

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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“t=0” and Counting: Lessons Along this Darkened Path

Genesis 1; John 1.1-5

Russ Dean, July 4, 2010 (first preached on June 22, 2005)



“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2.7). There may be no more controversial words in our culture than these from the King James Version of Genesis. How, exactly, did the Lord God “*form man?*” On one far side of the debate are those who claim in a miracle of supernatural power, the all-powerful God simply said it and, “poof,” there was a man, whose given name was “Adam.” These believers in the most-literal-of-all-creation are now referred to as “young earth creationists,” and owe their understanding to the work of Archbishop James Ussher of the Church of Ireland. In 1650 Bishop Ussher meticulously chronicled the events of scripture, recording the dates of all the Old Testament’s kingdoms, reigns, and epochs, matching them with what historical data he could, and concluded that the earth was created “at midday on October 23, 4004 B.C.”¹

Young earth creationists contend that Noah carried the dinosaurs on the ark, and that God created the striations in the earth’s crust under 10,000 years ago, making some appear to be millions of years old, even planting within those seemingly older layers, a fossil record – to confuse the archaeologists. (Just a little divine “for the fun of it,” I guess!)

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, p.74. As I understand it, there are relatively few “young earth creationists” still advancing Ussher’s theory (or some version of a very young earth). Most “creationists” bring to the discussion an understanding of the ancient age of our universe, and many bring understandings of evolutionary development – the key distinction being that they hold that whatever happened was the direct result of God’s control over the process. A relatively new movement called “Intelligent Design” is the newest version of creationism, the proponents of which capitalize on unexplained gaps in the Darwinian theory. (The fossil record shows long slow periods of gradual evolution, and then major advances, which have yet to be explained by Darwin’s random mutation and natural selection. The ID movement points to “irreducible complexities” in the biological makeup of organisms (the human eye is an example), which they believe could not have been produced one step at a time along a standard evolutionary scheme.)

On the other end of the philosophical and theological and scientific spectrum are the radical followers of Charles Darwin's theory of random mutation and natural selection. (Darwin never used the word, evolution, and was not the first to make such a proposal.) According to the strict Darwinists, some 14 billion years ago all the stuff that was, was compressed within a mere pin-prick of space and for no reason (and without needing a reason or a cause or a "first-mover"),² the stuff just exploded with a bang that "sent the pieces flying," in the whimsical words of David Wilcox's musical spoof, cooling and twirling "into dinosaurs and dandelions."³

For 14 billion years, unaided by divine design and unguided by a Providential hand, unfathomable trillions upon trillions of random events have occurred, leading blindly to a universe of infinite proportion, and with only one known speck of dust inhabitable for life. From one basic amino-acid, coming forth from the very un-alive "primordial soup" of early earth, life blossomed into an endless variety of living things. The two-legged, thinking thing (us!) has just become the latest (but certainly not the last) product of the "darkened path" of evolution.⁴

² This is the point at which what I have called "radical Darwinists" lose many people. According to current cosmological theories, the "singularity" (from which our universe began) is acceptable/ understandable, as is the "bang" that "sent the pieces flying" – without positing any need for cause, necessity, or a "first mover." When I preached this sermon in 2005, this footnote continued with these words: "Though fully affirming what I can know and understand of the sciences, this is a sticking point for me. In my cosmology I still maintain that God is the "source of life," and that still translates for me into some measure of first causation." My own theology has now moved to the point that I can perhaps even accept a "causeless creation" (a "bang" with no necessary first-mover), finding God, instead, in the progression that lead to life, and life with purpose – yet still the "source of life." (I address "purpose" in the sermon, below.) My sermon, "From Mold to Manger: Signs of an Emerging God," which I will also reproach this summer, addresses this topic. Perhaps the Genesis story itself is telling us this: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void...* (Gen. 1.2) Is the narrative suggesting to us that when God came onto the scene, the "stuff" was already there? Maybe we need not view God as the "first mover" (maybe the stuff was already there, but it was formless, lifeless, purposeless). But as "*a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*" (Gen. 1.2) the "source of life" whispered from the deep and wooed life out of the chaos and bestowed purpose into the randomly evolving process of the universe. If the Church could let go of this idea of God as the all-powerful "Creator" (as it has had to let go of other ideas of God when science proved them outdated), it would still find room for God as *Spirit!* (John 4.24) This conceptualization of God, which would show love and life to be the heart of God (not power or brute force), may, in fact, be more helpful to us in our evolutionary development (spiritually, if not biologically).

³ I included the lyrics to a song by David Wilcox as the cover of Sunday's bulletin. These words can be found at the end of the sermon, on the page of scripture.

⁴ "Darkened path" is from Wilcox's "Big Mistake." On this far-side of the spectrum, some believe that there are actually an infinite number of infinite universes, and given such an infinite opportunity, one of those universes was, eventually, just bound to end up producing life as we know it!

Whether you care about science or not, the controversy over creation/evolution is important to us as a people of faith. What, Where, Who is God in this vast universe? It is equally important to us as people of a diverse and pluralistic community. How shall we educate our children in such a culture? And if we take both of those commitments seriously, the convergence of the two will be most important of all – What will we teach our children about themselves? Are they just random accidents (a.k.a., a “big mistakes”) on one backwater planet in an infinite and purposeless universe, or are they the center of it all? What is the ultimate reason for God’s creative action – is the world created for our pleasure and enjoyment, for our use (and even our abuse)?

Some people believe that there are only these two radical options (however much I have caricatured or overstated them). We are meaningless. Or, we are the center of it all, the “crown of God’s creation.” Some believe that science and faith have no common ground. Many people of faith believe that all evolutionists represent that “liberal elite,” “secular humanist” band whose goal is to take God out of the classrooms and out of our lives forever.

I believe we ought to read the science book and the people’s book, together. Daring even to read the science book asking for spiritual insight: “Let us listen now for the Word of the Lord.”⁵ So, let me speak as plainly as I can about this issue that you asked about five years ago,⁶ an issue that is so important to me. What lessons have we learned from the moment of “the singularity” (the very beginning) until now? An infinite number of answers could be given; I suggest only three.

1) Science is good. Our life is as it is because of science. Period. When you got up this morning, science illuminated your home, through electricity. Science provided your breakfast by

⁵ In our opening scripture Amy and I read responsively from the Genesis 1 creation account and excerpts from Bryson’s book, prior to which I expressed my gratitude to our congregation for allowing my non-orthodox approach to hearing the “Word of the Lord.” The text is appended to the end of the sermon.

⁶ This is the first in a ten-sermon series entitled, “This I Believe,” developed from a congregational survey we conducted to solicit suggestions for sermon topics.

refrigeration, food preservation, and agricultural development to mention only a few. Science provided you with a host of information sources about your world, and science drove you to church this morning. Science amplifies my voice and keeps us comfortable in our clothing and an imported climate. Science keeps us well. Science even brings us back to life. The day before I preached this sermon five summers ago, our own Doc Campbell had walked 250 steps down the hall of Duke University Hospital, breathing Tarheel air through his new, transplanted, 14-year-old Puerto Rican lungs – all of the science that goes into securing such a life-gift (two lungs) and transferring that gift into a grateful recipient is beyond my understanding.

I hope I need not say more. Our way of life, sometimes even our very living, is the product of science. We simply cannot pick and choose what science we will believe in and what we will not, just because a growing science challenges a stagnant and defiant idea about God. In other worlds, if “evolution” challenges our notion of God – so be it! It will not be the first time, nor that last, that science shook up the Church, but it is high time the Church stopped sticking its head in the sand of dogma and opened itself to the grace and light of an ever-evolving God.

It took hundreds of years for the church to affirm the truth of Galileo and Copernicus – that the world really does not revolve around us! If that long-overdue admission destroyed someone’s idea of God,⁷ it was a Deity not worth having to begin with. So let the Church, and the people of the Church, be the first to affirm the knowledge of the world, the appreciation of the world, the enjoyment of the world – that comes at the hand of science. And let us, people of the Church, thank God for every advancement that comes in this exciting journey.

2) Life is beautiful. Life itself is blessing. Bill Bryson says simply, “we are awfully lucky to be here.” The Church must learn to recognize this and to thank God for all the life and beauty

⁷ I say “idea of God” and not “God” very intentionally – we will never destroy the God who is, yet our “ideas” of God, which can so quickly become idols, can (and sometimes need to be) destroyed.

that is around us. Catholic theologian, John Haught, who writes extensively about science and faith, particularly about the evolution debate, says this:

It simply cannot be unremarkable that the universe eventually abandoned the relative simplicity of its earliest moments and flowered, over the course of billions of years, into an astounding array of complexity and diversity, including human consciousness and moral aspiration. This aesthetic directionality was enough finally to convince the great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead that there is indeed a point to the universe. Purpose means the “realizing of value,” and to Whitehead, beauty was the queen of all values.⁸

Let us revel in the beauty of life. In the immeasurable opportunity that has been bestowed upon us, to know and appreciate the beauty that is around us. Especially, let us learn to joy in finding light in the darkness and love amidst the randomness and chaos that is still our home. I think the point of David Wilcox’s jab at evolutionary science is not to reject that science altogether, but to point to the eternal that can never be completely contained by the material. That we can find love in an evolutionary universe, “the fact that anyone could find their only one along this darkened path” is a hint of a light, calling us to that which is of ultimate importance – and that is, to the building of relationships. Only in relationship we will know our true “purpose.” Only in love we will know one another, and ourselves, and even God.

3) Darkness gives way to light. This is my most difficult, but the most important point of all, so stay with me. Because I am committed to the truth of science, I am committed to understanding God within a scientific framework. Evolutionary theory is by no means complete; large gaps in the Darwinian process have yet to be explained. But, neither is evolutionary theory “just a theory.” I believe that one day the Church will again come around (see the light!), and come to grips with the randomness and chance that is at the heart of the process of unfolding life.⁹

⁸ John Haught, in an article entitled, “Science can question the idea of cosmic purpose.” Those interested in this topic might look for Haught’s books, *Deeper than Darwin* and *God After Darwin*.

⁹ I have work yet to do in my own theology (as these footnotes have expressed my changing theology even from five years ago). I am simply trying to accept the full findings of scientific inquiry, as I can understand them, come what may to our current understanding of God. In so doing, at each stage, we will adapt and learn and mature in our understanding of the world and of God!

Acknowledging this “darkened path” will mean the eclipse of God for some, but only for those whose idea of God has become the idolatrous relic of a dead past. A living God will never die at the hands of any science.

If John Haught is right, that purpose means the “realizing of value,” then God need not be understood as literally speaking every step of creation, in order for God to give the world its ultimate meaning. Maybe Teilhard de Chardin is correct that God is to be understood less as alpha (the beginning) and more as omega (the direction, fulfillment, purpose end).¹⁰ As we as human beings realize our value to the world and to one another – light dawns!

As Christians, we affirm that we learn this value in one named Jesus, of Nazareth: *The Word made flesh* (John 1.14). He is the Spirit of God, eternal, yet seen among us – even as one of us. Jesus showed us how to live, taught us what is important, was and is light along our way. Jesus shows us a fully human being, fully alive – to himself, to a community, to the God within and above.¹¹

The Apostle Paul affirmed that we “*walk by faith not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5.7). So it is with our evolution, both biological and spiritual. The darkened path of random chance is enlightened by God’s spirit, still brooding over the waters of chaos (Genesis 1.2). God calls us to be more than just biological human beings, to outgrow our evolution, to accept and affirm in one another the very light of God. Darkness may have been our origin, but light is our destiny!

¹⁰ I have not located the primary source for the Teilhard quotation, which came to me in Robert Wright’s book, *Nonzero*: “One theologian has paraphrased Teilhard as believing that ‘God must become for us less Alpha than Omega’” p.332.

¹¹ I thought here of words from Walter Wink’s book, *The Human Being*: “Central to the Eastern Orthodox tradition is a statement by the church father Athanasius that Christ became as we are that we might become as he is. This has usually been interpreted to mean that Christ became human that we might become divine. We might hear it saying rather that Jesus became like us – people living within the constraints of earthly reality – in order that we might become like him – fully human. But that way of speaking is still too mythologically literal for me. It still imagines Jesus coming down from heaven to earth in order to incarnate God. I would prefer to say, Jesus incarnated God in his own person in order to show all of us how to incarnate God. And to incarnate God is what it means to be fully human” p.30.

If you are still having trouble with the idea that you can have purpose and meaning in the world and to God – even if God did not plan you from the very beginning, consider this true story...

She was just three years old when the doctor told her parents there was nothing more he could do. He advised them to take her home and to love her. To be there for her and enjoy whatever time they had left. As so they did, but when that little light went out, the very last thing on earth that these parents wanted was another child.

So they did not plan her. They did not premeditate her birth. They did not seek to create her life out of nothing. In fact, they will tell you to this day that because of the pain they had just been through, the knowledge that life had come, again, quite unplanned – an accident as it were – greeted them with much more dread than joy. But...

Cooing at a mother's breast... toddling into a father's excited and trembling hands... growing into a young woman, and carrying their name, realizing their values into even another generation of life... in that flowering, emerging grace, light shined, *and the darkness could not put it out* (John 1.5). As a daughter and a sister, as a wife and a mother, as a pastor and a friend, God's purpose, God's light shines. You see, little Amy Adair Jacks was not planned. (They say that most accidents happen in the home!)

But neither is she a big mistake!

May God, who is our home, light our darkened path, through Christ our Lord.

May it be so. Amen!

The Scripture Lessons

Excerpts from Genesis 1 (KJV) and
A Short History of Nearly Everything, by Bill Bryson
(Standing on opposite sides of the rostrum, Amy Jacks Dean read the scripture passages and
Russ Dean read from Bryson's account.)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

To build a... standard Big Bang universe, you'll need... to gather up everything there is – every last mote and particle of matter between here and the edge of creation – and squeeze it into a spot so infinitesimally compact that it has no dimensions at all. It is known as a singularity. [And then] get ready for a really big bang... It is natural but wrong to visualize the singularity as a kind of pregnant dot hanging in a dark, boundless void... there is no space, no darkness... There is no space for it to occupy, no place for it to be. We can't even ask how long it has been there... Time doesn't exist. There is no past for it to emerge from... And so, from nothing, our universe begins (p.9).

And God said, Let there be light:

When this moment happened is a matter of some debate... the consensus seems to be... about 13.7 billion years... all that can really be said is that at some indeterminate point in the very distant past... there came the moment known to science as $t=0$... (p.10).

and there was light.

In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions... In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across... It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful too (p.10).

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

Thank Goodness for the atmosphere. It keeps us warm. Without it, Earth would be a lifeless ball of ice with an average temperature of minus 60 degrees... In addition, the atmosphere absorbs or deflects incoming swarms of cosmic rays, charged particles, ultraviolet rays, and the like. Altogether, the gaseous padding of the atmosphere is equivalent to a fifteen-foot thickness of protective concrete... Even raindrops would pound us senseless if it weren't for the atmosphere's slowing drag (p.255).

*And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day
And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.*

About 4.6 billion years ago, a great swirl of gas and dust some 15 billion miles across accumulated in space where we are now and began to aggregate. Virtually of it... went to make the Sun. Out of the floating material that was left over, two microscopic grains floated close enough together to be joined by electrostatic forces. This was the moment of conception for our planet. All over the... solar system, the same was happening. Colliding dust grains formed larger and larger clumps... It all happened remarkably quickly. To

grow from a tiny cluster of grains to a baby planet some hundreds of miles across is thought to have taken only a few tens of thousands of years. In just 200 million years... the Earth was essentially formed... (p.38).

And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

When earth was only about a third of its eventual size, it was probably already beginning to form an atmosphere, mostly of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, methane, and sulfur. Hardly the sort of stuff that we would associate with life, and yet from this noxious stew life formed... For the next 500 million years the young earth continued to be pelted relentlessly by comets, meteorites, and other galactic debris, which brought water to fill the oceans and the components necessary for the successful formation of life. It was a singularly hostile environment and yet somehow life got going. Some tiny bag of chemicals twitched and became animate. We were on our way (p.39).

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. ... the third day.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.... the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven... And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. ... the fifth day.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so. And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness:

At one point between three and two million years ago, it appears there may have been as many as six hominid types coexisting in Africa. Only one, however, was fated to last... [and] emerged from the mists beginning about two million years ago. ... [our] line begins with *Homo habilis*... and concludes with us, *Homo sapiens* (literally “man the thinker”) (p.447).

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

...if you were designing an organism to look after life in our lonely cosmos, to monitor where it is going and keep a record of where it has been, you [would not] choose human beings for the job [so destructive have we been of other living things in our very short time upon this planet].

But here’s an extremely salient point: we have been chosen, by fate or Providence or whatever you wish to call it. As far as we can tell, we are the best there is. We may be all there is. It’s an unnerving thought that we may be the living universe’s supreme achievement and its worst nightmare simultaneously.

If this book has a lesson, it is that we are awfully lucky to be here – and by “we” I mean every living thing. To attain any kind of life in this universe of ours appears to be quite an achievement. As humans we are doubly lucky, of course: We enjoy not only the privilege of existence but also the singular ability to appreciate it and even, in a multitude of ways, to make it better. It is a talent we have only barely begun to grasp.

We have arrived at this position of eminence in a stunningly short time. Behaviorally modern human beings – that is, people who can speak and make art and organize complex activities – have existed for only about [ten-thousandth a] percent of earth's history (p.477).

And God saw every thing that he had made...

We really are at the beginning of it all. The trick, of course, is to make sure we never find the end. And that almost certainly, will require a good deal more than lucky breaks (p.477).

And, behold..., it was very good!

John 1.1-5 (NRSV)

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. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

FROM THE BULLETIN COVER: "Big Mistake," David Wilcox

They taught us kids in school between the recess breaks
That the universe just sorta fell together like a Big Mistake
It started with a bang that sent the pieces flying
Then it cooled and twirled into dinosaurs and dandelions

Chorus:

It was a Big Mistake to have eyes that see
To have love like this inside of me
To have lips that smile as I swim your kiss
To have minds that will forever every part of this
All the moonlight shrouded in the clouds above and
the autumn leaves and the falling love
The still reflection in the moonlit lake
All, they said, it was a big mistake, it was a big mistake

Now back to science class through the looking glass
We were magnifying little ancestors of our ancient past
Watch 'em break a couple chromosomes, wait a zillion years or so
And get an ostrich, a jellyfish, a kangaroo, and a Romeo

Chorus

The choreography of a coincidence
At the turning point there was eternity behind a moment's glance
It was for you and me the timing made us laugh
The fact that anyone could find their only one along this darkened path