

“The God of Changes”

A Sermon for Evolution Sunday in connection with the Clergy Letter Project¹

**Rev. Dr. Kyle M. Walker
Interim Pastor, Faith Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX
February 10, 2013
Transfiguration Sunday**

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.²

You know as we deal with the compatibility of science and faith, we should probably get one thing out of the way. Atoms are the basic building blocks of the universe but you should never trust an atom. You know why? They make up everything! I appreciate you indulging both my sense of humor and a chance to share something I’m passionate about which is the compatibility of science and faith.

¹ The Clergy Letter Project - http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/rel_evolution_weekend_2013.html

² *The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition)*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the [National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America](http://www.nccur.org/). Used by permission. All rights reserved.

President Obama, when changing his mind on issues related to gays in the military and gay marriage said he had “evolved” To change one’s mind has become equated with weakness as if there is no more information to be absorbed and considered in this life of ours. Let’s take that idea to the absurd end result. A seventh grader tells his/her teacher they do not have anything more to learn and they just refuse to participate in school or read or talk about things or be curious. The problems are obvious to us, they will no succeed in life. But somehow, when we become adults we believe we are immune to the obvious trap of immutableness. But this is not true. If we aren’t willing to learn something new, I think we are on the path to intellectual and spiritual death if not at risk for physical death as well. Curiosity about our world and universe and learning about it is essential and, frankly, it is natural but I’m continually amazed how we often resist it as if it were a disease to be quashed.

Isaac Asimov said, “There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that "my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.”

Where this has taken new life I think is in the lack of intellectual accountability in the marketplace of ideas. Want to publish a book about made up ideas and publish them as fact? No one will stop you. Want to report news that didn’t really happen? Start a cable news channel. Want your obscure religious cult to become mainstream easily searchable by Google? Start a blog. Really friends. It is that easy. Ideas make money, even bad, dangerous and false ones. I’m thankful for a seventh grade teacher in the Denton public schools who taught me to be a critic of ideas...all of them.

There are two camps in a false dichotomy that are fighting a war right now about how to tell the story about the origins of our existence as a human race. On the one extreme you have the fundamentalist Christians who want to remake science in the image of a literal Bible that not even John Calvin, Martin Luther, or the early church leaders believed in....and on the other side you have the dogmatic anti-theists who wish to use science to disqualify religion as having any role in expressing truth. Both sides have more in common philosophically than they have different. Both are products of the Enlightenment and both have no use for mystery or changing understandings about the universe. Both need to evolve.

Or both just need to remember that the Big Bang and a lot of what raised the ire of Christian fundamentalist was discovered by Christians themselves. I heard a piece on the Roman Catholic priest George LeMaitre from Belgium who actually

took Albert Einstein to task and first proposed the idea of the expansion of the universe.

Presbyterians have always lived in that place of compatibility between the intellect and the heart. We respect knowledge and we want people to love God with their head and their heart. But, we have allowed ourselves to lose our edge and our passion about what we have to offer debates like this. In short, we've become quite unknown in the debate between science and faith.

I learned this about 7 years ago in College Station when the Honors Council called me up asking me to be part of a panel with Philosophy professor Roger Sansom and Biology Professor Vincent Cassone. When the young woman called me up she said, "we're looking for a reverend to present the viewpoint of religion on intelligent design." Of course my question was "which religious viewpoint" and "what if I don't like intelligent design?" I soon realized that she was coming with the assumption that the universal view of religion was that of intelligent design and the idea that I as a person of faith could accept science was so beyond her worldview that she just couldn't hear what I was saying. Now for those of you who may spend your free time in such debates, the modern popular usage of intelligent design suggests that little evolutionary processes occur within species but not between them so that species can't originate except by the intervention of another power (presumably a supreme being). It makes God necessary in the micromanagement of life's scientific processes not just the author or initiator of it. It is a way to put God into a scientific equation and a lot of money and political lobbying has been spent to do it.

I pleaded with this young woman that she was not getting a proponent of intelligent design with me. I'm a supporter of evolutionary theory. I got a "mmm hmmm, ok, I'm sure it will be perfect". So I showed up. In the back of the room the atheist / agnostic club held signs up mocking belief in magic and superstition as they called religion and Christian fundamentalists sat glibly on the front row awaiting a fight they could sink their teeth into.

Dr. Cassone gave a long and well detailed explanation of evolutionary understandings and the hijacking of intelligent design from a subset of evolutionary theory to contestant against it inserting religious authority into the equation. Dr. Sansom told how various philosophical understandings of the origin of humanity can and should compete but not in the science classroom.

Then it was my turn. At which point, I said "as I told the Honors Council, I agree with these guys and I don't want to take away anything from what they have said. As far as I'm concerned we can go home now and God has been honored by these

two presentations.” I looked out to the crowd to see a perplexed front row and back row. So I proceeded with the simple statement, “science tells us how things happen, religion does not. Religion helps us understand why we exist. How and why are different questions but both very worthy and they do not negate each other. I then proudly talked about my Presbyterian heritage and how compatible science and faith are in our understanding of the world.

Afterwards, an amazing thing happened. The atheist / agnostic club thanked me and the fundamentalists in the crowd asked how I could betray Jesus with such thinking.

The 214th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) passed the following around the same time:

1. Reaffirming that God is Creator, in accordance with the witness of Scripture and The Reformed Confessions.
2. Reaffirming that there is no contradiction between an evolutionary theory of human origins and the doctrine of God as Creator.
3. Encouraging State Boards of Education across the nation to establish standards for science education in public schools based on the most reliable content of scientific knowledge as determined by the scientific community.
4. Calling upon Presbyterian scientists and science educators to assist congregations, presbyteries, communities, and the public to understand what constitutes reliable scientific knowledge.

You may wonder if this is really a big deal outside academia. Well, Bill Zedler from Arlington has once again offered House Bill 285 in the state legislature entitled “PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RESEARCH RELATED TO INTELLIGENT DESIGN.” It says, an institution of higher education may not discriminate against or penalize in any manner, especially with regard to employment or academic support, a faculty member or student based on the faculty member’s or student’s conduct of research relating to the theory of intelligent design or other alternate theories of the origination and development of organisms.³

Don’t worry too much because he tried this in 2011 and it was soundly defeated but it is disturbing these things happen in the first place.

³ <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlodocs/83R/billtext/pdf/HB002851.pdf#navpanes=0>

But religious fundamentalism is trying to undermine the respect even a Reformer like John Calvin had for the disciplines of science. According to the Texas Freedom Network, at least 31 Texas school districts teach Bible classes now and most of these are problematic in the sense that they present the Bible as scientific fact.. A Texas Freedom Network report cites cases in which, for example, educators claimed that the Bible can scientifically prove that the Earth is only 6,000 years old. Some districts teach that the Bible is written "under God's direction and inspiration," claiming that Christ's resurrection "was an event that occurred in time and space—that it was, in reality, historical and not mythological," and promoting the Rapture as a factual eventuality: "In North Texas, Prosper ISD promotes the Rapture, claiming in course materials that "the first time the Lord gathered his people back was after the Babylonian captivity. The second time the Lord will gather his people back will be at the end of the age."

While many of these classes advocate a particular religious view (mostly conservative Protestant), they are described as academic courses, presumably in order to stay within legal grounds. Some classes under the science banner purport to bridge the gap between science and religion, explaining, for instance, that racial and ethnic groups can be traced back to Noah's three sons⁴

At the most basic level I think evolution is a threat because people don't like change from what they have understood as fact and evolution is all about change. As we live in a rapidly technologically changing world, some people want religion to stop the inertia. But what do you think God thinks?

Today is Transfiguration Sunday and I have focused on our Evolution Sunday social issue but these two go together I believe. The Transfiguration itself points to an aspect and characteristic of our God that embraces change. Jesus changed on this day or we wouldn't talk about it. Or, if you prefer, those who saw Jesus began to see him in a new light. Either way, the point is clear. Our God wants us to be open to changes, insights, and new understandings. The biblical narrative itself offers different and changing expressions of God for us to broaden our understanding.

We as Presbyterians need to stand in that very empty space between those in the science community who have never known a friend in the faith community and faith arguments that negate legitimate science.

Marcus Borg grew up a Christian and became an atheist because he believed the lie that to be a good scientist and educated person, he had to leave religion

⁴ http://austiniist.com/2013/02/07/creationism_still_taught_in_texas_p.php

behind. Once he realized that he could bring his scientific mind to the religious conversation and let the world of how be the specialty of science and the world of why be the specialty of faith, he reclaimed his faith. How many out there or how many of us right here yearn for a journey like his where we can embrace the two worlds at the same time and perhaps grow more into both worlds as a result? I know we are people who largely understand these things. The world hungers to hear from us.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May the Lord give you grace to never sell yourself short;

Grace to risk something big for something good.

Grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Amen.