's day, notably T. H. Huxley, were distressed by the mechanical and reductionist interpretations of evolution. So while affirming science, we must be aware that some in the scientific community rush into proclaiming an irreconcilable antagonism between science and religion.

Sir John Templeton, mutual fund guru and committed Christian, was worried about the growing rift between science and religion. He started the “Templeton Prize” to honor individuals who have made significant contributions to the study of theology and science. His prize has encouraged scientists to be driven by theological questions. **Why** are we here? **What** are we all about? Templeton was asked about the push to teach Intelligent Design. I liked his comment, “*Would it not be strange if a universe without purpose accidentally created humans who are so obsessed with purpose?*”

Nancy Murphy, whose book, **“Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,”** won the Templeton Prize, was asked what she thought of the fact that in America, 150 years after Darwin, his theory of evolution remains contested in American Christianity and in American public life. First she thought it was a harmless expression of ignorance. Now she sees it as tragic. *“Vast numbers of young people are taught that evolution and Christianity can't both be true. They get a good science education in college, reconciling the truth of the evolutionary picture, and then believe that they have to reject their faith.”*

Murphy was asked how she would respond to parents who want creationism taught alongside The Theory of Evolution in their schools. She said she would first of all disabuse parents of the idea that evolution is bad science, and then attempt the more subtle task of explaining the differences between a scientific account of the origins and a theological account like those found in the Bible. She summarizes it this way, “Science tell us how, the Bible tell us why the whole process takes place.”

We live in a time of great change. There exists a social divide between the “comfortable haves” and the “have nots”. In these anxious times people are frightened by high divorce rates, rising crime, inter family strife, and terroristic threats. Many frightened and vulnerable people are looking for religion to make a stand against a culture that seems out of control.

I remember watching the House of Representatives on C-Span in those shocked days after the massacre at Columbine High School. Tom Delay attempted to explain the real cause behind the massacre when he read a sarcastic letter from a Texas newspaper that suggested that the teaching of Evolution was behind it, *“it couldn't have been because our school systems teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolved out of some primordial soup of mud.”*

I understand the need for comfort and the need to see our crazy world as one where God was not only part of its founding but involved in its rescue. But I worry that the anti-science view that pervades so much of contemporary American Christianity just detracts us from what the Creator set forth as the purpose of human creation, to be caretakers of the world.

We live in a fragile world. Our excesses are destroying the careful ecological balance of God's creation. Recent science is starting to tread on some theologically dangerous terrain. Here are some examples:

- Five U.S. companies are vying to produce, within 3 to 5 years, memory pills that might allow parents to buy an additional 200 points on their kids SAT scores.
- Joel Garbeau writes in *Wilson Quarterly*, *“It may not be long before you run into a young lady so seriously modified that you might ask whether she represent a transcendence comparable to the difference between Neanderthals and today's humans. She might have a significantly transformed mind, memory, metabolism, and personality. You'd be curious as to whether this had changed her tortured soul.”*

WOW. If you thought dating is scary enough now! What about the future!

One of my favorite books is Stephen Ambrose's book **“Undaunted Courage,”** the magisterial work on the journey of Lewis and Clark. Again and again as these explorers pushed west in the early days of 1800's they were stunned to see prairies literally black with herds of buffalo, the thunder of whose hoof beats reverberated for miles. Some days the sunshine would be blocked from view for long periods of time due to passing flocks of passenger pigeons (a species that is now extinct). One day on the river on

which they were traveling became clotted with some white fluffy substance. Upon rounding the bend in the river they discovered the source: a mind numbing gathering of thousands of white pelicans that were molting.

I love hearing the first chapter of Genesis because it shows us **God's "original intent"** to fill the world up to the brim with swarms of creatures. It is the spark of God in us that leads us to echo the affirmation in Genesis, **"God saw it and proclaimed it very good."**

Eugene Peterson once noted that according to Genesis, Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day. But that means that the first full day of their existence was the next day, the Sabbath. Adam and Eve kicked off the human race by getting a day off, a day of rest. We begin with Sabbath, a day of rest, a day to worship both God and the swarming variety of the world God created for us. To say we believe in God, "the maker of heaven and earth," is to proclaim that the life we have been given is to be spent glorifying and enjoying God and his works forever.

Yes, Science is a magnificent human achievement. But it cannot tell us how to live, or what we should live for. The need for that kind of meaning is, for us humans, as deep and relentless as the need for food or water. It cannot be denied for long.