

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
Psalm 33
Creation Talk

Later this week is the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday. This has sparked a lot of Darwin-focused lectures, book reviews, and newspaper articles. And much of the discussion invariably highlights the tension between Darwin's work and the Judeo-Christian religions. On one side - the bearded biologist with his evolutionary theory; on the other side – people-of-faith with their bibles and Genesis creation stories. It makes for great drama: "Inherit the Wind" with William Jennings Bryan versus Clarence Darrow. It also makes most of us quite tired – debate after debate about evolution vs. creationism, Genesis vs. genetics, did God make us or primordial goo make us or some combination thereof?

Too often the debate over creation resembles little boys shouting at one another while barricaded behind forts made of cardboard boxes. One side insists that evolution is a plan with no purpose other than survival of the fittest in a dog-eat-dog world. The other side insists that God the Creator set a divine plan in motion in the Garden of Eden long ago. One hurls quotes from biology textbooks; the other hurls verses from scripture. Both are wrong by taking something precious and turning it into a weapon to be used against others. Both sides exhaust themselves, since they allow for no middle ground between their positions. And it is exhausting for us as well; so much so that we avoid talking about creation if at all possible.

The point that I will come back to later in this sermon is this: Where you start a conversation dramatically shapes where you end up. For example, I was reading a book by the biologist Simon Morris, when I stumbled over a sentence that set off fireworks in my mind. Morris made the passing comment, "the architecture of the Universe need not be simply physical."¹ Of course! Arguments over creation are so unfruitful because biology fundamentalists insist we only talk about the physical reality of creation, thereby allowing no room for the spiritual, just as biblical fundamentalists insist we only talk about scripture, thereby ceding no authority to scientific data. But what if the battling little boys would knock down their forts and choose to construct something together; building it one box at a time, one from each side? What if the first box mutually placed in the middle of the floor was this simple idea: The architecture of the Universe need not be simply physical. Let's play this out and see what emerges.

The composition and architecture of the world need not be only the physical realm. To which the scientist concedes that humans are an intriguing species, because even though they are clearly a product of evolution, they have developed levels of self-awareness that exceed all other forms of life on earth.² The believer then responds that our heightened self-awareness has also led us to a humble realization about the interconnectedness of all life; that in the words

of the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker, “there is nothing in all of creation that can say to anything else in all of creation, I need thee not.”³

Do you see that by this subtle shift in the starting position of the debate, a true dialogue built on common perspectives can begin to emerge? The world around us is potentially more than just the physical; human beings are unique expressions of self-awareness, and yet despite our uniqueness, we are intimately connected with all of creation. At this point, enough trust and goodwill has been built up so that it is possible for each side to acknowledge the fundamental questions that trouble them when they think about the wonder of all creation. As the author Annie Dillard described it, the agnostic asks “Who turned on the lights?” while the believer asks, “Whatever for?”⁴ Why is there something instead of nothing?, asks the philosopher. What is mankind that Thou art mindful of us?, asks the Psalmist.

Now the two debaters trust one another enough to divert themselves through the sharing of stories about the wonders inherent in all of life. One recites the opening verses of Genesis and looks at the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo. One talks with wonder about fire ants and star-nosed moles, and how in a universe of vast possibilities, life consistently navigates the path to survival along the tiniest statistical fractions so that what evolves actually works. If 99.9% of the evolutionary options would fail, life finds that wonderful .1%. We listen as one recites James Weldon Johnson’s creation story about God kneeling down in the dust, like a mammy bending over her baby, shaping it into God’s own image and then breathing into it the breath of life. We listen as one describes Darwin’s voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle to the Galapagos Islands. And then together both sides pause to stare at the starry skies overhead and wonder if we are unique in this world, what obligation does that place on our shoulders? Who turned on the lights? Whatever for? How does it involve each one of us and our solitary lives?

If the architecture of the Universe is more than just physical, then the Genesis story and the psalm writer have something to teach us. *“In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the spirit, the breath of the Lord moved over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. And God saw that it was good.”* Psalm 33: *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the spirit, the breath of God’s mouth... Our soul waits for the Lord; we trust in God’s holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.”* If the life-force of all creation is a holy blend of physical and spiritual, flesh and soul, then how shall we live our lives on this precious planet? We should live it humbly, aware of the miracle in which we take part. We should live it peaceably, saying to no one or no creature in all of creation “I need thee not.” And we should live it redemptively, aware that the building blocks of all creation stack up to a story of a creator God, a redemption won through a Savior’s movement from suffering to resurrection life, and of a Spirit that still moves over all creation, bringing forth life and calling it good.

Where you start a conversation always shapes where you end up. So, what if the architecture of the Universe includes more than just the physical? Let us begin to name all the other elements, calling them: Spirit, righteousness, justice, love, redemption, hope, God. Let us decide how we should live in such a world, starting today, starting right here.

Yes, Darwin's 200th birthday is this week. But don't limit these thoughts to hypothetical conversations between biologists and believers. There are lots of forts out there, lots of contentious debates that need to be started over with the similar premise that life is more than just the physical. We now know that race has very little to do with genetics and much, much more to do with social structures designed to preserve privilege and allow the oppression of the many by the few. How shall we live if race is not at all what we think it is? What if we stopped telling ourselves that poverty is just a result of poor money management skills and instead saw it as a byproduct of conscious patterns of political power designed to protect the wealth of the few to the detriment of the many? What happens when faith is added to these debates about flesh and blood realities; if the spiritual is fully considered in all these worldly conversations about race, gender, economics, and war? Could something new be built out of opposing perspectives, something mutual, something just, something redemptive?

The psalm writer spoke of creation and of God in the same breath. It's truly OK to do that, biologists and believers alike. With a sweeping glance out to the horizon, the psalmist says, "The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." Believing that changes everything. Having the story of Jesus Christ at the center of that belief transforms everything. For now, faith, hope, and love are added into the evolutionary debate – and as you all know, the greatest of these is love.

AMEN

¹ Simon Conway Morris, Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe, Cambridge Press, 326.

² John C. Greene article on Darwin and religion, *proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 103, pp. 716-725, 1959.

³ Quoted by Martha Sterne, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 1996, p. 13.

⁴ Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p. 148.