

Last week we begin our June sermon series called “Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About” by focusing on something I was quite sure **had not been** preached about from this pulpit: extra-terrestrial life.

Today, we are going to focus on something that I know for a fact **has been** preached about in this pulpit: evolution.

Now, very few of us would remember it, but for about 20 years, from 1920 to about 1940, the Presbyterian Church had a HUGE debate called the “Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy” about a topic that is too big to unpack in today’s sermon. But what really came to capture the essence of that debate was something that took place just outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1925 that I bet you might remember from your history books: The Scopes Monkey Trial.

The Scopes trial featured a high school science teacher, John L. Scopes, accused of violating a law that prohibited teaching evolution in state-funded schools. The trial became somewhat of a national circus because it was framed as a showdown between science and religion.

I tried to find some of the sermons preached from this pulpit during the mid-to-late 1920s. I didn’t find the actual sermons, but in our church’s recently published history book, I read that in 1925, our then-Senior Pastor, Dr. Albert Sydney Johnson “denounced from the pulpit state-supported colleges whose professors taught evolution.” Dr. Johnson insisted teaching evolution led to “carnality, sensuality, communism, and the Red Flag.”¹

I have a hunch the sermon I will preach today will vary a bit from Dr. Johnson’s (though, to be clear, I am not a fan of communism) – but I also want to say that 99 years makes a difference when it comes to perspective. Views – even tightly held theological views – can change...which is kind of the point.

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Our Scripture for today is from the first chapter of Genesis – I’m reading various verses. Listen with me for the word of God.

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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

¹ Stickell, Lois, *200 Years in the heart of Charlotte: A History of First Presbyterian Church*, p. 163

the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

(I’m skipping a few days...)

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

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One of the first and most impactful theology classes I took didn’t take place in Saunders Hall in at UNC Chapel Hill (where I went to college), or with Dr. Shirley Guthrie at Columbia Seminary (where I went to graduate school). The first theology class I remember took place around a camp fire when I was in middle school or early high school at Camp Grier in Old Fort, North Carolina.

I don’t remember who the college kid was who was my counselor, or what group I was in, exactly, but I have a very distinct memory of what we were talking about around that campfire: We were talking about the seven days of creation.

I don’t believe that college kid who was my counselor was credentialed in any way – he may have taken a philosophy class at some point or another. You actually don’t need to have a degree to be a good student (or teacher) of theology – you just need to be curious.

But sitting around that campfire circle as we watched the glowing embers of the wood we had gathered, the counselor asked how we thought we could take the way the Bible described creation seriously and at the same time accept the definitive science behind evolution. It was kind of a rhetorical question because the counselor quickly shared his answer:

“You don’t have to choose,” he said. “Maybe it is as simple as knowing that when the Bible talks about ‘seven days’ it is just a figure of speech...maybe a day is a billion years? The point isn’t the timeline – the point is God is the one who creates. And the world that God creates is amazing.”

10-12 years later – when I was in seminary – I learned a little bit more about the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis (including our Scripture for today) – and how we might best understand them. These first eleven chapters of the Bible are what scholars call “pre-history” – think of it, not as an eye-witness account of what happened from the beginning of creation (as if Adam and Eve were carrying around a legal pad writing everything down). Instead, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are the way people who lived **well after** the events those Scripture verses describe came to understand where God was at work in the world that they now inhabited.

Another way to say it is that the first eleven chapters of Genesis (including the stories of creation) are meant to be read theologically...not literally.

Another way to say it – relative to today’s topic – is that there is no contradiction whatsoever if the Bible doesn’t mention the billions’ years’ process of evolution that wasn’t discovered until 1859 when Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species*. How in the world would the Scripture writers know to include that?

Maybe instead of worrying about whether the Bible and evolution can coexist we might ask why – as people of faith – we sometimes feel threatened when we confront the possibility that science knows more about the details of how we came to be than our Scripture does? As if the Bible should function like a science book.

What the Bible talks about is the *relationship* between God and what God created. The Bible talks about God’s **promises** and **faithfulness**...and how those things endure, even in spite of the ways we as God’s creatures make a mess of things sometimes. The Bible talks about the **commitment** that God makes to those of us created in God’s image that defies logic...and, in fact, only makes sense in the context of **love**. And you certainly aren’t going to read about that in any science textbook.

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Most of the time when we pair faith and evolution in a conversation we tend to look backward, to the beginning of things – with the goal of trying to make the narratives fit together (or to argue that the narratives don’t fit together and that one of them...the Bible, or the theory of evolution, is just wrong).

Maybe it is because I don’t see the contradiction, but I actually think looking backward is less interesting than looking forward.

A billion years from now – assuming human beings figure out how to peacefully coexist, and become better stewards of the environment, and how to share resources...you know, little things like that – but a billion years from now, I wonder in what ways we will have evolved as a species.

Maybe we will finally stop being born with appendixes.

Maybe our bodies will make more cartilage so that our elbows and knees and shoulders and hips will last longer as we continue to extend our life expectancy?

Maybe we will unlock a greater percentage of our brain power to help us solve some of the world’s mysteries?

Maybe we will find that ADHD is actually a feature instead of a bug – because it helps us manage information that comes at us a million miles an hour from all directions?

We, of course, won’t be around to see any of this.

And I couldn’t tell you the scientific probability of whether that might happen, or when.

But what I think is **theologically** intriguing about the fact that evolution doesn’t just stop...but will continue as time marches on...are two things:

- (1) It alleviates those of us who are created from the idea that we could ever be perfect, and
- (2) It reminds us that there are, and will always be, ways that we can (and should) grow.

The Bible (and our faith) might not give us the language to describe the process of evolution – but what we can affirm is the fact that God did not create a static world. The world that God created was one of

abundance. The people who God created are beings that have **possibility.** And the God who created us (and our world) loves us too much to just leave us alone...God’s **providence** shapes and molds us in ways we scarcely notice...toward the promise of a future that is grounded in hope.

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I find the fact that God’s creation is not yet finished to be good news.

I find that news to be especially good when I get a little anxious or demoralized by how entrenched some things feel, and by how stuck things can seem, and by how certain and self-righteous people sound, and by how divided we so often are.

We are conditioned, I think, to view the world as if what we see and experience is just the way it is. And every day – in so many different ways – we hear voices tell us who to blame or thank for the way things are – and why the future is something we should fear.

My friends – there is an antidote to that way of thinking.

And it is the gift of faith.

The good news that the Master Potter – however long ago – put God’s hands on clay that is on the wheel and still hasn’t let us go.

May that knowledge steady our hearts and minds – and keep us on the lookout for change – today and for every tomorrow.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.