

Epiphany 5/ Evolution Sunday    February 7, 2010    Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

I love when a movie or a book comes out at just the right time that going to see it could legitimately be considered sermon preparation time. That happened this past week when Laurence asked me if I wanted to go see *Creation*, the movie about Charles Darwin. “Well,” I said, “this Sunday is Evolution Sunday; I think I’d better go see it.”

The movie is not specifically about the theory of evolution. It’s a personal story of the Darwin family based on a book by a great-great-grandson using letters and diaries from the family. In large part, it’s a love story. But evolution is certainly a character in the plot, especially as it relates to religion. Mrs. Darwin, Emma, is a devout Christian. And although Charles had returned from his expedition to the Galapagos Islands fifteen years earlier, he struggled to finish the book about his findings, largely due to Emma’s opposition to his ideas. Emma worries about Charles’ soul and fears that if he does not go to heaven, they will be separated for eternity.

In the end (spoiler alert), Emma reads the manuscript of *The Origin of Species*, and gives her approval for its publication. She declares herself to be an “accomplice” and hopes that God will forgive them both. The movie ends with love taking priority over doctrine.

As love stories go, it’s pretty good. As a window into the fierce collision of science and religion, it’s also pretty good. On one side, there’s the church, exemplified by the family’s pastor who makes Darwin’s daughter crawl on rock salt as punishment for defending her father’s theory. On the other side is Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin’s friends in the scientific community, who congratulates Darwin that with his theory he has “killed God.” Huxley and the pastor are polar opposites; both made me cringe.

Of course, we could say that that was 150 years ago; we’ve learned so much since then – in both science and religion. Things are much different today. Except - according to the movies’ producer, the US was one of the last countries to find a distributor because of the creation/evolution controversy. So - Thomas Huxley lives on in scientists like Richard Dawkins, who said: “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence,” while the family pastor lives on in the promoters of Creation Sunday as a rebuttal of the efforts of Evolution Sunday. “The signers of . . . pro-evolution Clergy Letter Project will be celebrating Evolution Sunday on this very same date, preaching that evolution is true and that the first 11 chapters of Genesis are teaching stories like Aesop’s fables - from our very pulpits! It is disgusting that this modern-day Goliath gets to mock the people of God, flaunting the compromise of some of our ministers as if it represented the majority opinion, with no answer in kind.” In the words of Moses, “Oy veh!”

When the movie ended, I still had questions. What I wanted to know more about was how Emma came to reconcile the religious teachings in which she so firmly believed with her acceptance of discoveries that came into direct conflict with those teachings. Because this is still where so many people of faith are today, not with Dawkins, not with the creationists. And unfortunately many think there's no middle way. They either have to check their brains at the church door and accept teachings that no longer make sense. Or they have to give up on religion altogether as (at best) an outdated belief system) or (at worst) as an oppressive opiate.

So is there a middle ground for people of faith? I believe there is. But it's not always easy to find. That's why we have the growing group of those who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Contrary to what Thomas Huxley thought, Darwin did not kill God. But perhaps he did begin or contribute to a process of examining religious beliefs, doctrines, creeds, organizations – all the trappings of "organized religion." And in that process, many have decided that "church" is not for them, yet they partake of a myriad of spiritual practices.

You may know that I attended the Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion two weeks ago and the theme this year was: *Spiritual but not Religious: Chasing the Divine*. The controversial, often called heretical, Matthew Fox was one of the speakers; his lecture was entitled: *From Religion to Spirituality and Back Again?* asking if we are not able to learn from our encounters with the mystics and with various spiritual practices and bring that back into a renewed and enlivened expression of religion. It was interesting to hear many of the participants confessing that for most of their lives they were "religious but not spiritual." It was the best Earl Lecture series I've been to, and I heard that same sentiment from many others. It appears that there is a strong desire to bring spirituality and religion together. PSR president, Bill McKinney, in his closing remarks, noted that "we pretty much demolished the notion that religion and spirituality are polar opposites. Each needs the other to be truly healthy." It seems that organized religion is beginning to get the idea. And it was obvious at the Earl Lectures that we're trying this and experimenting with that, that there are no easy answers to being church today – but it is a pretty interesting and exciting time.

Which brings me back to Evolution Sunday. I'm not usually a fan of having special interest days in church – or at least I have conflicting feelings about it. We have a liturgical season that takes us through the cycle of the year with intention and purpose, so that days like Reconciling in Christ Sunday and Evolution Sunday sometimes force us to divert our attention away from the meaning of the appointed day. But this week, I'm amazed at the connection – or maybe I'm just more attuned to it because it's Evolution Sunday.

Did you notice that all of the readings have an element of the supernatural or the miraculous or the mystical? Isaiah has a vision of God and angels and a call to ministry. Paul recalls his own vision and conversion on the road to Damascus. And Jesus produces an amazing catch in a night of unproductive fishing. All of these mysterious events would surely be scoffed at by the likes of Huxley and Dawkins.

And frankly, by us, when we're using the rational parts of our brains. How do we explain these visions, these miracles? Richard Dawkins wrote a famous letter to his 10-year-old daughter, in which he instructed her about how to decide whether or not to believe something. One good reason to believe something is true is evidence. Three bad reasons to believe that something is true are: tradition, authority, and revelation.

Now I don't have any trouble at all with the first two. He has some good arguments there; and I doubt that any Christian of the progressive persuasion would disagree with him; Dawkins is arguing against a much more orthodox Christianity. But revelation is problematic. And the funny thing is that that a whole lot of "religious" people would agree that you can't have a direct experience of the Divine and that it can cause a whole lot of trouble when people go around claiming they have. How would you react to an Isaiah of today, having a vision like that? What would you think of a Paul who claimed to hear Jesus speaking him? And what do we make of these miracles that Jesus, and others, may have been able to perform? How would we know what was true? We'd surely want to see some – evidence.

But here is where we must depart from Dawkins and acknowledge that there are different ways of knowing. In the gospel reading, Peter "knew" that there were no fish in those waters; the evidence was in their empty nets. But Jesus told Peter to "go deeper" - go deeper into the water, deeper in faith, deeper in God's vision for his life, beyond rational evidence, into an apparently impossible adventure.

This is where we are today – being called to "go deeper," to be spiritual, to learn from the mystics both old and new, to chase the Divine, dive into the water of spiritual adventure – and then haul the catch of fish back into the boat of the church in a renewed and enlivened expression of religion.

This is not to say that our revelations can't be questioned or examined. I'm always suspicious when someone says, "God told me that you're supposed to . . ." There's plenty of evidence for the destructive nature of so-called revelations to cult leaders like Jim Jones and David Koresh. There are criteria for discerning these things, and they should be part of an on-going subject of discussion within the church.

We claim that Epiphany is the season of revelation. We began with stargazers from the East and now come to a scientist from the West. Here, in the intersection of spiritual and religious, is where we engage the so-called creation/evolution controversy. This is where we engage in interfaith and interspiritual understanding and experience. This is where we go deeper into what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Writer Bruce Epperly calls these texts today a connection of mysticism and mission. The upshot of Peter's obedience to "go deeper" was, not only a catch of fish, but the call to take the good news out to other people.

We have good news to tell, too - that the God of Isaiah, and Paul, and Jesus, and Charles is big enough to take our questions and doubts and changing understandings of the world around us and to love us back with what the Psalmist so often calls "steadfast love," proving once again, as Emma Darwin discovered, that the movie always ends with love taking priority over doctrine.

Amen