

Check My Brain at the Door? No Thanks!

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 10, 2019—"Evolution Sunday"

- Joshua 10:12-15 (Good News Translation) ¹²On the day that the LORD gave the men of Israel victory over the Amorites, Joshua spoke to the LORD. In the presence of the Israelites he said, "Sun, stand still over Gibeon; Moon, stop over Aijalon Valley." ¹³The sun stood still and the moon did not move until the nation had conquered its enemies. This is written in the *Book of Jashar*. The sun stood still in the middle of the sky and did not go down for a whole day. ¹⁴Never before, and never since, has there been a day like it, when the LORD obeyed a human being. The LORD fought on Israel's side! ¹⁵After this, Joshua and his army went back to the camp at Gilgal.
- Luke 6:1-5 (Good News Translation) ¹Jesus was walking through some wheat fields on a Sabbath. His disciples began to pick the heads of wheat, rub them in their hands, and eat the grain. ²Some Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what our Law says you cannot do on the Sabbath?" ³Jesus answered them, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his men were hungry? ⁴He went into the house of God, took the bread offered to God, ate it, and gave it also to his men. Yet it is against our Law for anyone except the priests to eat that bread." ⁵And Jesus concluded, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: People of faith need not surrender their God-given gift of intellect in order to align their lives with God's will.

First, let me explain today's bulletin cover. Yes, my wife and I and two of our sons are graduates of The College of Wooster, and yes, one of our church members is a student there now and other church members are considering attending Wooster. But I didn't put the college seal on the cover as advertising. I put the seal on the cover because of the motto depicted there: you can see the Latin words "Ex Uno Fonte."

Next, let me confess: okay, I'm a college nostalgia geek. For instance, tucked in an out-of-the-way corner of the Wooster campus there is a sundial – a gift of the Class of 1907. How many people memorize the inscription on a sundial? I did: "United in time, parted in time, to be reunited when time shall be no more." Or in the historic archway that cuts through the campus' main classroom building there is an engraved stone mounted in the wall – a gift of the Class of 1893 – which bears the full motto of the College which I've included at the bottom of the bulletin's cover. It reads, "*Scientia et religio ex uno fonte*." Even for someone like me who never studied Latin, I could wager a pretty good guess of what that meant. Translated, I learned that the motto declares "Science and religion from one source."

Now, the reason I chose that as the theme for our reflection today is because I want us to understand this clearly: just because God wants your *heart* doesn't mean you have to check your *brain* at the door. Over the last decade and more, religious and academic leaders have collaborated to remind society that faith and science are not enemies. At first their combined effort was dubbed "Evolution Sunday," but then recognizing that some faith communities worship on Fridays or Saturdays the name changed to "Evolution Weekend." According to the organizers,

Evolution Weekend is an opportunity for serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between religion and science. The ongoing goal has been to... show that

religion and science are not adversaries. Rather, they look at the natural world from quite different perspectives and ask, and answer, different questions.¹

Why call this effort “*Evolution Weekend*”?

Evolution is a scientific term, of course. Evolution isn’t discussed in the Bible. Just the opposite: the opening chapters of the book of Genesis – that is, “the book of beginnings” – don’t describe an evolutionary process but *creatio ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing. Genesis offers some familiar, beloved, mythic speculation about origins.

Let’s picture those reverent, curious, wondering people of old trying to imagine how it was that they came to be, and how the world around them came into existence. I picture them around a campfire, lying on their backs staring up at the starry canopy. They had no idea how far away the stars were, or how they moved across the sky every night. And so as they stared into that majestic darkness, perhaps one ventured, “In the beginning, God created what’s up there and what’s down here.” Someone else piped in, “Yeah, because before that there was nothing but darkness. Nothing!” “Right,” added another, “but then God said, ‘Light up!’ and the sun began to shine.” And so it went as they imagined the appearance of every thing and every phenomenon they could see.

They weren’t ignorant. They weren’t ignoring facts and evidence available to them. They were describing and interacting with the world based what they had and what they knew. Theirs was not a measurable, objective account of a process; they were describing what it meant to them that they were part of creation. That’s the role of scripture: not to be used as a scientific reference, but as a record and resource of spiritual inspiration and insight.

Take today’s reading from the Old Testament book called Joshua. It described that period after the Hebrew people had escaped from Pharaoh’s slavery and had wandered in the wilderness for a very long time (the Bible’s code phrase for “a very long time” was the phrase “forty years” regardless of exactly how much time had elapsed). Now the Israelites were moving into their promised “Land of Milk and Honey,” the region called Canaan – what we know now as Israel. It wasn’t always an easy relocation; the Bible describes battle after battle for the ability to move in and settle down. In Joshua Chapter 10 we’re told that on one occasion the heroic leader Joshua commanded the sun to stand still until the Israelites had emerged victorious in battle. Verse 13 states, “The sun stood still in the middle of the sky and did not go down for a whole day.”

I’ve never seen that happen. All available data would conclude that the world has never seen that happen. According to astronomer Dr. Sten Odenwald,

If the Earth stopped spinning suddenly [so the sun would stand still], the atmosphere would still be in motion with the Earth’s original 1,100 mile per hour rotation speed at the equator. All of the land masses would be scoured clean of anything not attached to bedrock. This means rocks, topsoil, trees, buildings, your pet dog, and so on, would be swept away into the atmosphere.²

An objective, quantifiable evaluation of that scenario concludes that the sun simply could not stand still in relation to a revolving earth. So why did someone’s memory of that battle include a description of Joshua commanding the sun to stop in its course and shine down upon the warriors until victory was achieved? Are we to take it literally? Did they check their watch and notice that time was passing but the sun wasn’t? No, it was a picturesque, figurative description of the persistence and bravery of the warriors. Their trust in God’s encouraging presence inspired them to press on in their quest until they vanquished their foes. The book of Joshua – like the Bible as a whole – is a story of the interaction between God and God’s creatures; it’s not an astronomy textbook.

¹ https://theclergyletterproject.org/rel_evolution_weekend_2019.html accessed 2/8/2019

² Dr. Sten Odenwald © 1997, “What would happen if the Earth stopped spinning?” at Ask the Astronomer, <https://image.gsfc.nasa.gov/poetry/ask/q1168.html> accessed 2/8/2019

As people of faith we need to contend with the difference between objective, quantifiable matters of scientific inquiry and subjective, inspirational matters of faith. Sometimes characters in the Bible actually had to deal with the difference between literal and figurative interpretation. An example of that occurs in one of my favorite Bible stories which was this morning's gospel reading.

Let's remember what happened: Jesus and his disciples were walking somewhere on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath, remember, was a day of worship and restoration, refraining from work and daily chores. Jesus and his friends must not have been traveling very far because Sabbath rules prohibited excessive travel. As they cut through a grain field, the disciples dragged their hands through the stalks of grain, and some of the kernels came off in their hands, which they popped into their mouths—sort of a granola-snack-on-the-go.

But some religious hard-liners called Pharisees saw this and challenged Jesus. They said, "Admonish your disciples! They are removing grain from stalks—that constitutes 'harvesting,' which is a kind of work that is prohibited on the Sabbath day of rest."

Now to you and me it's obvious that the disciples had not stepped into that field for the purpose of "harvesting." They didn't have harvesting tools; they weren't proceeding systematically through the field. Jesus' response to the Pharisees gets at the issue of literal versus figurative interpretation of actions. Literally, the disciples did remove grains from the stalks; figuratively, that action was merely incidental to their primary act of walking through a field. So why is the story in the gospels? Is it a literal warning to us not to cut our grass on Sundays? No, the figurative meaning of the story reminds us that a day set aside for worship and rest and restoration is intended by God to be a gift to us.

We can see the importance of deciding between literal and figurative understandings of scripture—they both are possible, but which one makes more sense to the reasoned intellect?

Similarly, we can see the importance of both a scientific view of the world and a religious approach to life. Both look at the same world but through different lenses, asking different questions, serving different purposes. Being a person of faith does not jeopardize the validity of science, and approaching the world with the objective mindset of scientific inquiry does not threaten the inspiration and comfort, hope and encouragement we derive from religion.

The word "science" can refer not merely to the natural sciences but to all knowledge and higher learning. "Knowing" and "believing"—science and religion—are different approaches to perceiving and engaging the world. But they come from the same source—"Ex Uno Fonte": both knowledge and faith are revealed to us by the Creator of All That Was, Is, And Ever Will Be.

Presbyterian Christians value learning, education, knowledge. That's why they founded colleges like Wooster and Muskingum in Ohio, or a place out east that you may have heard of called Princeton, as well as dozens of other colleges. Because we value learning, education and knowledge, so many Presbyterian congregations offer weekday preschools—to offer education in the years before public education begins. Because we value learning, education and knowledge, Presbyterian congregations offers religious education through Sunday schools and summer camping and vacation Bible schools and campus ministries. We don't fear that our growing knowledge will "in any way threaten, demean, or diminish [our] faith in God. In fact, for many, the wonders of science often enhance and deepen their awe and gratitude toward God."³

We don't need to leave our brains at the door of the church just because we seek to devote our hearts to God. God has given us minds to explore and comprehend the wonder and majesty of the created order. Likewise God has given us hearts to appreciate God's immeasurable love, to return that love to God and to share that love with the world. Knowledge and faith, science and religion—they all come from the same source: the One True Living, Loving God.

[sermons: se20190210; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

³ https://theclergyletterproject.org/rel_evolution_weekend_2019.html accessed 2/8/2019