

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)  
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Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA  
January 25, 2009  
Texts: Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62

## FAITH AND SCIENCE: BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)

The snowstorm was starting as I began the long drive from Houghton Michigan, near the northern shores of Lake Superior, to go home for a long Thanksgiving weekend. It was the beginning of my second year at Michigan Tech, where I was studying metallurgical engineering. I was driving, and riding with me was my good friend, who was a student in the same department and also headed to her parents' home in Bay City, an 8-hour drive under normal conditions. Two hours into the drive, we were leaving the city of Marquette and had nothing but small towns and two-lane roads for the next two hundred miles or so. My friend hesitated for a moment then said to me, "Anita, you are an educated person, and reasonable. I respect you as scientist in training, like me. You evaluate the evidence for assertions that are made. How can you be a Christian? I mean, how can you believe all those things about creation in six days? And Noah's ark? Do you have to believe this to be a Christian? What do you have to believe to be a Christian?"

What about you? Have you ever had a conversation about this conflict or perceived conflict, between Christian faith and science? Can you remember the conversation - with whom you were speaking, and what it was about? If you would like, I invite you to turn to someone sitting near you - beside you, or in front or behind, and share with them if you've ever had a conversation about this conflict or perceived conflict, with whom you had it, and what it was about.

Maybe this has touched into an experience some of you have had. This was not by any means the first conversation I had had about faith and science, but it was an important one for me. It helped me to see more clearly than I ever had that these questions are very real for some people and this was the entry into a conversation about faith in God.

For the next hour, the drive included a very long, straight sparsely populated section of road we affectionately called the Seney stretch. We had time and space to take up these questions – more time than we are giving ourselves this morning for such a dialogue. But in sum, I shared with her that some Christians, including some of my friends and family members, insisted that to believe in God meant believing God created the world in six 24-hour days and that evolution had no part in the emergence of biological life forms. But other Christians did not insist that in those particular set of beliefs in order to be Christian. For me, I said, the essence of being a Christian was believing in God who created and is creating all that is, however God does that, following Jesus as the Christ – that is, God made known within this creation, and responding to the invitation God gives through the Spirit to trust God and live in light of God.

Our youth graffiti artists have put up two new words in our sanctuary this morning – “Follow” and “Invite.” As my friend and I talked that day and as I listened, I learned from my friend that how Christians engage these questions of faith and science can have a profound impact on our inviting others to follow Jesus. These were things my friend really wanted to talk about. I think these are things we need to talk about in the Christian community, too. I will tell you that I am not setting out in these sermons on faith and science this Sunday and next Sunday to ask you to adopt a particular view of how God went about the creation of the world. I will tell you from my experience that it can matter how Christians engage these questions people ask us or ask about us. If I had seen the scientific view as necessarily in conflict with a Christian perspective, then I would have presented my friend with a forced choice between the two. That seemed like a false choice to me, so we kept on talking. It seemed to me that my following Jesus in that moment meant allowing her to discover a way to follow also if Christ was also calling her. I myself was discovering more and more through my studies how the methods of science prove fruitful in discovering the principles of the way matter is and behaves, and useful for describing the phenomena of the natural world; and I still held dear my lifelong belief in God through Christ. Could there be harmony between my faith and science? We need to talk about this among scientists, yes – and also among Christians, for some Christians do not understand all that well what the work of science is actually about.

Francis Collins, the former director of the international Human Genome Project, an evolutionary biologist and devout Christian, describes searching for harmony between faith and science in his book, The Language of God:

One of the challenges in achieving that harmony is that science is not static. Scientists are constantly reaching into new arenas, investigating the natural world in new ways, digging deeper into territory where understanding is incomplete. Faced with a set of data that includes a puzzling and unexplained phenomenon, scientists construct hypotheses of the mechanism

that might be involved, and then conduct experiments to test those hypotheses. Many experiments on the cutting edge of science fail, and most hypotheses turn out to be wrong. Science is progressive and self-correcting: no significantly erroneous conclusions or false hypotheses can be sustained for long, as newer observations will ultimately knock down incorrect constructs. But over a long period of time, a consistent set of observations sometimes emerges that leads to a new framework of understanding. That framework is then given a much more substantive description, and is called a “theory” – the theory of gravitation, the theory of relativity, or the germ theory, for instance.

One of the most cherished hopes of a scientist is to make an observation that shakes up a field of research. Scientists have a streak of closeted anarchism, hoping that someday they will turn up some unexpected fact that will force a disruption of the framework of the day. That’s what Nobel Prizes are given for. In that regard, any assumption that a conspiracy could exist among scientists to keep a widely current theory alive when it actually contains serious flaws is completely antithetical to the restless mind-set of the profession.

The study of astrophysics nicely exemplifies these principles. Profound upheavals have occurred over the last five hundred years, during which the understanding of the nature of matter and the structure of the universe has undergone major revisions. No doubt more revisions still lie ahead of us.

These disruptions can sometimes be wrenching for attempts to achieve a comfortable synthesis between science and faith, especially if the church has attached itself to a prior view of things and incorporated that into its core belief system. Today’s harmony can be tomorrow’s discord. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo (all strong believers in God) built an increasingly compelling case that the movement of the planets could be properly understood only if the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the other way around. The details of their conclusions were not all quite correct (Galileo made a famous blooper in his explanation of the tides), and many in the scientific community were initially unconvinced, but ultimately the data and the consistency of the theory’s predictions convinced even the most skeptical scientists. The Catholic Church remained strongly opposed, however, claiming that this view was incompatible with holy scripture. In retrospect it is clear that the scriptural basis for those claims was remarkably thin; nonetheless, this confrontation raged for decades and ultimately did considerable harm, both to science and the church. (Collins, 58-59).

My friend and I talked about these things and more as we drove. When we reached the northernmost shores of Lake Michigan, we suddenly stopped talking. A fierce wind was blowing snow across highway US 2 that followed the shore. The highway itself was covered in glassy ice. I was used to driving on ice and in snow, and these were the most difficult driving conditions I had ever encountered. As we slowly made our way, ahead of us and behind us we saw car after car slide into a ditch on either side of the road. We were many miles from any town, and determined that the best we could do for any of those in need of help was get to the nearest town to call for help. (This was, of course, long before the days of cell phones). “Are you scared?” my friend asked me. “Yes, I am,” I said. “This driving is so hard even with all my concentration.” “What can I do to help?” she asked. “We’ve been talking all this time about God,” I said. “I’m praying for us and for all those people back there on the sides of the road. I don’t know if you have ever prayed before. But if think you may like to pray sometime, this could be a good time to begin.”

She did pray that day, and so did I, and we prayed together. Our prayers were not as poetic as Psalm 62, but very like it:

In God alone is my soul at rest,  
the God who is my help.  
The Lord is my rock, my strength and my hope;  
my fortress, my God.

It was dawning on me as I was driving that Jesus was probably calling us both to follow. I believe he was calling my friend to follow, and she did. She had begun a journey of faith in Christ, she received the gift of baptism a year and a half later, and continues on the journey of faith today. And I was receiving a call to follow, too. It was no longer enough for me as a follower to refer someone’s real questions to a professional, like a pastor. I as a follower of Jesus had to begin to risk responding and being in the conversation, with all respect for my conversation partner and the world of inquiry and faith we were exploring.

Eventually we made it to the town of St. Ignace, where others who had made it ahead of us had already alerted the police to all the vehicles in distress further back. The weather was improving slightly. There was nothing for us to do, they said, but to follow the police escort across the Mackinaw Bridge and get to better conditions and eventually home. So we prayed again, as I still pray today for all on the sometimes treacherous journey of faith, in trust that God will bring us all safely home.