***God, Science and Common Sense*** *a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 20, 2025*

*based on Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31*

In 1633, a 68 year-old man was summoned to a Dominican Convent in Rome. There, in the presence of the Papal Inquisition, he got down on his knees and read a statement prepared for him by his Inquisitors. Here is what it said.

“Wishing to remove from the minds of your Eminences and of every true Christian this vehement suspicion justly cast upon me, with sincere heart and unfeigned faith, I do abjure, condemn, and detest [my] errors and heresies, and generally each and every other error and heresy contrary to the Holy Church; and I do swear for the future that I shall never again speak or assert orally or in writing, such things as might bring me under similar suspicion.”

His name was Galileo Galilei. He was an astronomer, physicist, and engineer. On the basis of his observations, Galileo believed that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the solar system, and that the earth was only one of several planets that revolved around the sun. He didn’t come up with this on his own. He was influenced by the work of a Polish scholar by the name of Copernicus who died before Galileo was born.

Copernicus knew that his ideas would stir up a lot of trouble with religious and civil authorities, and so he kept them to himself, arranging for their publication *after* his death.

It has been said that Copernicus’s ideas are the only things Catholics and Protestants agreed on in the midst of the Reformation. That is to say, he was condemned by all, including John Calvin and Martin Luther. Catholics and Protestants agreed, the earth had to be at the center. The sun moves, *not* the earth—that’s what the Bible was believed to have said.

Only heretics and troublemakers wanted to let reason, or observation, for that matter, get in the way of established dogma.

So, in 1616, the Catholic Church banned all books that suggested that the earth moved at all. Including Galileo’s.

And here is an odd post script to his story. After he recanted, the Inquisition sentenced the old astronomer to house arrest and ordered that he listen each day for the remainder of his life to the seven psalms of penitence. Galileo lived for eight more years. As his daughter read to him those psalms from the Bible he sat by his window still using his telescope to watch the four largest moons of Jupiter revolve around that huge planet as it too made its way around a larger body, the sun.

I do hope that every now and then she slipped in Psalm 8. It’s not one of the penitential psalms but it pertains.

“O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in
all the earth . . .
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that
you have established;
What are human beings that you
are mindful of them? . . .”

The story of religion and science is not pretty. Science and religion have been battling for 400 years now and science has won every war, but not every battle.

The battle lines have today become more defined than ever due to the polarization everywhere present. And the stakes in this game have never been higher since so many evangelical Christians have so little regard for science and prefer right wing ideology over facts of any kind, even scientific facts as incontrovertible as gravity.

When I say the stakes are high, I am referring in part to the propensity of those in power in our country today to fire scientists by the thousands and subvert scientific evidence that tells us why catastrophic weather events are increasing everywhere, and bringing with it death, destruction, and extinction of species.

Yes, and on the medical front, we are seeing the undermining of our formerly robust vaccine system, the dismantling of public health infrastructure, and the promotion by the White House of unscientific claims and therapies.

The trust we had for over a hundred years in evidence-based medicine in this country is on the ropes.

But, you know, the roots of ideologically driven science policy goes back, of course, to earlier battles in this country over the theory of evolution.

Using scientific observation and deduction, Charles Darwin posited that we are here as a result of a slow process of evolution, spanning millions of years, guided by a principle Darwin called “natural selection.” However Christian Fundamentalists are of a very different mind. Many believe that the creation of the earth was the result of a single act of creation that occurred on the evening of October 22, 4004 BC (I am not making this up). That date was deduced according to “careful” calculations based on the genealogies in the Bible, by an Irishman named James Usshur.

Few understand that Darwin, himself, never attacked religion. He even went to some length to say that his theories could actually be in harmony with the existence of God.

In any case, he has been demonized in a way that would probably amuse him. His theories were both attacked and also defended in this country in a notable way on July 21st 1925, exactly 100 years ago tomorrow.

I am referring to the Scopes “Monkey” Trial which, remember, featured two popular and dramatic protagonists: Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan. You may not know that Bryan was a Presbyterian as well as a distinguished American politician. He was, rather sadly, made fun of by Clarence Darrow because he was out of his depth in this debate.

The late Stephen Jay Gould, Professor of Geology at Harvard, once wrote that evolution is the “central concept of biology, [and is] as well documented as any phenomenon in science. Eliminating it is like trying to teach American history without Abraham Lincoln.”

“We should cringe in embarrassment,” Gould wrote, “at the suppression of one of the greatest triumphs of human discovery.” (*Time*, 8/23/99)

So, where is the debate today? Well, what has happened is that the anti-evolution folks, in the name of Biblical religion, have become extremely well organized.

With the goal of suppression of information in mind, they worked hard decades ago to get anti-evolutionists on school boards. Pretty soon they got them into congress and we all know the rest of the story. They have been amazingly well-funded and they have invented something called, “Creation Science.” Right?

A lot of states now teach Creationism and Evolution side-by side. So, okay, what’s wrong with that? There’s a good argument in favor of that, and I’ll give it to you, in a moment, but first …

the trouble with Creation Science is …. it’s just not science. Science examines evidence, sifts, sorts, and then elevates just a handful of ideas to the status of theories which are constantly critiqued, examined, questioned and replaced when the evidence warrants. Science is a live thing.

However, Creationism begins with a doctrinal position and then, like a semi backing up into a parking spot, seeks for evidence to prove it and, in essence,

pin it to a bulletin board like a dead butterfly. There’s no law against doing it that way, of course. It just isn’t science.

Second, what Creationism teaches is wrong-headed. Evolution is***not*** an undocumented theory being foisted on us by a few godless liberals. The fossil and geological evidence for evolution is simply overwhelming. We may not know the whole story of how we got here, but the vast majority of scientists are confident that we did, in fact, evolve.

Third, and what makes me crazy, personally, is that Creationists are misusing the Bible. The objection to Biblical fundamentalism and its insistence on literalism, has always been that it takes scripture out of context.

I mean, look, the Bible is not a scientific or historical textbook. It is a collection of documents written by God-inspired people (and there’s a lot of healthy debate about what “God-inspired” might mean).

If we insist on making the Bible into something it is not—a scientific text—we will miss what it is, and what it says, which is something timeless that speaks to us in this moment in time, and every moment in time, in a deeply incarnational way. Don’t look that up on your phone. I just made that up.

Fourth, I object to Creationism for the same reason I cringe every time I hear the story of Galileo and the Inquisition, or any effort to impose an ideological or theological screen on academic freedom.

True faith is not threatened by scientific inquiry. No, it welcomes and celebrates it. In fact, my faith welcomes new scientific discovery as even more evidence of God’s amazing and mysterious creativity.

All that said, I am actually in favor of teaching evolution and creation “science” side-by-side as a way of illustrating how important critical thinking is. And, let me be honest, in that forum, creation science comes up short every time.

Okay then, while some folks are fighting about whether creation happened in six days or six billion years, a quiet revolution is happening within the scientific community. I don’t pretend to even begin to comprehend it, but what I do understand fascinates me. It has enormous implications for how we think about the world and it makes scientists sound, more and more, like theologians.

Until just a few years ago, we understood the universe in terms of Newtonian physics -- the theories of Sir Isaac Newton, who lies mere feet away from Charles Darwin in Westminster Abbey. Newton’s universe is mechanical, predictable, operating on the basis of four mathematical laws.

There is no room in a Newtonian universe for randomness, surprise, unpredictability: and not much room for God except as the creator of the machine, who simply observes (or observed long ago) its regular and predictable operation.

Today, however, we have Quantum Physics and Chaos Theory and String Theory, to name three that have replaced Newton’s ideas. New theories suggest that stuff happens, not always predictably. And the Universe is not like a machine.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, the universe is mostly like a web, which shakes and moves and responds to every single stimulus on or in it. “Physical reality,” she says, “refuses to be compartmentalized. As hard as we may try to turn it into a machine, it insists on acting like a body, animated by some intelligence that exceeds the speed of light.”  (Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Luminous Web,” *The Christian Century*, June 2-9, 1999)

And so, today, 100 years after the Scopes Trial, instead of a universe with no place for God, we find that we are living in a universe that is alive, responsive, full of spirit, full of energy, full of mystery.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, . . . Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.”

That is not scientific theory about the beginning of the universe. It is proclamation written to address a very real terrifying historical shift—which, if we read those words in their original context, was to find a reason to keep on trusting God at a time and place when there weren’t many reasons for doing so.

Those words were written in the 6th century BC for a community of Jews living in exile in Babylon having just lost a war. They were living in what seemed like a hopeless, God-forsaken, God-abandoned situation. “Where is our God?” they surely asked. “Maybe there is no God?” “Maybe the gods of Babylon, our enemy, are just as real as our God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Interpreter, Walter Brueggemann, says that the Genesis creation story was written to evoke the faith and trust of a community of desperate people.

To people who feel God-forsaken, abandoned, with no hope, the words of Genesis 1 are good news: “You belong to God. Creation belongs to God. God is still God.”

Yes, and in that story, men and women are God’s agents, given dominion and responsibility. The creator is counting on them to take care of the earth; a garden spot in the universe that God delights in because it is so beautiful; so good.

That was a very different word for the defeated Hebrew speaking exiles who were so very depressed.

No one believed creation was good. Life was mean, short, and brutish; full of injustice, suffering, and death. No one thought of human beings as responsible agents, or God’s partners in the management of creation. Everybody then knew human beings were insignificant, unimportant, living and dying at the whim of the gods.

This idea of a good creation, “surging with the mystery of God” was new and revolutionary. (Walter Brueggemann *Genesis, An Interpretation*, p. 26)

How sad to miss it. How sad to misunderstand the glorious poetry of the Bible and instead think it a rather dull science text.

And now, those at the top in our country, supported chiefly by Christians to whom Genesis 1 is merely a dead bit of dogma, are thrilled. They are gearing up to exploit every inch of our public lands for maximum profit to themselves.

A good creation, surging with the mystery of God is totally invisible to them.

How sad to miss the beauty Vincent Van Gogh saw when he looked upon a cypress tree, or a field of sunflowers; the same beauty to which the poet, e.e. cummings gave incomparable praise to God for, when he wrote …

“i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes . . .”

Amen