

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Rev. Anita R. Warner

Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA

February 1, 2009

Texts: Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

## FAITH AND SCIENCE: IN PRAISE OF THE CREATOR

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever.

Psalm 111 (NRSV)

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

I Corinthians 8:1-13 (NRSV)

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching-- with authority!

He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

An ancient hymn of praise was taught to the people of ancient Israel. The people were far from their homeland, in exile in Babylon. They were surrounded by other gods, the gods of their rulers. Sometimes they were compelled to worship other gods set up by the rulers and priests of Babylon. The family leaders and religious leaders of the people of Israel needed to remind them that the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob is the only and one true God, the creator of the whole cosmos. So the chant began: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the Light day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." The chant continued, describing the creation in its orders, the separation of land from sea; the emergence of plants; the sun, moon and stars; the fish, sea creatures and birds; the animals and humans, and the Sabbath day.

Some time later, when the scriptures were assembled, these words were placed as the prologue to the book of Genesis.

The Psalmist wrote, "The worship of the Lord is the height of wisdom." These words from Genesis 1 are words of worship, of putting God in first place. They are timeless words, words that introduce in majestic cadence the ordering of the natural world. These words spoke of the majesty of God to a downtrodden people and poetically set forth the framework for understanding the God of Israel as the God of all creation.

By the way, what is the apex of the creation as described in Genesis 1? Not human beings, but the Sabbath – the time of worship of the one true God – is, in this account, the apex of creation.

For a long time, scripture and science have seemed to be in conflict on matters of creation. That has certainly been my experience in the church of my youth, where some leaders thought it important to show scientific accounts of origins of the earth to be wrong. *But it does not need to be so. Science and faith do not necessarily need to come into conflict.*

Richard Rohr asks, "How do I let Scripture *and the present moment* and tradition teach me? [Science is the present moment of how people think about our world.] The contemplative mind does not need to prove anything or disprove anything. It's

just what the Benedictines called a *Lectio Divina* reading of the Scripture that looks for wisdom that says, ‘What does this text ask of me to change about me?’ The contemplative mind lets the terrifying wonderful moment be what it is and primarily ask something of me, not always using it to convert the nations. The contemplative mind is willing to hear from a beginner’s mind, yet also learn from the Tradition. It has the humility to receive both/and thinking and not all or nothing thinking. Now we call this non-dual thinking. It leads to what we call the Third Way, neither fight nor flight, but standing in between where I can hold what I do know together with what I don’t know. And let that wonderful mix lead me to wisdom instead of this quick knowledge which largely just creates opinionated people and not wise people.” (from the Center for Action and Contemplation webcast, Nov. 8, 2008: “What Is the Emerging Church?”)

With this in mind, I need to speak for a moment especially to our young people, and maybe also to adults who were taught a creationist only view in school or by your church, if you have been exposed to a negative view of evolution in your churches or in Christian schools. Some of your teachers, or other Christians, may say to you that evolution is contrary to the Bible, that you cannot believe in both God and evolution, that evolution is an atheistic philosophy, and, sometimes, that evolution is an invention of the devil. With due respect, this information you receive about evolution in sermons or from teachers or Christian friends usually comes from young earth creationists – those who believe that the earth is 6,000 years old - and not from evolutionary scientists or biologists. This anti-evolution viewpoint can stir powerful feelings in many students when the topic comes up in classes and reading assignments in college. One biology professor at a Christian college said, “A student told one of my science colleagues that when he was exposed to evolution in a previous course, he became physically ill. I hope and trust that such a reaction is rare, but it does point up the difficulty I and others face in trying to help students armed and armored against evolution by religious authority figures to let down their defenses and listen to another point of view--to understand evolution in a different and positive light.”

Now, when I have spoken with some dear family members, for instance, in this way, they even feared that I may be losing my faith. I ask you today to not fear that! I believe with all my heart, soul and mind in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A significant number of scientists from all Christian traditions are among those who advance the research that every year more firmly grounds evolution as a valid scientific way of understanding the history of life. They earnestly desire that all Christians understand what evolution actually is and why one can accept it without giving up belief in God, the doctrine of creation and the Bible, including the assurance of salvation Holy Scripture proclaims. Evolution is a theory, well-supported by evidence, of a *mechanism* for the emergence of diverse and complex forms of life on earth. There are similarities with the Big Bang theory – this is

theory advanced by cosmologists of a *mechanism* of early origins of the universe. God created however God chose to create, and of course there were no humans to witness that act.

This topic is difficult to speak about because it can be a stumbling block – in both directions. If you have long held a certain view of creation and do not wish to change it, you have my respect and my love. If you are a young person, and Christian teachers or Christian friends insist that one cannot believe in both God and evolution, then as you think for yourself about these things, I ask you to simply remember that many real Christians, including your pastor, do not believe that they must necessarily be in conflict.

I invite you to consider that evolution is not a threat to Christian faith but an invitation to think differently about the relationship between God and creation. There is nothing in the biblical proclamations of creation when properly understood that conflicts with the theological notion that God has chosen to create through evolutionary processes. Numerous thinkers from both evangelical and non-evangelical traditions are developing theologies of an evolving creation that argue just that. For the different accounts of creation in scripture assert that it is God who has created all things. The scriptures do not say by what mechanism God brought the cosmos and all that is in it into being. I think that it is highly possible that God, who created human beings with curiosity and imagination, and a sense of adventure and discovery, left in the creation itself clues about the way in which life unfolded on this earth.

Last Sunday I told a story about a long conversation I had with a friend about faith and science, and how it matters that Christians are in the conversation of our present time, which includes a scientific view of the natural world. This month (February 2009) marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of his book *The Origin of the Species*. There will be many opportunities to talk about science in light of faith as these anniversaries are marked in the world.

Some will ask, however, don't naturalistic explanations take the divine mystery out of the world?

Each person will need to answer this for herself or himself. I studied much more in the physical sciences than in the biological sciences. As I learned more and more of the structure of matter, and the elegance of the mathematical relationships involved at the atomic and molecular levels, as well as how aesthetically pleasing were all these arrangements, I was *more* in awe of the creativity of my God, not less. Other scientists who are Christian have told me how very often the wonder of God's creation is for them an occasion of worship and praise of God.

One prominent evolutionary biologist has said similar things: “There is not a shred of disappointment or disillusionment in these discoveries about the nature of life - quite the contrary! How marvelous and intricate life turns out to be! How deeply satisfying and appealing is the digital elegance of DNA! How aesthetically appealing and artistically sublime are the components of living things, from the ribosome that translates RNA into protein, to the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into the butterfly, to the fabulous plumage of the peacock attracting his mate! Evolution, *as a mechanism*, can be and must be true. For those who believe in God, there are reasons now to be more in awe, not less.” (Francis Collins The Language of God, 107).

God is involved in the creation, not only in the beginning but in its unfolding process and development. This was shown particularly in Jesus – God’s son who became known within the creation itself, as a human being, born of a human mother and living his life on earth. In his life and teaching he revealed God’s intentions for the creation. Our youth graffiti artists have put up two new words for us today: Reveal and Illumine. In our gospel reading today, it was clear that from the first day Jesus taught in the synagogue, people could tell that this was something different. He illumined their spirits, hearts and minds with his teaching. And then, when an unclean spirit revealed itself, he took action, and cast it out - setting to right what had gone astray in creation and in human society, showing God’s intentions for wholeness for the creation.

Christ not only revealed God’s intentions; Christ is also revealed as the telos, or end of the creation. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist who was a part of the team who discovered Peking Man, thought deeply about the destination for humankind. The theology he developed declared Christ as the Omega point toward which the whole creation is heading.

The Omega point is personal, not abstract: we know Christ personally, and are known personally by God in Christ. Just as Jesus was particular and unique, so the uniqueness of each of us within the whole of creation is taken up into Christ, “through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (I Cor. 8:6)

The Omega point is personal, and the Omega point, Christ, the end of existence, was already existing even before the creation. The end toward which we are headed was with God in the beginning. When John, a disciple so close to Jesus, meditated on what was revealed in his life, death, and resurrection, he re-worked Genesis 1 to express Christ within the creation: “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.... and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1-4, 14)