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“Einstein & Genesis”

Genesis 1 & 2

A couple of months ago, I spoke about inclusive language...that we need to explore various names and images for God. Today, you will see and hear about 3 images: “Elohim”, “Yahweh”-both masculine- and then our closing song includes a feminine pronoun For the Divine. It may be shocking sing it the first time, but I hope that you will find it a lovely piece of music with a sentiment that you appreciate. If nothing else, it will be good fodder for you lunch conversation.

This week I would like to invite you to have a Bible in your hands throughout the sermon. You will want to reference it as I talk about Genesis 1 & 2. Much of what I am sharing today is based on an article written by Larry Winters, who is a retired United Church of Christ minister.

In the magazine racks and online, you don’t have to look hard for various takes on how science and faith interface. Some people would like for them to be separate entities with little or no overlap. Either God was the creator of the universe and all that is in it OR there was a big bang.

- Creationism or Science. They are mutually exclusive.
- Faith or Scientific Theory. They can’t operate in unison.

But it was Einstein himself, when people tried to pin him down about the nature of light... was it a particle or a wave.... And Einstein said it wasn’t an “either/or” proposition. He concluded that the answer was a “both/and.” Light is both a particle and a wave. Furthermore, he said, “Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.”

So let's dig in to the first two chapters of Genesis. They do not tell one story. They splice together two different myths by two authors living in different times. The gods they describe are as different as night and day.

Genesis 1 is a rhythmic poem that recites the 7 days of creation. Scholars refer to this poem as part of P strand of the Old Testament. P stands for Priestly. In the P writings, the term for God is "Elohim." This story was written after Babylon crushed Jerusalem. The Jews were in exile and questioning their fate as God's chosen people. The writer of Genesis 1 begins with "... and darkness covered the face of the deep." The "deep" represented how the people felt – covered in darkness and chaos. The writer compared their current struggle with a story about how the earth began. Genesis 1 may start with darkness and chaos, but it quickly moves into symmetry. "Here is something you can count on", says the writer... so each part of the poem has the same refrain:

"God said
... let there be
... God saw
... it was good
... it was so
... and there was."

There is an obvious rhythm and even musical beat to this poem. And the writer says that life may appear out of control, but the universe has a pattern. P used all of his writing skill to underscore a pattern, equilibrium and dependability in the universe. His people needed that.

In other words, P assured them that chaos does not have to mean, "It's over." What appears to be an end can be the opening of a new beginning. It's here that science and faith overlap. Instead of an "either/or"; here is the "both/and". Science has long pointed out the link between destruction and creation as the universe evolves. **Faith teaches us - starting in Genesis 1 - that in chaos, we can depend upon God who brings stability and makes sense of the chaos.**

That was a message the people needed to hear so long ago and we continue to need to hear in our own lives.

When asked, “What is the most important question?” Einstein reportedly answered, “Is the universe friendly?” Genesis answers by repeating the word “good” seven times. The poem tells us: this is a dark time, God is invisible, but order prevails. Another quote from Albert about this is: “My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind.”

Let’s turn to the 2nd creation myth in Genesis. It is actually the oldest (by about 500 years) of the two writings but it is clear that a different writer and a different message are presented. While P is the name of the writer of Genesis 1, J is the writer for Genesis 2. And the name of God changes between the two writings. Elohim is the creating, ordering, stable force in chapter 1. In Genesis 2 we have a folksy god named Yahweh. And unlike the rhythmic Genesis 1, this story meanders. J introduces us to a radically different idea of how things happen.

The people to whom J writes were in a different position than the exiled Jews P was reassuring. J’s people had been blessed with King David’s charismatic leadership. Israel was a proud and noble nation then. They had standing among other nations.

And Genesis 2 is a wonderful drama. While Elohim orchestrates creation from beyond, Yahweh gets down and dirty. He touches things, experiments with soil. And in a twist, while Elohim gets everything right and pronounces it good; Yahweh’s first experiment... is “not good”. The reader is told that Yahweh says, “It’s not good that man should be alone.” So back to the dirt Yahweh goes. He makes animals and has the man look them over... even name them. But none of these creatures fits exactly right. Yahweh scratches his head... “Hmmm, I suppose we could try a female version of this earthling.” This god is completely at home with trial and error; chance and accident. This is a sculptor-God who is

comfortable sitting cross-legged in the clay as if playing with play dough, shaping and then smashing, recreating and then starting anew.

Genesis doesn't argue for Intelligent Design, as in the distinct formation of species. What Genesis does is ask that we hold *pattern* in one hand and *accident* in the other, realizing that they are essential complements. This is a "both/and" proposition. The first creation myth is about pattern. The second about the messiness of this world. They complement one another.

Comparing and contrasting Genesis 1 & 2 has some incredible implications. And that's really the heart of what I want to say today.

Implication 1: Literalism cheats us out of the wealth of symbol and story. Faith is an indescribable concept, as is God. Symbol and story help us express the inexpressible. But when we tie the hands of faith to make it a literal concept, we lose the complexity and mystery of truth. These stories help us get our minds around a Creator who cannot be defined into only one category. The Divine is orderly and messy; powerful and experimental; authoritative and questioning.

Implication 2: "Either/Or" thinking shrinks our minds. Einstein knew it. We don't have to choose between science and spirit. Science, in itself, is awe-inspiring. Both spirituality and science complement each other and need each other. Einstein is quoted saying, "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Jesus asked his listeners to be mindful of the world around them... to see truth in nature and in human nature. He combined story with wisdom and has left us with mysteries still to unravel.

Einstein was both a mathematician and a mystic. He was not embarrassed by reverent wonder. He said, "I want to know how God created this world. I am not

interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details.”

Implication 3: “Both/and” thinking asks us to get comfortable with metaphor, paradox, and uncertainty. Elohim and Yahweh make a very odd couple. How can the universe be both intelligent and random? Yet, people for centuries have recognized the unity of opposites. Aboriginal peoples used symbols to show the unity of opposites. Pre-Socratic Greeks and the philosophers of China and India made paradox their cornerstone. When we think critically, we recognize that very different things can be true at the same time.

I am often frustrated with the “either/or” discussions we have and we watch on TV. Truth is held in tension between opposites. We can argue that we believe in scientific theory while another person argues on the side of creationism. However, in creation, as in most events, we need to recognize the scientific and the mysterious held in tension with the other.

As the horizon blends sky with land, so the creation blends the elements of faith and reason; of science and mystery; of truth and story. May we behold the complementary nature of all as we journey in faith. I’d like to leave you with one more Einstein quote, which I think expresses the philosophy of many of us: “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

Einstein quotes from: <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/einstein>