Narnia's Aslan, Earth's Darwin, and Heaven's God

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Note: *This sermon was delivered at the Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Boston University Worship Service, Sunday, June 21, 2009. Readings: Psalm 8, Job 38:1–7, John 1:1–5*

Text: *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4a)*

I

I consider myself an evangelical Christian of the liberal sort, but I have many evangelical Christian relatives, friends, and students who are extremely conservative. Despite mutual respect, it appears that I have little in common with them theologically. My outlook on life and faith leaves me feeling dismayed by what strikes me as their doctrinal and moral rigidity, appalled by their dismissal of the wisdom of other religions, and a little frightened by their willingness to vest absolute authority in an allegedly plain reading of the Bible.

But my self-righteous theological appraisal does not go unchallenged. From their point of view, I am disloyal to what they see as the supernaturally established tradition of the Christian faith, dangerously cavalier about the fragile moral fabric of society, and all too willing to besmirch the purity of divine revelation with arrogant reliance on human reason and experience. They wouldn't hesitate to declare, with relief, that they share little in common theologically with *me*.

At the personal level, this liberal-conservative difference is manageable, so long as we don't have to resolve disagreements about biblical authority, so long as we care for one another, and so long as we remember to laugh at ourselves from time to time. At

the cultural level, however, the liberal-conservative difference has the proportions of an unbridgeable chasm, which makes it seem deadly serious. Often enough, it is a hateful and deadly disagreement. You know about the murder on May 31, 2009, of late-term abortion provider Dr. George Tiller inside the Reformation Lutheran Church of Wichita, Kansas, as he prepared to welcome worshippers into the sanctuary and talked with a friend about taking his grandchildren to Disneyworld. This act of violence shows how deadly the disagreement can become as effectively as any of the other disastrous consequences of religious hatred.

Most fundamentalist and conservative evangelical groups decried Dr. Tiller's murder; but others, such as Rev. Fred Phelps's Westboro Baptist Church, said Dr. Tiller got what he deserved and even picketed his funeral. Meanwhile, the violent rhetoric that inspires extremists to act out their distorted heroic fantasies continues. Sometimes it seems that the United States is only a small step away from the religious violence that has been so disastrous between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, or between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East.

Such disagreements among religious people are sad and strange, in some ways. After all, we do have a great deal in common, including our love of children, our preference for peaceful neighborhoods, our quest for health and happiness, and our conviction that life is best lived in relation to an ultimate reality that suffuses everyday events and transcends everyday concerns. But despite these shared life goals, mutual suspicion and hostility are very real.

As I address this issue today, I will not take up the abortion controversy, despite our shared awareness of how painful that topic is on all sides. Rather I will focus on another front of the disagreement, namely, the evolution wars. As far as I know, the evolution controversy has not produced fanatical murders. But it surfaces the substantive disagreements clearly, as we shall see.

This sermon will increase neither peace in the world nor consensus about creation and evolution among Christian subgroups. Keep in mind that I am not addressing the wider debate over evolution between secular and religious perspectives. Rather, I am speaking to a dispute among religious people, all of whom accept that the world is God's creation and thereafter have to figure out

whether and how to incorporate evolutionary theory into that basic conviction. I hope to demonstrate that each group of Christians has something valuable to learn from the other.

II

The dispute among Christians over the theological implications of evolution arises from four deeper disagreements.

First, we have conflicting visions of reality. The conservative evangelical imaginative world is defined by a God who knows the world intimately, who cares about each one of us personally, who acts freely according to divine purposes, and who answers our prayers when we ask in confident faith. The liberal evangelical imaginative world is defined by a God who is beyond measure and understanding, speaking from the whirlwind of creativity in ways that are sometimes difficult to comprehend. One God is scaled to human needs and interests and sits awkwardly with evolution, while the other is vastly beyond every worldly agenda and suits evolution more naturally.

Second, we have conflicting visions of authority. The conservative evangelical vests authority in definitive divine revelation, expressed decisively through the Bible, the Pope, or some other religious touchstone. The liberal evangelical vests authority in traditions of interpretation, accepting diversity, contradictions, and struggles within those traditions as unavoidable and valuable. If evolution contradicts the authoritative revelation of the nature of God, then evolution is easily rejected for one side, while the other side naturally seeks for a creative synthesis.

Third, we have conflicting visions of history. The conservative evangelical regards culture and civilization and scientific discovery as the ambiguous stage for the drama of salvation but never salvific in itself and always subordinate to theological truth. The liberal evangelical sees history as a process of development that can be appreciated as part of what salvation means and thus as able to challenge traditionally received religious beliefs. One side has little reason to respect scientific theories such as evolution if they contradict revealed truth, while the other side receives evolution as a magnificent divine revelation about the world that must be taken seriously no matter what theology says.

Finally, we have conflicting visions of church. The conservative evangelical sees correctness of doctrine as a vital form of religious purity and will sacrifice church unity to protect it. Meanwhile, the liberal evangelical tries hard to tolerate doctrinal variations because certainty about such matters is impossible and because unity of believers matters more than purity of beliefs. One side handles tension between God-beliefs and evolution by rejecting evolution to protect doctrinal purity, while the other side minimizes the tension in the name of Christian unity and in hopes that God and evolution can somehow be reconciled.

III

Let me be clear: In my view, conservative evangelicals who reject evolution in favor of creationism or who embrace the neo-creationism of intelligent design theory make a serious error in judgment. Yet they understand what is theologically at stake in evolution far better than most of their liberal counterparts who casually resolve the issue by declaring that God creates through evolution, without pausing to think through what that must mean.

Charles Darwin, whose two-hundredth birthday we celebrated in 2009, began his scholarly career as a convinced believer that God intentionally conceived, designed, and created the world in roughly the form Darwin encountered it. As a young man, he read and accepted the still-famous design arguments of his countryman William Paley. After all, he couldn't explain the wondrous structure of the eye any other way; he had to assume a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active designer-God. As his studies widened and deepened, however, Darwin's theological views slowly shifted. Though he never discovered the DNA mechanism by which traits were transmitted across generations, he was confident that trait preservation and transmission occurred and that random variations of traits made organisms more and less fit to survive the rigors of any given environment. He believed that this process of trait inheritance, random variation, and natural selection in competitive environments was powerful enough to explain the origin of species, which is the name he gave to his most famous book, published in 1859. And he assembled a formidable array of evidence to support his theory—evidence that is extraordinarily difficult to explain apart from the evolutionary hypothesis.

Unsurprisingly, Darwin's view of God changed as the secrets

of the natural world opened before his astonishingly perceptive eyes. God was no longer necessary to explain the particulars of the world and its teeming life forms. Rather, God's domain was the creation of the potentialities of the world-as-a-whole, a world that answered to the description that the theory of evolution provided. Unsurprisingly, to Darwin, God gradually came to seem less personal, benevolent, attentive, and active. Surely such a loving, personal Deity would have created in another way, a way that involved less trial and error, fewer false starts, fewer mindless species extinctions, fewer pointless cruelties, and less reliance on predation to sort out the fit from the unfit. Darwin arguably never lost his faith in God. Rather, he believed that God created through the evolutionary process, but his growing knowledge of that process dramatically transformed his view of God, which left him ill at ease with the anthropomorphic personal theism of his day and at odds with friends and colleagues who believed in a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active divine being.

Christians and other theists who casually assert that God creates through evolution—as if there is no theological problem with this assertion—should pause and consider Darwin's faith journey. Darwin was theologically more perceptive than many of his liberal endorsers. He knew that evolution puts enormous stress on the idea of God. Evolution makes belief in a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active Deity far more difficult. It casts a pall over the moral clarity that most people want to see in the God they worship and serve. Darwin felt the difficulty. Many theologians since Darwin have struggled with the problem. Do you feel the challenge? Or do you casually meld evolutionary theory and belief in a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active God as if there is no problem?

IV

Many of my conservative evangelical Christian brothers and sisters who reject evolutionary theory feel acutely the problem that Darwin felt. They instinctively grasp that their personal, benevolent, attentive, and active God could not possibly have created the world as Darwin described it. Such a God would be morally unrecognizable to them, a kind of heartless gambler over the lives and well-being of Earth's creatures. This picture would con-

tradict their morally clear and homey worldview, which is borne up by a God of pure love and perfect goodness. Because they take on authority the proposition that God is personal, benevolent, attentive, and active, they know with confidence that Darwin must have been wrong.

To see the power of this argument, consider C. S. Lewis's creation story. It is in a lesser-known volume of his Narnia Chronicles called *The Magician's Nephew*. The children in that story are present when the great lion Aslan creates Narnia and its creatures. The method of creation is beautifully intimate and personal: Aslan sings in a majestic voice, with spectacularly complex undertones and rippling overtones, and the world awakens around him. Each creature struggles up and out of the Narnian soil, awakening to a new world, personally called into being by the Lion God himself. I find the story enormously moving. You see, C. S. Lewis grasped the point that Darwin also felt so forcefully: The God Lewis believed in could not create in a way much different than Aslan did. Good literature is able to test the coherence of the "God creates through evolution" idea. So long as God is conceived as a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active being, like Aslan, the literary acid test shows that God cannot and would not create through evolution. They just don't fit.

The conservative evangelical Christians who resist evolutionary theory for theological reasons are shrewdly targeting a problem for their God-infused worldview, perhaps the sharpest problem that worldview has ever faced. They are not tiptoeing around, pretending that the God they trust every day somehow creates through evolution. They feel the contradiction and "just say no" to evolution. I admire that decisiveness. I, too, feel the dilemma they feel. Since a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active Deity cannot create through evolution, either that view of God or acceptance of evolution must go. Unlike them, however, I am not in any doubt about the exceptional robustness of the theory of evolution. It is as stable a scientific theory as the atomic theory of matter.

For me, therefore, the choice leads to a different conclusion: God the creator is not a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active Deity. We can preserve those affirmations symbolically, but they no longer refer to a divine being with intentions and awareness,

with feelings and intelligence, with plans and powers to act. Rather, they refer to the ground of being itself, to the creative and fecund power source in the depths of nature, to the value structures and potentialities that the world manifests. They refer to the God beyond God, which is to say the truly ultimate reality that hovers behind and beneath and beyond the symbolic Gods we create and deploy to satisfy our personal needs, to make sense of our world, and to legitimate the exercise of social control.

V

You may be surprised to hear me praising the theological perceptiveness of the conservative evangelical resistance to evolutionary theory while also praising evolutionary theory itself. And you may be taken aback by my affirmation of the God beyond God, with the associated critique of more popular views of God as a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active being. I do not speak to you this way, however, to convince you to agree with me about God; I understand this view of God to be a bit of a stretch for most people. Rather, my aim is to convince you that there is a big problem trying to fit popular personal theism together with evolutionary theory—a bigger problem than many Christian believers and even many theologians are ready to admit. Ironically, it is the conservative evangelical resistance to evolutionary theory that best expresses this point. Conservative evangelicals who reject evolution believe in a God who could create the world only in something like the way Aslan creates Narnia.

But Darwin showed us a different world and that revelation demands not atheism—not for Darwin and not for us today either—but a different conception of the divine. You may not think it is necessary to embrace my solution to this problem, and I would not blame you for looking for some other solution. But I am confident that we will never understand the real passion and coherence of the anti-evolution position until we grasp the problem that evolutionary theory poses for personal theism.

The luminous Narnian creation story helps to confirm what evolutionary theory shows us, namely, that God did not create in Aslan's way. It also helps us grasp why a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active divine being could not and would not create through evolution. One of our readings has God interrogate Job,

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Well, according to Job's way of thinking, we were nowhere to be found, so we have to approach these matters with humility. But that does not mean we should be casual in our theological reasoning. Conservative evangelical anti-evolutionists and neo-creationist ID theorists understand the inconsistency and are willing to protect their homey worldview at any cost—even if it means rejecting a scientific theory as thoroughly supported as evolutionary theory and their attendant migration into an anti-intellectual cultural backwater.

Are you as careful and consistent as they are? Do you believe in a God who would and could create the world in the way Aslan created Narnia? Such a God could not and would not and did not create the world that evolutionary theory shows us. So how do you resolve the theological puzzle? When God speaks to you from the evolutionary whirlwind, do you hear a personal, benevolent, attentive, and active divine being addressing you, soul to soul? Or do you hear the abysmal ground of being rumbling in fecund creativity, morally impenetrable, imponderably beautiful, and defying rational grasp? My spirituality is tuned to the latter conception, to the God beyond God, so I can afford to acknowledge the theological perceptiveness of my conservative evangelical anti-evolutionist brothers and sisters. What about you? What sort of God could, would, and did create the world through evolution?

This question haunted Darwin and we owe it to the great man to consider it carefully. And to the God who speaks to us from the whirlwind, we owe our very best efforts to absorb what is revealed to us about the world we inhabit and to incorporate that into our faith journeys as honestly and consistently as we can.