

## **Science and God – Acts 17:24-28a - January 3, 2010**

(Watch “Science and God” Clip) I think most of you have figured out that we are starting a new sermon series this morning that will go for the next six weeks right up to - believe it or not – Lent. This series is entitled: The Case for God in Today’s World and as usual, I launch into it with lots of excitement and just a little bit of fear and trepidation. For if we are truly honest with ourselves, we have all at one time or another thought some of the very same thoughts that the woman from the video expressed – as well as others that will come up the next six weeks. That does not necessarily mean we are agnostics or even atheists but simply people of faith who have some questions or even some doubts.

Whether we want to accept it or not, doubt is a part of the universal, human condition and not necessarily a bad part. All of us struggle with doubt in most – if not all - areas of our lives: our relationships, our career paths, our college choices, our vacation plans, and yes our faith and that is a good thing. Why? Because I believe it leads to a deeper, more grounded, examined faith as opposed to a blind, ignorant, obedient one. Alfred Lord Tennyson once said, they’re lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds. When we doubt and struggle, at least we are thinking about things and wrestling with them.

Now if you do believe you are an atheist or agnostic that is okay too – especially since I believe you struggle with doubt as well. Please know that I am just glad that you are here – whether you are a visitor or regular at St. John’s - and hope that this sermon series will maybe help you – all of us actually - in our search for answers or direction

beginning this morning with the question of science and whether it has done away with the need for God.

Next week we will take a look at all the bad things that are done in the name of religion followed by the subject of religious wars and violence. Week four we will tackle some of the more disturbing passages in the bible that just don't make sense to us. Week five we will talk about a subject I know I have already attempted before but believe it is probably the number one stumbling block for people – myself included especially in seminary - which is the question of suffering. And finally on week six I am going to attempt to bring it all together and make the best case I can for the existence of God in today's world.

So let's get started with the question of God and science. Now please hear me loud and clear when I say that my goal this morning is NOT to scientifically prove the existence of God. For I don't believe that is possible – which is actually part of the problem or at least the challenge. Instead what I hope to do this morning is prove to you that you can be a thinking, intelligent person who believes in both science and the existence of God. Unlike Richard Dawkins, the world's most widely publicized atheist who was referred to in the opening video, I do not believe that the two – science and God are mutually exclusive or incompatible.

I know there are people – Christians - who believe that the earth is only six thousand years old but I am not one of them. In fact, most of the Christians that I know or associate with believe that the universe is more likely 14 or 15 billion years old. They and I also believe that the planet earth was probably formed about four billion plus years ago and life began to form shortly after that. In much the same vane most of the

Christians that I personally know believe - like me - that evolution is a magnificent way to explain the mechanism by which life on our planet changes over time. However, I do not believe that this is a completely unguided, blind process. That it is random chance with no design or goal.

And believe it or not, I do not personally know many Christians who look at Genesis 1 and 2 as scientific texts meant to explain and teach us how the universe came into being. Most of the Christians I know - at least the ones who are willing to talk about it - again myself included - look at the creation stories as epic poetry designed to teach us about theology and anthropology – about the things of God and humanity and not about cosmology or science. In other words, Genesis 1 and 2 are beautiful words or stories written down by people over 32 hundred years ago who in their limited knowledge and understanding of science weren't really that far off if you think about it.

Up until a hundred years ago, scientists believed that the universe was static and always existed. But thanks in part to two Catholic priests, things began to change. The first was the French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard who was willing to go against the Church as he sought a less restrictive interpretation of the Genesis story in favor of a brand new account of the unfolding of the cosmos.

The second was the Belgian priest Father Lemaitre who introduced his hypothesis of the primeval atom which eventually became known as – you guessed it - the big bang theory. In other words, that there was a beginning point to the universe which is what is basically said in Genesis. While not immediately accepted by the scientific world because many thought it was impossible to prove and did sound too

much like the biblical creation account, eventually it has evolved into the prevailing theory of development of the universe.

Similarly, evolutionists tell us that life – the first cells – emerged in the primordial seas and you read the Genesis account and find that God called forth life first from the seas. Evolutionists go on to tell us that organisms gradually developed from more simple life forms to more complex ones which is basically again what we read in Genesis until we finally reach the evolution of humanity – at the very end of the development process. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to ignore or reject these similarities because of the seven day language in Genesis that most of us realize actually took billions of years.

But even without these interesting connections, what I believe is most important in the Genesis story is the assertion that there is a God before the big bang. Before anything else was – God was. And God was the one who set all things into motion. It also asserts that God created everything to be good. He looked at his creation and said this is a good creation – this is a good planet – a good cosmos.

And then we find that humankind evolved as the crowning creation with the capacity to reason and think and love and ask questions about whether there is a God. Unfortunately along with such attributes came the challenge of temptation. There is not one person in this room - I am certain - that does not know what I am talking about for we all wrestle with temptation. It is part of our human condition. The problem of course is that when we succumb to it – when we give into temptation even when we know we shouldn't - we lose paradise. We lose the best that God has given us and settle for less.

Now I suspect that some of you are thinking that is all fine and good but how do we know – how can we prove that God was the one who set all these things in motion. In fact, how can we prove that God exists at all? Some scientists cannot accept that God is not subject to the same scientific method that everything else is subject to. Scientists say this is how we know truth, this is how we learn. We observe, we create a hypothesis, we speculate or predict certain likely outcomes of a test, we do the test and that is how we know what is true or not true. But unfortunately, God does not seem very willing to get under our microscopes for us to be able to examine God in that way. And so many have said, unless there is scientific proof I am not going to believe.

Unless we can answer those wonderful questions children eventually ask us like who made God, what is God made of and why can't we see God – questions that I cannot adequately answer - they are not willing to accept or believe. Instead many of them believe that the more science can explain about the workings of the universe, the less they need God and the smaller God gets – if God really exists at all.

On the other hand, there are other people – myself and many scientists included - who believe that the more science can unveil and explain to us the bigger God actually gets. Just because we can better explain the mechanisms of the universe doesn't mean we don't also need to explain the mechanical engineer who designed it. Just because we can explain the mechanism doesn't mean that there is not God behind these things who is orchestrating it to begin with. Even though science can explain something doesn't in anyway diminish for me the wonder and mystery of God.

In fact, in many cases, when I can understand something better thanks to science, the more I marvel in who God is and the fact that there is such an amazing,

complex world like ours that I believe God is ultimately responsible for. And the same seems true for these folks as well. Take a look. (Watch “Scientists Who Believe in God” Clip)

Now I suspect that none of these believing scientists or I have changed anyone’s mind or beliefs this morning and that is okay. But what I do hope you are willing to consider – especially if you believe yourself to be an atheist or agnostic – is that it is possible to be both a Christian – a believer in God – and at the same time a believer in science. I hope that you might be able to see that religion and science are two different but very important ways to explain the truth of the universe and that they can be complimentary. I believe that we need both and that they are not at odds with each other. Let me end this morning with a couple of examples of why I believe that.

I have no doubt that scientists can explain to me that a sunset is the daily disappearance of the sun below the horizon as a result of the earth’s rotation. They can tell me that due to refraction of light in the atmosphere, the ray path of the setting sun is highly distorted near the horizon making the apparent astronomical sunset occur when the sun’s disk is already about one diameter below the horizon. But that does not explain to me how the grandeur and beauty of a sunset catches my breath and makes me marvel at what I cannot but believe is God’s handiwork.

A scientist can tell me how on Friday morning when Mike put his arms around me, gave me a kiss and wished me a happy New Year – since I was asleep by 10:30 New Year’s Eve – that oxytocin exploded across my brain. But it doesn’t really explain to me the love that I have for him and he for me. The scientists can explain to me how sound waves are produced by this beautiful organ or piano or any of the other instruments we use at St. John’s – how they hit my eardrum and produce a response in

my brain but it can't quite explain what I felt Christmas Eve with all the amazing music we heard at both services.

Scientists can explain so many amazing things to me and I am truly thankful for all they have taught us and all they will teach us in the future. But I cannot help but hear in my mind and my heart the powerful words from our text this morning: The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth gives to all mortals life and breath and all things so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being.” I for one am thankful for that truth and hope and pray you are as well. Amen.