

January 28, 2018  
 “The Bible and Science”

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. See chapters 19-21.

Genesis 1: 1-13, 26-31, *The Message*

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see.  
 Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness.  
 God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

God spoke: “Light!”  
 And light appeared.  
 God saw that light was good  
 and separated light from dark.  
 God named the light Day,  
 he named the dark Night.  
 It was evening, it was morning—  
 Day One.

God spoke: “Sky! In the middle of the waters;  
 separate water from water!”  
 God made sky.  
 He separated the water under sky  
 from the water above sky.  
 And there it was:  
 he named sky the Heavens;  
 It was evening, it was morning—  
 Day Two.

God spoke: “Separate!  
 Water-beneath-Heaven, gather into one place;  
 Land, appear!”  
 And there it was.  
 God named the land Earth.  
 He named the pooled water Ocean.  
 God saw that it was good.

God spoke: “Earth, green up! Grow all varieties  
 of seed-bearing plants,  
 Every sort of fruit-bearing tree.”  
 And there it was.  
 Earth produced green seed-bearing plants,

all varieties,  
 And fruit-bearing trees of all sorts.  
 God saw that it was good.  
 It was evening, it was morning—  
 Day Three.

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them  
 reflecting our nature  
 So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,  
 the birds in the air, the cattle,  
 And, yes, Earth itself,  
 and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”  
 God created human beings;  
 he created them godlike,  
 Reflecting God’s nature.  
 He created them male and female.  
 God blessed them:  
 “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!  
 Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,  
 for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”

Then God said, “I’ve given you  
 every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth  
 And every kind of fruit-bearing tree,  
 given them to you for food.  
 To all animals and all birds,  
 everything that moves and breathes,  
 I give whatever grows out of the ground for food.”  
 And there it was.  
 God looked over everything he had made;  
 it was so good, so very good!  
 It was evening, it was morning—  
 Day Six.

This is the first of a 3-sermon series on controversies in our faith. Today we will discuss science and the Bible. Next week we will cover violence in the Old Testament, and conclude in two weeks with how the Bible treats suffering. After Easter, we will return to controversies, with a focus on things like the role of women, human sexuality, and getting a tattoo.

Let’s start with the observation that we are more divided in our nation than perhaps at any time since the civil war. A tendency has grown for us to form opinions based on what is traditional for us, or what “feels right,” and then demonize those who disagree with us. Social media and fake or very partisan news causes us to just get more entrenched. We often only

listen to people who we agree with, and oppose those with whom we disagree with knee-jerk, negative reactions.

And most unfortunately, this carries over into the church. Our denomination is right now studying how we can not split apart due to disagreements and polarization about human sexuality.

Let me say what should be obvious—this polarization, demonizing and not listening is not Christ-like, and is beneath our Christian values. Jesus' mission on earth was to bring us together, to teach us to love our neighbor and even our enemy. He taught, healed and fed all who he encountered. He loved and listened to everyone he met, and he calls us to do the same.

Here is my point in a nutshell: ***We aren't called to always agree with each other, but we are called to stay in relationship to our sisters and brothers even when we disagree.***

In the course of these sermons on controversies, I will almost certainly say things that you don't agree with. It's not my plan to convince you that I'm right and you're wrong. The opposite may be true! I certainly don't know all the answers, and I am only a human being who gets things wrong on a regular basis. My goal is that we will talk about these things in the spirit of Christian love; that we will consider new perspectives, listen to each other, and do so with respect. I hope that I will simply give you a new way to think about these controversies; what answers make sense to you in your faith life are between you and God.

First, I want to talk about the traditional view that science and religion oppose each other. This opposition is based on a fundamental difference in the way that science and religion often work.

***Traditionally, religion starts with a conclusion, and then forces all information into that conclusion.*** So for example—creation. The traditional view is that God created the earth and all that is in it in six 24-hour days, and this happened about 6000 years ago. People who believe this often respond to the claims of science by saying that what we know scientifically about the age of the earth and the evolution of life is simply wrong, or even evidence that Satan is acting on human minds. So, the conclusion is that God created the earth, and anything that seems to contradict that is just false. Either the facts fit the conclusion, or the fact are wrong.

Science comes at the question of creation in just about the opposite way. ***Science is built around a method where we start with a question, gather evidence about it, and then form a conclusion based on that evidence.*** So if scientists wants to know how the earth was created, they gather data about the earth and the cosmos, and then make a conclusion based on that data. This method tells us that the earth began with a big bang of matter and energy about 13.8 billion years ago. Matter coalesced in our earth about 4.5 billion years old. Life has evolved on our planet for the last 3.8 billion years, beginning with simple forms and becoming more complex over time. Science therefore starts with information, and uses it to build a conclusion.

***There is a big problem with the traditional way of looking at science and the Bible—you have to believe in one and only one.*** Either the Bible is literally accurate and science is just an illusion, or science contains all the truth and the Bible is superstition. It's an either/or dichotomy that puts lots of people in an uncomfortable place.

I have to confess that I'm one of them. Something you should know about me is that I am a scientist. I have a doctorate in clinical psychology, which is a scientific discipline. I was trained to evaluate and perform scientific research. I've never had a particular interest in pursuing this, but I have done an honors project, a master's thesis, a doctoral dissertation, and extracurricular research using the highest of scientific methods. I'd like to share with you a couple things I've learned as a scientist.

First, ***God's creation is far more beautiful than we can easily see.*** A lion is a spectacular being, but have you ever looked at a model of DNA? The order, symmetry, and perfection is stunning. A flower is an amazing creation, but have you ever studied how the biodiversity of the field it grows in supports the wellbeing of each plant? The interconnectedness of all life is full of grace. A sunset is beautiful, but have you explored where those colors come from? The delicate adjustments of water, temperature and light are miraculous. The more I have studied science, the more beautiful, amazing and perfect God's creation as become to me.

Second, ***when science is done well, it always raises more questions than it answers.*** A scientist asks a question, makes observations and tests ideas about that question, and comes to a conclusion; but that conclusion always points to more questions. At the end of every single research paper published in a reputable journal, is a section on what further questions the research raises. This tells me that while science is awesome, it will never be able to fully explain the mysteries of God. Science has its limits, but God doesn't.

Now, that said, I'd like to propose that we consider science and the Bible as both reflections of God. Both tell us something important about our creator, and they can work together to reveal him.

We need to ask ourselves why the biblical authors told this story in the first place. It wasn't for the purpose of being a science textbook. The Genesis account is beautiful, awe-inspiring poetry about who God is and who we are in relation to him. It's not about a research study, but about God as the creator who loves us and made us in his own image. It tells us that all he created is beautiful and good. Our life is a gift from the God who loves us deeply and profoundly. ***Science can tell us details—amazing, beautiful details of God's creation, but it will never tell us why we are here, who we are, or how much we are loved. We need the Bible to understand that.***

So I'm suggesting that rather than seeing science and the Bible as a mutually exclusive dichotomy, we see them in synthesis, working together to reveal God. Once we see them as working together, we can begin to answer some confusing questions.

First, is evolution for real? *I'm offering that there is no reason for Christians to doubt the scientific fact of the evolution of life.* Science has confirmed it over and over, but the Bible isn't a book of science. Science gives us a window into how the hand of God has shaped life. The Bible gives us a picture of the fact that life was created by a loving God who desires beauty, companionship and goodness in his creation. The Bible and science tell us important but different things about creation. They're not in opposition, but work together.

Another controversy in our faith related to science is whether Adam and Eve were real people. Some believe that the Bible is historically accurate about them, while others believe they are symbolic and archetypal—representations of humanity in general, not actual people. I'm going to propose that the answer to this question is more like both/and rather than yes/no.

On the one hand, ***no, Adam and Eve weren't real people.*** The Bible isn't a book of science that describes the first humans. It's also not a history book like we would have today. Adam and Eve were from prehistory, before there is any written record. No one actually recorded their names or their story. Rather, ***what we have in the Bible is a narrative that explains who we are, and who God is.*** We are God's good creation. We are sinners who can't live in perfect unity with God without a Savior. We are God's beloved children, made in his image, who he has eternal compassion for. All these things are true without Adam and Eve being actual particular people.

On the other hand, they were real. There really were first human beings, and science supports this. At one point, our ancestors lived hand-to-mouth, a simple existence of basic survival. But around 35,000-45,000 year ago, science tells us there was a dramatic change. Language, art, music, tools and symbolic thinking suddenly appeared. Along with it came religion, evidence of elaborate burials that suggested an afterlife.

In other word, we became human. God had somehow entered us, and we began to reflect his own creativity. ***Somewhere, at some point, there really was an Adam and Eve. And like all humanity ever since, we can be sure that they did two things: they worshiped God, and they sinned.*** And this is the point where science and the Bible come together. Adam and Eve were real people at some moment in history, and they had real struggles with sin and real hearts that praised God. The Bible tells us so, and science confirms it.

One more science-based controversy for today: Were there dinosaurs on Noah's ark? We have to ask! We know that Noah floated an ark with animals on it, and we know that dinosaurs existed because we can clearly see their fossilized bones, so therefore, there were dinosaurs on the ark, right?

Let's look for a minute about what science tells us. We know that dinosaurs went extinct 65 million years ago, while human beings have only been around for about 200,000 years. So no, there were no dinosaurs around for Noah to gather because they were extinct long before he lived.

But a study of ancient literature tells us something very interesting. Genesis is not the only ancient document to tell a flood story. Many cultures of this time also tell stories of a huge flood. Floods seem to be embedded in human memory of prehistory. In fact, scientists tell us that at the end of the last ice age, around 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, there was massive flooding across the whole northern hemisphere. In places, it created inland seas. In other places, ice dams broke that caused torrents that destroyed everything in their path. It seems likely that human memories of these events were turned into stories of floods as humans began to write.

***So is the Noah story true?*** I think it's another case of both/and. No, it's not true in the sense that the Bible wasn't written to teach us ancient history. The flooding occurred before written history, and the stories cannot be fully historically accurate.

But yes, ***the story is true because there was a flood, and there were people who survived it, and the story points to great truths.*** It tells us that humanity is broken. We sin, sometimes terribly, committing atrocious violence against each other. And that violence and sin break God's heart. He grieves to see how his beloved children, made in his image, treat each other. And yet God has compassion for us. He acted in anger, but yet preserved us as his precious creation, continuing to pour blessings on us throughout the ages.

Paul addresses some of our concerns in the New Testament. Speaking of the stories of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, he says in 1 Corinthians 10:11:

These things happened to them as an example and were written as a warning for us to whom the end of time has come.

And in Romans 15: 4, he speaks about a verse from the Psalms:

Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures.

So even Paul isn't suggesting that we read the Bible like a science text book; rather, we are to learn other important lessons from it. It is a book filled with moral examples. It helps us distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, obedience from disobedience. It presents to us God's will through the ages. It is there to provide encouragement and hope. Its purpose is to reveal God—not in a science experiment, but in human hearts.

Science is great. I'm a huge fan. It provides glimpses of God's hand at work in ways that nothing else can. But we need the Bible to tell us who we are and whose we are. To give us hope. To teach us the way to live. To point to our forgiveness and salvation. To point to life itself. So hang on to science. Let's use it to learn everything we can about God's creation. And let's hang on to the Bible, too, as our endless source of truth and grace.