

GOD, THE CREATOR
FIRST IN THE SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
SEPTEMBER 14, 1986

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The sermon at the Baacalaureate service in June at the public high school in Escalon, California, was quite controversial. The preacher, a local fundamentalist minister, evidently was eloquent in his attack on the teaching of evolution in the school, and the absence of the teaching of creationism in the school's biology classes. The Lutheran minister in Escalon responded to the sermon with a letter to the editor in the local paper in which he said that the sermon did not reflect the thinking of all the Christians in Escalon and that the sermon was inappropriate for a baccalaureate service. The preacher then replied in a letter to the editor in which he defended his attack on the teaching of evolution, and expressed shock that any Bible believing Christian could accept evolution.

These are interesting times in which we live. The famous Scopes trial of 1925 lives again. The right-wing of Protestant Christianity is receiving most of the press coverage, and is very influential in political decisions. While driving through Oregon on our way home from Expo early this week, we read in the Portland newspaper of a movement in Portland called "Fundamentalists Anonymous." A counselor started the support group for fundamentalists who are trying to break free of the dogmatism, authoritarianism and guilt of their religious training.

On the other hand, middle-of-the-theological-road Christians are not sure what we believe. It is time for a series of theological sermons where we deal with the major tenets of the Christian faith. There is an alternative to fundamentalism. We do not need to be wishy-washy in our thinking. Nor do we need to sacrifice intellectual integrity in order to be a biblical Christian. We need to study theology. We want to have a grasp on the major issues of the day, from a biblical, theological perspective.

Therefore, we are developing a solid program of adult education in our church. We have three adult classes on Sunday mornings, including one on theology. In two weeks, we will host a lecture series. Claremont Seminary recently completed another class in our church. We have excellent classes for youth and children. And, I am beginning this morning a series of sermons on the historic Apostles' Creed, which was compiled by a church council in approximately 250 A.D. The Apostles' Creed has been the foundational statement of Christian beliefs for centuries. Let's look at the creed from a fresh perspective and seek to relate these ancient beliefs to our modern times. We begin this morning with the first statement, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

There is little material in the Bible on the existence and nature of God. The Hebrews were not interested in abstract concepts. They were interested in living their lives, understanding what was happening to them, and concerned about relating to God. They were far more interested in what God does than in who God is. The Bible begins in Genesis with a picturesque account of what God does and is doing; namely, creating. God created the heavens and the earth, and God is still creating. The energy, process, spirit which we call God is continually and constantly creating and reclaiming (but that is next week's sermon.)

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What about evolution? How did God create the world and how does God yet create? What process does God use? At this point the Bible is not helpful for the "how" question was really not addressed. Those who support the creationist model use the first chapter of Genesis as a literal description of how God creates. But, there are two creation stories in Genesis. Chapter 1 describes the creation in six days. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the creation of Adam and Eve and the subsequent disaster. The creationist proponents attempt to merge the two accounts into one, but they do so in violation of the texts. Read the first three chapters of Genesis carefully and you will see that the Adam and Eve creation is of a different nature and order than chapter 1.

In chapter 1 God creates the world out of the waters of chaos by placing a firmament in the midst of the water. A firmament is an upside-down bowl. When you leave the service today, find a relatively clear space and look at the sky. It looks like a bowl turned upside down and, according to Genesis 1:6-7, the firmament is holding back the water so that dry land could appear. Also, in Genesis 1, humans are the last to be created, and were created on the sixth day.

In the second account of creation, however, beginning in 2:4, God does not create out of water, but God begins with a desert. This account reflects the world-view of a desert, nomadic people. And, in the chapter 2 account, humans are not the last to be created, but are the first. Adam, which is the Hebrew word for mankind, was created first, then plant and animal life.

The discrepancy between the two accounts did not bother biblical people for neither account was intended to be a scientific theory of creation. Biblical people were not interested in the "how" question. These two accounts are poetic, picturesque, dramatic stories told through the centuries to answer, not the "how" question--not "how did God create?"--but the "who" and "why" questions. Who created the world? Genesis 1 is magnificent in its answer. The one, true God created all there is. Why are we here? Genesis 1 tells us that we humans were created to have "dominion" over creation; in other words, we are here to take care of the world. We are the caretakers, the stewards. The second account of creation--the Adam and Eve story--answers the "why" questions that people have asked since the beginning of time: Why is there evil? What has gone wrong with God's beautiful creation? Why do humans suffer? The Adam and Eve account says that humans get the big head, try to be like God, and attempt to run the world for our own benefit.

How God created the world is not discussed in the Bible, and we are free to allow science to answer the "how" question. As far as I am concerned, the theory of evolution is compatible with my biblical, theological understanding of God and God's purposes. My faith firmly believes that the God of the Bible created the world and is still creating. Let science tell me how. Nikos Kanzantzakis gives us a compelling picture of how God creates, and of God's purpose in creation, by taking poetic license with evolution. Listen to his poem.

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts
and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic
breath--a great Cry--which we call God. Plant life wished
to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters,

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but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: "Away, let go of the earth, walk!" Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, "I don't want to. What are you urging me to do? You are demanding the impossible.!" But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, "Away, let go of the earth, walk!"

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo, as a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared--worms--making themselves at home in water and mud. "We're just fine here," they said. "We have peace and security; we're not budging!"

But the terrible Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. "Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!" "We don't want to! We can't!" "You can't, but I can. Stand up!"

And lo, after thousands of eons, human beings emerged, trembling on still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur; the equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but the body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. Humans have been fighting, again for thousands of eons, to draw themselves, like a sword, out of the animalistic scabbards. Humans are also fighting--this is the new struggle--to draw themselves out of the human scabbard. They call in despair. "Where can we go? We have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss." And the Cry answers, "I am beyond. Stand up!"

Have you felt the Cry within you? Have you experienced that relentless force telling you to get up and get moving? You can live your life successfully. You can handle this pain. You can conquer this illness. You can overcome this depression. You can make your marriage work. You can serve God. You can do this impossible task. You can make your life count. You can make a difference. You can influence society. You can change things.

In worship services across the country this morning, United Methodist ministers are asked to highlight the pastoral letter to all United Methodists from the Council of Bishops, "In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace." It is divine coincidence that we are called to defend creation on the very Sunday we discuss God, the Creator. The foundational document begins with these words:

We write in defense of Creation. We do so because the Creation itself is under attack. Air and water, trees and fruits and flowers, birds and fish and cattle, all children and youth, women and men live under the darkening shadows of a threatening nuclear winter. We call the United Methodist Church to more faithful witness and action in the face of this worsening nuclear crisis. It is a crisis that threatens to assault not only the whole human family but planet Earth itself, even while the arms race itself cruelly destroys millions of lives in conventional wars, repressive violence, and massive poverty.

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I call your attention to this week's edition of our church paper, "The New Outlook." Please read the bishops' pastoral letter on page 2 and the complete document on page 5. Some of the media reaction to the bishops' letter was exaggerated, as so often happens. Here is your chance to read it in its entirety, draw your own conclusions, and make your own response to the challenge to defend Creation.

God, the Creator, is constantly creating, constantly calling, urging, pushing his creation to the vision. God is creating a new world, a new humankind, and God calls you and me to participate--to be partners--in creation. God, the Creator, calls us to become co-creators. God calls us to create a new church right here in our midst. We are in the process of creating our church's future, and the workshop will now be held on October 19. We have a thrilling opportunity to create a church like Jesus intended. We have magnificent facilities. We have the lay and staff leadership. We have the willingness, the motivation. Now, what we need is a common vision of what that ideal church looks like, and we need the power to achieve that vision, the power that comes from the Holy Spirit. Through our church and our commitment together as God's people, God calls us to create a city, a nation, and a world, without war, a world in which all his people are fed, educated, housed and treated with dignity and respect, a world in which the love of Jesus is the norm, rather than the exception.

Do you hear the Cry within you urging you to get on with the task? Do you feel its pulse--throbbing, commanding, compelling? That Cry is the creative force of God who is making a new heaven and a new earth. Will you heed the Cry? Will you commit your life to Jesus Christ and become a co-creator with God? Will you affirm: Yes, I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

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