



## **Sermons** **from Northwood United Church**

**“Science and the Magnificence of God”**

**Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 21:23-32**

**Will Sparks**

**September 28, 2014**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Some years ago I led a confirmation class of a group of teens who had been very involved in youth activities in the church in Salmon Arm. These kids knew each other really well, had spent many happy hours playing sardines in the darkened church on Friday nights. They had travelled together and done great projects together. And now they were having conversation with me about faith. So I knew these kids, really liked them, hoped that they would become ever more connected with the church.

We had talked about God, the bible, religion: the good the bad and the ugly of it. We had debated the words of Jesus, and talked about the creeds. I wanted them to see the faith as a way of living, as a choice rooted in hope for them, for life and for the world. I will never forget one of our closing conversations, in which we were talking about commitment- what are you going to commit to in this life. And one young person, I'm going to call him Dennis, said that there was no way he would ever be able to commit to Christianity. Rather, he believed in science.

Now I can't remember how that conversation went after that, but I remember thinking, Oh dear. This kid believes that Christianity, and in fact faith at all, is utterly incompatible with science. He believes that there is a gulf between the sources of authority and truth that we seek in the church and the other sources of authority and truth in his world that mean something to him. He believes he cannot, with integrity, accept the Christian faith, and seek a life engaged in science. He was at a crossroads and he chose science.

Now, I am not sure if there was anything I could have said at that moment to change the course of the conversation. After all, he was 16 and knew way more than he likely knows now, but I have to say that I would love to have that conversation back- that in many ways I failed him. Because I believe his questions revealed a crucial crossroads that our faith is in that many fear relegates religion to irrelevance, but that I believe has the power to renew faith.

We are in the season of Creation, in which we celebrate the wonders of the creation, peeling our eyes that the creation might reveal to us something of the Creator. Our approach assumes the hand of an unseen one behind the creation, an assumption that integrity made my young friend reject religion. He is not alone.

Renowned evangelical atheist Richard Dawkins has said, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” He has also said, “Religion is about turning untested belief into unshakable truth through the power of institutions and the passage of time.” These are strong critiques. And although I think sometimes, like fundamentalist Christians, atheists like Dawkins can get a little strident and enjoy the debate a little too much, we people of faith must not ignore that science is producing some amazing discoveries about the world and new ideas that claim the minds and hearts of people.

People of faith, and religious institutions have often been threatened by new ideas. The religious authorities around Jesus were threatened by him and his ideas, and as we heard in today's reading, they wanted to stifle his voice. Ironically, the religion that follows his teachings has tried to stifle other new voices, and in the last 500 years or so, many of those voices have come from science: Galileo, Darwin, voices coming from archeology, biology, astronomy which

have tried to tell us about this amazing world. This suspicion of new knowledge has set up an opposition between science and religion that I believe is totally artificial. I want a second shot at that conversation with Dennis.

You see there are different kinds of truth in this world and scientific truth is one kind of truth, and religious truth is another and they are not as incompatible as this great modern debate would lead you to believe. Let's use this story from Exodus as our jumping off place.

Moses and the people are in the desert having escaped from slavery in Egypt. But they run out of water. Not a good situation. They start to grumble and get frantic and they go after their leader, Moses. Moses, who is a prophet, somebody who has a special relationship with God and life, calls the key leaders together and takes them for a walk. He gets to a place where God tells him, he lifts up his staff, a key symbol of God's presence with them, and he strikes a rock and water pours out of it, and the people drink.

Religious faith looks at that story and says, the moral of the story is that Moses was a prophet that we could always trust, that he was close to God, and that God never abandoned us before. From this comes the conviction, which serves us in times of struggle, that God will not abandon us now.

Science looks at that story and says, nice story. It then turns to the desert and says, if I was thirsty, how would I find water? And from that curiosity develops understandings of rain patterns in the desert, subterranean water sources, and the way plant life can indicate the presence of water, and interestingly, just what it might be like if you were a group of people in the desert who had run out of water.

Religion looks at reality and life as it is unfolding and asks, what do I need to know in order to move well through this incredible experience. What are, shall we say, the best practices, for a good and faithful life. And over the years, stories and traditions and teachings develop which make sense of reality as it is unfolding, allowing us to not have to learn everything for ourselves, but perhaps gain for the experience of humans trying to live well in the past. Religious practice helps us to live with hope, and courage, trust, gratitude, inspiration. The story of water from the rock enters our religious imagination in the places where hope and courage and inspiration live. And that is all it was ever intended to do. The person of faith is not inspired by this story to take a stick and go out into the desert and start hitting rocks in search of water. No that would be silly. That's not what the story is for.

Science, on the other hand, looks at reality and life and asks, "how does this work, and how does it happen?" And the how question is really helpful. How would a community of refugees survive in the desert? Well, first and foremost, they would need a source of water. And where would they get that. And from this curiosity, comes an investigation revealing amazing things about the world. Likely the bible was never consulted in the process. No, that would be silly. That is not what the bible is for.

The late Carl Sagan, scientist and prolific author once said, "How is it that hardly any major religions has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant?" Instead they say, "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way." A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths."

And friends, that is what I believe is possible in the season of Creation, if we lay aside our suspicions and defenses, and pay attention to what science is teaching us about the nature of reality, the mechanisms at work in the universe, and the processes of life. Far from diminishing the faith, or stripping away our sources of religious truth and inspiration, it shows that God is just that much more amazing than we had previously imagined. As Michael Dowd says, "Thank God

for evolution,” and I concur, because isn’t evolution a cool mechanism for the process of creation?

And were I to have another opportunity to talk with Dennis about life and faith and science, I would ask him to tell me about what he is discovering about how the universe works, the evidence he is uncovering about life and reality, and I will listen, and perhaps we will be inspired together to live lives of heart and soul, with hope and courage, trusting in a far bigger God than either of us can imagine.