

“Timeless Truth, Living Faith”
February 11, 2007
Preached By: Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent:

I am no scientist. And neither was Jesus. But he knew something about the world around him, and his parables reflected that. In this, one of the shortest parables, Jesus describes the process of a seed growing into a plant into a bud and finally a fruit that might be harvested. And while this suggests something of the symbol of evolution, Jesus knew nothing of that theory. And yet his parable prompts us to consider seriously this theory that is really a part of our culture and a part of the way we think and talk and believe, whether we admit it out loud.

It is important, however, not to read scripture as if it were a scientific narrative. To do so would be to disrespect scripture and to impose upon it something it never intended for itself. It would be like reading a cookbook as poetry.

This reading is from the volume, *The All New, All Purpose Joy of Cooking*. This particular selection that I will read from is a poignant poem that I think will speak to us today is titled “Classic Meatloaf.” It’s by the author 8 servings.

A good meatloaf should be both firm and juicy. It should not crumble or fall apart when sliced. This meatloaf is cooked in a bread pan, which gives a juicier result. It can also be molded into a free form loaf on a baking sheet. Position a rack in the center of the oven. Preheat the oven to 350° Fahrenheit. Lightly grease a 9.5” eight cup loaf pan. Combine in a large bowl.

You can read that on your own time.

So if it’s not a scientific narrative, then what is it? It is the expression of the world view – an ancient world view. And one that as people of the book we seek to own anew for us today. But we may not do so without considering what that world view reflected in the creation story of Genesis was responding to. What world view was it defining itself against?

Scholars are fairly unanimous that this creation story depicted in Genesis that you heard was composed, was written, and was shared, while the people of Israel were in exile. They are far from home. They are grasping for identity. They are afraid that they are only a generation away from losing it.

And the Babylonians, their captors, had their own creation story. It was called the Enuma Elish the Babylonian creation myth. And it’s quite charming.

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Essentially, the cosmos was made from the dismembered corpse of the goddess Tiamat, whose skull was split by her youngest son, Marduk.

So the story that these Hebrew children are learning in their Babylonian Sunday School classes suggests that by murdering his mother, this Marduk brought order out of chaos with an act of redemptive violence. And you can imagine the Hebrew mothers and fathers getting together and saying, "We need to come up with a new story." And they did. The story they came up with was the one that we heard Steve read. That is, that creation came about in stages, by a God who created the world out of God's own freedom. Not out of any conflict or obligation or vengeance, but simply because God wanted there to be a universe and life. And at each point in this process of creation, God would pause and look at it and say, "Yeah, that's good. Let's keep going."

I first heard this explained by Walter Wink at a workshop a number of years ago. I remember, as it was being presented to us, I had this feeling of, "God, you really do love us don't you?" And that the story of our creation conveys that love.

But does it explain how we all got to be here, exactly the way we are? How all of our fellow species came to be the way that they are? Not at all. In fact, one of the effects of what I'll call "modernity," the modern world, is that what once belonged only in the camp of religion, namely a description of why we were created but also how, was divided.

This is a notion that Ken Wilbur of Boulder talks about in some of his books. This differentiation of knowledge and value spheres. And so that religion still has that part of the question around the why. What is the purpose, the intention behind all of this? But science has teased out what happens and how it happens. But science can only do that.

This quote by Dr. Anthony Carpi is helpful to me. "Science does not define truth. It defines a way of knowing." In other words, the scientific method. That there is a method by which we as humans might go about forming a hypothesis, performing an experiment, observing the effects, trying to repeat it, and in community, a community of accountability, determining together what actually might be the case with the material phenomenon that we live with. Religion has no such method.

Within religious communities, I suppose you could apply some sort of method like this. But religion has never sought to have such a method as that. It has a different way of knowing. A scientific way of knowing is unique and yields unique results.

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But I suppose the biggest conflict is the question of whether there is any purpose behind the processes that we are aware of. For example, the evolutionary process. Darwin himself and many contemporary scientists make a point to say, “There is no discernable purpose. Evolution has come about as a result of a bunch of happy instances and accidents. And there was no plan ahead of time that led us to this point. We just happened to find ourselves here.”

And in a sense, that is all science should, or can, say. In fact, it really shouldn't step over into the truth making or the interpretive business. Neither should religion try to approximate science. Neither should we take the world view that existed 2, 3, 4,000 years ago and seek to supplant what we know with modern knowledge with an ancient point of view.

Rather, the purpose of our religious narrative is that together, in community, as we read the story anew and understand it anew, we come to an understanding of how it might be that we, who exist because of the smallest and most infinitesimal chances of being the way we are, how we might understand that it would be a good purpose behind all of that. That the God in whom we trust might be good or loving, that might have some purpose for us. But that is the unique task of the faith community. And it is an overstepping of bounds for a faith community or a faith institution to impose that truth making and interpretative business upon the curriculum in our public schools. The curriculum in our public schools needs to stay faithful to that scientific method which allows people of different communities, different backgrounds, and the variety of interpretations, not to leave them at the door, but to own them for themselves within their communities of meaning.

We are a community of meaning. We seek to make meaning. We seek to proclaim that God is good, that God works through processes, that those processes are to be trusted, and that God's goodness is to be trusted. But in this modern world, I think we should encourage a new dialogue, a new integration of and respect for different ways of thinking, but not to try to put back together these two things that have come apart – the way from the how. We believe that the why and the how are all of God, but somehow they work better, and we understand them better when we can see them as separate and yet related.

Amen.