

Proving Divine Providence

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 9, 2020—Science & Religion Sunday

- Job 38:1-12, 18 (Good News Translation) Then out of the storm the LORD spoke to Job. ² “Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words? ³ Now stand up straight and answer the questions I ask you. ⁴ Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it. ⁵ Who decided how large it would be? Who stretched the measuring line over it? Do you know all the answers? ⁶ What holds up the pillars that support the earth? Who laid the cornerstone of the world? ⁷ In the dawn of that day the stars sang together, and the heavenly beings shouted for joy. ⁸ Who closed the gates to hold back the sea when it burst from the womb of the earth? ⁹ It was I who covered the sea with clouds and wrapped it in darkness. ¹⁰ I marked a boundary for the sea and kept it behind bolted gates. ¹¹ I told it, “So far and no farther! Here your powerful waves must stop.” ¹² Job, have you ever in all your life commanded a day to dawn? ¹⁸ ...Have you any idea how big the world is? Answer me if you know.
- Matthew 15:32-38 (Good News Translation) ³² Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I feel sorry for these people, because they have been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat. I don’t want to send them away without feeding them, for they might faint on their way home.” ³³ The disciples asked him, “Where will we find enough food in this desert to feed this crowd?” ³⁴ “How much bread do you have?” Jesus asked. “Seven loaves,” they answered, “and a few small fish.” ³⁵ So Jesus ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks to God, broke them, and gave them to the disciples; and the disciples gave them to the people. ³⁷ They all ate and had enough. Then the disciples took up seven baskets full of pieces left over. ³⁸ The number of men who ate was four thousand, not counting the women and children.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Science and religion are different but not competing ways of making sense of our existence.

In the classic Broadway musical “Oklahoma!” the song that opens Act II acknowledges competing interests in the Oklahoma territory in the early years of the 1900s.

- On the one hand, there were homesteaders trying to establish themselves by plowing the sod and sowing seeds. Those farmers put up barbed-wire fences to protect their crops from being trampled by roaming livestock.
- On the other hand there were the ranchers grazing livestock on the open plains. The herds of cows were guided and guarded by “cowboys.” The cowboys didn’t like the fences being put up by the farmers.

Hence, the song kicking off the show after intermission proclaims “*Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends.*” After all, the song continues, “*One man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow, but that’s no reason why they cain’t be friends.*”¹

In a similar vein, I think the scientist and the theologian should be friends. Sometimes people think a person of science and a person of faith have competing interests, not unlike the farmer and the cowman.

- By “theologian” I mean anyone whose world view presumes the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful divine being – any person of faith who gives thought to who God is could be considered a “theologian” – literally, “one who thinks about God.”
- And I don’t limit the meaning of “scientist” to someone working in a laboratory; the person of science is anyone who relies on impartial “proof” that can be demonstrated and replicated before they will accept something as true or real.

¹ Richard Rodgers, “The Farmer and the Cowman” from “Oklahoma!” at <https://genius.com/Richard-rodgers-the-farmer-and-the-cowman-lyrics>

The two are not mutually exclusive. Not only can the person of faith and the person of science be friends... one can be both at the same time.

Just last week someone in the church said to me, "I've got lots of questions about the Bible. I've been reading it and some of it just doesn't make sense." I agree. Some of the Bible *doesn't* make sense. We're not always aware of it, but we read the Bible with an Enlightenment point of view. So we assume that what we read should be rational, logical, and able to be proven in an objective way.

But then we read about the Hebrew people escaping Egypt and Pharaoh's armies by God giving Moses the ability to part the waters of the Red Sea, thus allowing the people to pass upon dry ground to safety on the other side. We've never seen that before. Where's the proof of that?

Or we hear about mystic astrologers from an eastern land following the guidance of a miraculous star leading them across desert and wilderness to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem to find Jesus the child born to be the world's savior. We've never seen a celestial body behave like that. How could that be explained?

Or we hear a story of Jesus feeding a multitude with seven loaves and two fish. How did that happen? We couldn't give communion to 4,000 people with seven loaves of bread.

To be sure, there have been efforts to use the scientific method to explain those and other "miracles" described in the Bible:

- For instance, as recently as five years ago the *Washington Post* reported on a software engineer whose master's thesis presented an explanation of meteorological and oceanographic phenomena that could have produced a parting of waters in a Nile delta marsh, a "Sea of Reeds."²
- Or, the *BBC* reported a British astronomer's theories that the appearance and unusual movements of the biblical Star of Bethlehem could be attributed to rare planetary alignments of Uranus and Jupiter, or the orbit of a previously unknown comet.³
- Some have suggested that the feeding of the multitudes can be explained by human psychology. With that mass of people being directed to sit down smaller groups--seeing each other face to face--perhaps they were more willing to share whatever food they had brought with them as they saw the meager loaves being distributed through the crowd.

Is it possible to provide a rational, logical, scientifically justified explanation to the Bible's seemingly nature-defying incidents? Sometimes, maybe. It's also possible that biblical figures simply perceived unusual events of nature as being miraculous. And of course it's entirely possible that some things were, indeed, miracles that defy explanation.

But trying to read the Bible as a document of science is going to be frustrating because that's not what the Bible is intended to convey.

To show you what I mean, consider this booklet that nearly everyone here has read at some point or other: "The Digest of Ohio Motor Vehicle Laws." This book details the "rules of the road" in the State of Ohio. In it you'll learn things like

- When you're required to drive with headlights on;
- How close to an intersection you can park (Anyone? No closer than 20 feet.);
- Whether you can keep the deer you just hit and killed with your car (answer: yes, if you report it to the authorities first);
- If you must sound your horn before passing any vehicle (answer: surprisingly, yes, but really... who does *that?*).

I borrowed this copy from my neighbor's teenage daughter. I'll admit that it was interesting to review it for the first time in years. Helpful information... but if what I wanted to learn was how

² Chris Mooney, Dec. 8, 2014 at

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/12/08/no-really-there-is-a-scientific-explanation-for-the-parting-of-the-red-sea-in-exodus/> accessed 2/6/2020

³ Victoria Gill, Dec. 23, 2012, "Star of Bethlehem: The astronomical explanation" at <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20730828> accessed 2/6/2020

to get from Rocky River to Toledo, this document all about vehicles and roads and procedures would be of no help.

No, I'd want to consult this document: a map of the State of Ohio. The map will show me where I am, where I want to go, and the various options for selecting a route from here to there. The map won't tell me what to do if I see an emergency vehicle with flashing lights approaching me or what are the speed limits on the roads between here and there; that's not what a map is intended to do.

Similarly, the Bible is not intended to convey scientific explanations of how the universe came to be or how a dead body could be restored to life or any other event that defies our experience of the natural world around us. The Old and New Testaments are human testaments to faith and trust in a living God who loves and provides for us. Most Presbyterians understand Holy Scripture to be the "unique and authoritative witness" to God's engagement with the created order. Most believe that scripture is to be taken seriously but not literally, for while the scriptures were "given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," they are "the words of [human beings]... "reflect[ing] views of life, history and the cosmos which were then current."⁴

From this morning's Old Testament reading from the Book of Job we heard the voice of God dismissing the notion that the human being can explain God's ways: "⁴*Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it. ⁵Who decided how large it would be? Who stretched the measuring line over it? Do you know all the answers?*"⁵ The Bible reveals God's awesome grandeur, God's comforting care, God's high expectations, God's mercy, God's love embodied in Jesus the man of Nazareth, the man for all the world. The theologian asks the questions of Who and Why.

Those aren't the questions of a scientist. No, the scientific outlook brings to bear the capacity of intellect, curiosity and reason to explore the questions of How and When. Scientists have postulated a point of origin—the proverbial "Big Bang"—some 20 billion years ago. They presume it was precipitated by an action describable by what they now call a law of physics... but the scientist is unable to explain what "was" immediately before that nanosecond of an instant when the searing heat of a cataclysmic explosion launched into the farthest corners of an infinite universe every bit of matter that exists.

Their mathematical equations and computations can calculate the movement and speed of galaxies racing away from each other, and the temperatures of far-flung stars and the orbits of planets circling them. But the scientist cannot see beyond The Creation to explain *why* our universe exists at all. Contemplating "Why" is the role of the believer; calculating "How" is the role of the scientist. Each helps us comprehend our very existence.

The late Robert Jastrow was a popular scientist, author, and a few decades ago served as long-time director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Steeped in the scientific method as a way of understanding life, still Dr. Jastrow understood that there was a role for science and a role for theology.

At the close of his book God and the Astronomers, Robert Jastrow offer[ed] this homage to theology. The scientist, he [wrote], "has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."⁶

Contemplating "Why" is the role of the believer; calculating "How" is the role of the scientist. Like the farmer and the cowman, the theologian and the scientist can be friends. Each helps us appreciate the gift of our very existence.

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⁴ Excerpted from "The Confession of 1967," 9:29, Book of Confessions, Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

⁵ Job 38:4-5 Good News Translation

⁶ --as cited by Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post*, in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 7/27/97