

Thank God for Evolution  
Rev. Alan Claassen November 15, 2015

Where to begin?

Where to begin if you are God and you have a universe to create.

Where to begin if you are God and you want to create a universe that will include among its elemental forces freedom and love?

Where to begin if you are God and want to create a universe that is capable of creating itself?

Where to begin if you the human first gifted with consciousness and you want to describe God, the world, and your place in it?

Where to begin a sermon that wants to deal with such questions as these?

I can remember when I was in grade school; I used to like to think about the end or edge of the universe. I would imagine traveling out further and further in space and then coming to the wall at the edge of the universe. But then I would always have ask myself, "What's on the other side of that wall?"

My childhood dilemma apparently is an ancient one. There is an old story about a western traveler encountering an Asian philosopher and asks him to describe the nature of the world.

The great philosopher says, “The world is a ball resting on the flat back of a huge turtle.”

“Ah yes,” replied the westerner, “But what does the turtle stand on?”

“On the back of an even larger turtle.”

“Yes, but what does that turtle stand on?”

“A very perceptive question, but it’s no use, mister, it’s turtles all the way down.”

My future must have begun with that frustration of not knowing how to describe the beginnings or endings of the universe because later in life I chose to go into the humanities where poetic answers to such questions are allowed.

In fact, I became stubbornly anti-science in high school and college. And so in my last year of college, when it was time to assess what general education classes I still needed to graduate I discovered that I needed to take two science classes and one math class.

No more term papers, no more waxing eloquently, these were teachers that wanted real facts, no subjectivity, or so I thought.

My fears were somewhat calmed on my first day in astronomy class. After a perfectly interesting lecture the teacher gave the assignment for that evening. He said, “Go out and look at the stars tonight and wonder.”

Well I could that.

But then he added this amazing fact.

The ancient Greeks were such fine observers of the stars that they noticed that some stars moved, very slowly month-by-month. These stars seemed to wander on a course across the night sky.

The Greek word for wander? Planet.

These friends of Socrates paid such close attention to the night sky that they could see one light change place among millions of lights.

I was impressed.

Years passed and then the curiosity about Science and Religion got a hold of me again. I found a book by John Polkinghorne, a Cambridge Professor of Mathematical Physics, who became an Anglican Priest and President of Queen's College, Cambridge.

The book that I chose to read, is entitled Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity.

He begins the book by saying that science is not like some sort of cosmic Dragnet, "Just the facts, ma'am." Instead it is experiment and theory, fact and interpretation, always mixed up with each other. Now to a humanities person such as myself, this is comforting, it almost sounds like scientists are actually very creative people.

Polkinghorne believes that both science and religion seek knowledge. Science works by testing, religion works by trusting. Science asks How? Religion asks Why? And what science today is able to tell us about creation far surpasses what Greeks accomplished by seeing moving stars.

Polkinghorne describes the time it takes for the basic components of the atom to develop into helium, hydrogen. Millions of years just for this to take place.

The right degree of expansion after the Great Flaring Forth at the beginning of time,  
just the right amount of smoothness in space/time for it appears to be ripples in the universe that give us galaxies.

Just the right amount of chance and necessity so that we don't have a completely random world that makes no sense,  
nor do we have a boring world that sparks no delight.

Albert Einstein said that one of the miracles of the universe is that we can understand it at all.

I really can't begin to describe all of the things he says in the book, mainly because I don't understand them.

I am a recovering humanities major. These things take time.

He did have one passage I found interesting and I think I understood it. He is talking about water.

"A few H<sub>2</sub>O molecules by themselves are not wet, but if you have a collection of billions of these molecules, they interact with each other in such a way as to produce an energy at the surface of that the collection that physicists call "*surface tension*" and we experience as *wetness*."

Wetness is the collective effect of the H<sub>2</sub>O molecules together. Wetness is an energetic property of relationships.

The significance of this statement about water is that is indicative of the dramatic shift that took place in physics in the 1920s, namely the shift from the view that the world is a collection of separate entities to the view that the physical world is a network of relationships.

This is the most exciting aspect of these sub-atomic discoveries. Energy-relationship is the basis of creation. Not matter. Not things.

But energy. Energy like light, and heat, and gravity,  
like attraction, like spirit, like love.

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep;

and the wind of God was moving over the face of the waters and God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God said, “I feel good. So good. I’ve got light.”

This leads a man of science and religion like Polkinghorne to say that God is a part of every moment of creation, not just the first one. The difference might be put into words by saying, “the Creator Creating.”

In the 13th century there was a philosopher named Barush Spinoza who wrote at a time when science and religion were not estranged from one another.

He had a definition for God that I have always liked and coincides nicely with this idea of Polkinghorne’s as the Creator Creating.

Spinoza defined God as “Nature naturing.”

God cannot be separated out from the universe, just as consciousness cannot be separated out from our brains and body.

Spirit/energy/matter are interrelated. God is not one thing among all of the other things of the universe.

God is not directing the universe like a puppeteer directs the puppet, and yet the universe is not free to go wherever it wills.

There are natural laws and there is natural freedom. God is the form that was there before it all began and the idea that pulls it all forward.

The great novelist Alice Walker describes this interconnection between energy and matter this way. "What I have noticed in my small world is that if I praise the wild flowers growing on the hill in front of my house, the following year they double in profusion and brilliance.

The universe responds. What you ask of it, it gives.

I remember I used to dismiss the bumper sticker, "Pray for Peace." I realize now that I did not understand it, since I did not understand prayer; which I know now to be the active affirmation of our inseparableness from the divine."

Prayer is a force of energy just as real as gravity, light, or the breath of God hovering over the waters at the beginning of creation.

Prayer is the active affirmation of our inseparableness from the divine, and one another.

The poet, Emily Dickinson said, that the only commandment of Jesus that she obeyed was, "Consider the lilies."

What would happen if we did just what Jesus asked his disciples to do and considered the lilies. Truly considered the lilies. Go out tonight and look at the stars and wonder.

These thoughts about sub-atomic particles, the scientific theories about the beginnings of the universe, energy/relationships as the basis of life, all of these thoughts are new for me and I wish I could share some of delight in them with you.

Part of my excitement comes from my belief that we need a new way to talk about God. The Bible is a great storehouse of stories of the interaction between God and humanity. But it is a story cast in an understanding of the world that is 2,000-6,000 years old.

Much of it does not square with our understanding of the universe. How can we retain the great insights of love and justice that are in the Bible and join them with our current view of the world?

And, in light of the crisis of global warming, and increasing violence in the world, we also need to understand the great insights of love and justice that are in science and in order to shape our current view of theology and morality.

We need a new creation story and science and religion, cosmology and theology, dancing together can provide.

Let me close with a reading from a scientist who has taken a new position at the Vatican, namely, Pope Francis, who says, in his latest encyclical,

God has written a precious book, “whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe”.<sup>[54]</sup>

[IN other words, nature is a scripture.]

The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: “From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine”.<sup>[55]</sup>

The bishops of Japan, for their part, made a thought-provoking observation: “To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s love and hope”.<sup>[56]</sup>

Next Sunday, Elizabeth Griego and I will share more about the moral implications of this awareness of the Universe story with selected readings from the Pope’s Encyclical, the poetry of Mary Oliver, and the Earth Care Covenant of this congregation.

For now, I just want to affirm that as a progressive Christians we affirm to wisdom of science, evolution, and the Creator’s care for all creation.

And let us realize how we can be praying for peace simply by considering a lily, as an active affirmation of our inseparableness from the divine.