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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 40: 21-31
Mark 1: 29-39

The Challenge of Receptivity

This coming Thursday marks the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin. I mention this because I recently learned that many congregations will be celebrating his birthday in one way or another this weekend. This year also marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the reformed theologian and so-called father of our denomination. A few congregations may also be celebrating his birth.

It just so happens—and I promise that it is purely coincidental—that I read an essay on Darwin written by a Calvinist this past week for a clergy study group I attend. It was written by the author Marilynne Robinson, who wrote two of my favorite novels: *Gilead* and *Home*. Robinson is a writer by profession and Presbyterian by choice. She also happens to be an incredibly intelligent and insightful woman. She has a book of essays on modern thought entitled *The Death of Adam*. I was the one to recommend the book to the group, even though I had not as of that point read it—always a risky proposition! To give you an example of the type of mind we are working with here, I will tell you that as the group gathered last week—a very respectable and intelligent group—we all began to confess how many words we had to look up in the dictionary as we were reading the essays. Her essay on Darwin is critical of him and of the pattern of study and thought known as Darwinism, although not in the way we have come to expect of so-called Christians being critical of Darwin. She is careful to distinguish between the scientific theory of evolution, to which she assigns a great deal of value, and Darwinism.

Darwin, it may surprise you to learn, once aspired to the ministry. For much of his early and middle life, he was active in his local parish. It was not the study of biology that caused him to lose faith, but, it seems, the tragic loss of his daughter. After that point, he became much more critical of faith, but never as critical as those who would pick up his ideas and run with them. Darwinism has become nearly synonymous with an anti-religious sentiment. This is, admittedly, a general statement. But the fact is that along with providing evidence for the theory of evolution by natural selection, many Darwinists did in fact have a bias against religious belief. This gave rise to a tremendous back-lash from parts of the church, which eventually developed into the fundamentalist movement of the early 20th century. This fundamentalist movement affirmed a belief in the literal truth of the Bible and rejected many scientific theories that clashed with a strictly literal biblical world-view. Of course, we know that this fundamentalist movement is still ongoing today as is the Darwinist bias against religion. (You may have heard the name Richard Dawkins.) Have you ever noticed that we allow these two extremes to define the conversation? Hence we call it science vs. religion or theology, as if they are necessarily opposed?

Many of us, however, do not find that to be the case and are able to hold onto both the theory of evolution and our faith in a benevolent Creator. In fact, many of us in the Christian tradition almost feel the need to apologize for our Creationist brothers and sisters, and bend over backwards to show that we are in no way anti-intellectual nor unappreciative of the contributions of Darwin and the like. (Perhaps that is one reason some congregations are celebrating his birth this weekend.)

You may have noticed that I provided a perfect example of one who felt the need to apologize in last week's sermon, although that is not how I thought of it at the time. In talking about our Gospel lesson from Mark, the verses that immediately proceeded today's reading, I excused the belief in unclean spirits that inhabit bodies espoused by Jesus' contemporaries as superstition. I didn't use the word superstition, but upon reflection that is what I meant. I said something along the lines of that is how they explained anything they did not understand, which in one sense is true enough. But it is more dismissive than it should have been.

I was convicted of my error in both the reading of Robinson's essay on Darwin as well as one of the commentaries that I consulted in preparation for today's message. Again, in today's passage Mark is telling us of Jesus' early ministry, which according to him is filled with healings and exorcisms. One commentary I read had this to say: "While it is true that phenomena now understood as epilepsy, paranoia, or other forms of physical or mental illness were attributed to evil spirits in a pre-scientific age, this is not sufficient to explain away such biblical stories as mere primitive superstition. Within the worldview of their times, they used evil spirits as a way of expressing the reality of evil powers to which human life is subject in every age. Modern readers may no longer believe in evil spirits, but human beings in every age confront the powers of evil at work in their own world and within their own lives."¹ It seems I read these words a week late!

¹ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 128.

I lift up my error for our attention not because it is extraordinary, but because it is commonplace. We commonly dismiss what does not fit in or confirm our world-view. Robinson puts it this way, “We are so persuaded of the rightness of our judgment as to invalidate evidence that does not confirm us in it. Nothing that deserves to be called truth could ever be arrived at by such a means.”² The remedy to our certainty, she tells us, is a proper sense of humility and awe, perhaps if not always in the religious sense, then at least in the sense of appreciating the complexities and limits of our own minds.

Last week we talked a bit about awe, this week I want to put a little more emphasis on humility. It seems to me a sense of humility and awe is what the writer of our Isaiah passage is trying to convey. *Have you not seen? Have you not heard?* This passage reminds me heavily of the passage from the end of the book of Job, where the Lord finally responds to Job’s plea for an answer from God in the face of his own suffering. “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*” is the response he gets. In Isaiah we have the strikingly similar line, *Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth?* This is meant to strike a sense of wonderment in the imagination of the reader, a sense of God’s majesty. God is unfathomable, yet at the same time, Isaiah tells us, God is the one who calls us by name. It may be hard to discern God’s ways, but that is not because God is remote or absent, Isaiah tells us, it’s because we are immersed in God’s work. Like a dot on a vast canvas, we do not get to see the big picture. But—and here is the real beauty in this passage from Isaiah—this God whose understandings are unsearchable, is the God who gives strength to the

² Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam* (New York: Picador, 1998), 27.

powerless. The Bible is clear—this point can not be disputed from the biblical text—that God cares for the least among us, most of all. We see evidence in Jesus’ ministry. Those that society shunned, Jesus welcomed. Those who were deemed unclean, impure, even dangerous to look at, Jesus would willingly touch.

It is on the basis of this Judeo-Christian belief in the value of every person as created in the image of God that Robinson critiques Darwinism, which she says “is harsh and crude in its practical consequences, in a degree that sets it apart from all other respectable scientific hypotheses; not coincidentally, it had its origins in a polemic against the poor, and against the irksome burden of extending charity to them...Why generosity and morality, whose ordinary, commonplace utility need hardly be defended, should be given secondary or probationary status is a question best answered by the history of Darwinism...I do not intend this as a defense of religion. What is needed [in this instance] is a defense of Darwinism.”³ In other words, we must be able to distinguish between the best and worst in both science and theology. Both have the ability to be the source of much good, or, conversely be the justification for great harm.

What we are talking about here, really, is the challenge of receptivity, the challenge of remaining open to new or old perspectives, because, as scripture reminds us, the primary stance of faith is one of humility and trust. Yet, we have a tendency to become more intent on proving the rightness of our claims, rather than measuring them by their effects. As one theologian has put it, “Christianity has never been able to ‘prove’ its claims except by appeal to the experiences and convictions of those already

³ Robinson, 47, 52.

convinced. The only real validation that Christ is what the creeds claims him to be...is to be found in the quality of life demonstrated by those who [seek to follow him]...Only if Christians and Christ communities illustrate lives transformed according to the pattern of faithful obedience and loving service found in Jesus does their claim to live by the Spirit of Jesus have any validity. The claims of the gospel cannot be demonstrated logically. They cannot be proved historically. They can be validated only existentially by the witness of authentic Christian discipleship.”⁴

Let us pray: Gracious God, you know all too well that we prefer to think of ourselves as self-sufficient, as self made, as able to survive on our own intellect and strength. We do not like to think of ourselves as needy or vulnerable or weak. Yet, you call us to live lives of receptivity, to you and to one another. You call us to be open to new thoughts and new ideas. Give us such faith that we may be counted among those who wait for you, who rely on you, who trust in you. Give us such love for neighbor that we never count the cost of service, but joyfully extend ourselves in thanksgiving for how you have extended yourself to us. Amen.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 168.