

First Baptist Church of Augusta
June 15, 2008
Genesis 1:1-5
Three Stories That Changed the World: Creation

I love the Genesis story of creation. Who among us can deny that when we first heard it read, we were mesmerized at the thought of God breathing creation into existence, taming the chaos and bringing it into order, dispelling darkness and giving us light. Yes, these words of creation have captured our imagination down through the ages.

It has only been in the last 150-200 years, that we have allowed the creation story of Genesis to become controversial, even divisive. In 1961, a Baptist scholar, Ralph Elliot, wrote a commentary on Genesis that nearly split the Southern Baptist Convention. A few years later, an entire set of commentaries was written, and the one on Genesis, written by Henton Davies, was eventually removed from the set and replaced with a revised one authored by Clyde Francisco. Why? - Disagreement over how to interpret Genesis, particularly the first 11 or so chapters.

For the next three weeks, I am going to invite us to return, once again to those first 11 chapters. I am calling this series, *Three Stories That Changed the World*. We will consider the story of creation, the story of the flood, and the story of the Tower of Babel.

This morning, we begin appropriately, with the story of creation. Actually, Genesis tells us two stories of the creation of the world: one is in the first chapter, and there is another quite different story in chapter two. For the purpose of simplicity, we are going to look at the first creation account.

There are at least four ways to interpret the Genesis creation stories. Let me share with you three of them:

1. Young Earth – creation took place in six 24 hour days. If we use the calculations based on Old Testament genealogies, this means that the earth is less than 10,000 years old. The implication of this is that all of the scientific evidence regarding dinosaurs, geology, the Ice Age, and so on, is wrong. I do not find this argument very compelling, and see it as a gross misunderstanding of the purpose of the Genesis stories of creation.
2. Old Earth Biblical Literalists – This theory is inspired in part by a verse in the New Testament, 2 Peter 3:8 - “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day”, The old Earth literalists interpret the “days” of creation as “epochs.” That is they are not 24 hour days but could span thousands, millions or even billions of years. Since it is broadly accepted in the scientific community that the earth is over 4 billion years old, this interpretation leaves room for agreement.
3. Naturalistic and Mythological Approach – this goes to the other extreme of creation science. This view interprets the biblical creation stories as just that – stories, with little credibility in the modern era. They evolved – if you will pardon the pun – to help primitive people explain the origins of the universe, but they no longer are useful in the modern era. I, along with a great number of the Christian community, find this explanation undesirable for reasons that will follow.

So, where do we go from here? How are we to understand the creation stories of Genesis, in light of what seems to be competing, and at times very different scientific theories?

The fourth way we may interpret the Creation story is this:
A Biblical-Scientific Synthesis

Let science answer the questions of science, and faith deal with faith. These two are not polar opposites or two extremes. It is viewing science and faith in synthesis.

Let me begin by saying, I am no scientist. That is an academic discipline, that pretty much has eluded me, since I came in third place in the science fair at Putnam County Middle School. I did an exhibit on pollution. But like the rest of you, I am the beneficiary of science. I benefit from science everyday – from my use of electronic gadgets to my dependency of current medical and pharmaceutical information. Scientists tell me what is happening and why throughout this world. They inspired me as a child, as new fossils of dinosaurs were discovered. And they stimulated my imagination, with conjectures about our universe.

So, I freely confess, that if you came here to hear a scientific discourse on a comparative study between evolution and creation, then you are going to go away wanting.

I do know that the core of evolutionary theory is used as an organizing principle in nearly every field of science – from geology to astronomy to pharmacology. We know that evolution is used to explain why certain bacteria are becoming immune to old antibiotics. My pediatrician, who is a member of this church, will tell you that. We know that evolution is used to explain how old the earth is and how dinosaurs roamed the earth millions of years before human beings were around.

Believe it or not, the purpose of the creation stories of the Bible is not to tell us how or when God did it. The purpose is to answer two questions:

1) Who - ***God did it!***

It is not a scientific description, but a theological affirmation. The Bible does not take a stand on any scientific or quasi-scientific hypotheses. The point of Genesis as with the rest of the text is one of good news. The point is that God did it

2) Why - **Original Blessing**

In creation, the Bible tells us that God blessed. The story of Creation is the story of Original Blessing (see Matthew Fox). I know that we often see the seeds of original sin in the larger telling, and that is too bad, because this limits what God has done. Indeed, it is what God continues to do. It is the story of the Creator God, setting loose creation and now creation creates.

Annie Dillard writes in her timeless book, *Pilgrim of Tinker Creek*, of God's extravagance. She gives as an example, the creative fecundity of just a simple patch of rye grass. A single rye plant, in four months, can grow 378 miles of root and 14 billion root hairs. In one cubic inch of soil, the length of these root hairs would total 6000 miles. Talk about being fruitful and multiplying!

The "why" of Genesis also includes a "what now." Literally, in this story we hear God's call. Genesis is about God's call (see Walter Brueggemann) in two ways: calling the world into being, and calling people into a special community to bear witness. Thomas Merton writes: "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 14).

What the Bible teaches us is that creation is part of God's sovereign call. There is order, meaning and purpose. Creation was and is no accident. What science does, is look at the evidence and attempt to draw some conclusions. I appreciate that and we need that. A medical doctor is a scientist who looks at the evidence of symptoms, of cells, of diseases, and so forth, and makes some conclusions, based on the cumulative experiences and conclusions of others. What a scientist cannot do, however, is give meaning. It is not enough to say that the

earth is 6,000 years old or 16 billion years old. We want to know what all of this means. You cannot make that observation from the lens of a microscope. It takes the eyes of faith.

Walter Brueggemann writes, the creation stories in Genesis lead the reader to some theological affirmations, including:

- 1) The creator has a purpose and will for creation.
- 2) Part of the purpose of creation is to listen and answer. Note, that in the Genesis account, the world came into being by the speech of God (think also of John 1).
- 3) The speech of God is a sovereign call. We do not have a voice in the matter. Creation cannot debate the sovereignty of God. It is not coercive but evocative. It invites, but it does not compel. It hopes, rather than requires.

The word “creation” itself is a confessional word, that only people of faith can make. That is why we cannot let government schools teach it, because the government cannot be in the faith teaching business. And I am tired of the church acquiescing to the government or to other institutions, what the church ought to be doing in the first place.

The Genesis passages about creation assert that God does something and continues to care about what he does. It cannot be explained by some quasi-scientific analysis of creation, it can only be affirmed and confessed.

In the many school systems today, there are a number of parents wanting to push forward a teaching of creation called, “intelligent design.” It critiques evolution as a theory, that does not prove or disprove that the creation of the world has an intelligent meaning or purpose. Evolution, as science, cannot teach intelligent design. That is not the purpose of science. It can be the purpose for philosophy, or theology or faith. But not science. Because you cannot prove it. That is faith.

Can evolution be taught as creation without God? Yes, but of course, I do not agree with that. But at the same time evolution does not negate God. At its essence, it is a scientific theory. I am fine with that. My business is faith.

Consider an example right from the scientific community: an amoeba is among the simplest of life forms. It is a single cell organism. Yet, as simple as it is, it is still an amazing creature. It has a cell wall. It has a digestive system. It has an engine that converts food to energy. It has a propulsion system and a pressurization system. It can divide and multiply. It produces waste, and it has its own genetic software.

Consider also, the brightest and best scientists of the world, cannot create amoebas. We can send people to the moon and clone sheep, frogs and kittens, and we now have unraveled the complex genetic coding of human beings, **but**, cannot create one little amoeba. We know the basic ingredients. We understand how the amoeba works. But that is about as far as it goes.

Now any evolutionary theory that implies – and some do – that what we cannot explain and cannot do, must have happened by chance, is wrong!

[adapted and quoted in part from *Confronting the Controversies*, pp 41-42]

And that is the business of the church – to proclaim the good news, that we are here not by chance, not by the dumb luck of billions of years, but, because God has a purpose and a meaning for you and me. And I do not want a government school doing what the church ought to be doing in the first place. And neither do the Genesis creation stories need to be explained away by borrowing or hijacking scientific language. That is not the purpose.

“Create” is used four times in the first two chapters. “Make” or “made” is used nine times. It is God who calls the world into being: Rom 4:17: *“In the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”*

Whether or not in years to come, evolution is proved or disproved as a theory, I do not know, and do not care. That is not my concern. It doesn’t really matter to me how God created the world, in six days or six billion years. I do not care. I really do not. What I do care passionately about is the faith that **God created it**, and us, for **his good pleasure**, and that because God created, there is purpose, and will, for this universe and for you and me. Creation teaches me that there is no life apart from God, and in a peculiar way, we belong to God.

This good news changed the world. If we allow it, it will change us too.