

Faith and the Great Invention of the West

For this Sunday only, you don't need to open your Bible, not right now at least. But we will speak about the Bible. Last week we talked about the two creation stories in Genesis. This teaching is also about creation. This is the second of two parts on creation.

I want to explain more carefully where our faith and our society differ from each other, at the center. How we understand Nature is a big part of this. The first two chapters of the Bible are not just two old creation stories. They tell us that God, our God, made everything. Our God is the Creator. But that's not the only voice in the world.

Gullible Humans Before we get to Nature, let's talk about people and the truth. People care about what's right and what's wrong, it matters if something is true or false. We can be passionate about our views, and argue about them with all our might.

But for all our interest and energy, we disagree about many things. There are many things that some people are sure are right, and others are sure are wrong, in all kinds of human knowledge. We care about what's right and wrong, but we cannot reliably find it.

Our "decider" fails us. Our compass is broken. Our thinking and reason make mistakes. Humans cannot reliably figure out what is true and what is false. We think we know, but others are just as sure, and disagree with us. We are easily fooled, all of us, every single one of us.

What often gets us in trouble is when one claim to truth is more attractive than the other. We *want* one to be right and we *want* the other to be wrong. And our search for truth ends up being a search for reasons to support the truth we like and a search for reasons why the other is wrong.

I remember, after my first wife left, I was reading the Bible to figure out whether or not God gave me the freedom to remarry. In the church, some said no, some said yes. Which was right? Before God, could I remarry, or could I not? The Bible was not clear to me.

But a bigger problem was that I was hopelessly biased. I badly wanted freedom to remarry. I was not an honest truth seeker. I was a biased truth seeker. We are all like this. We are more attracted to one explanation of the truth than another. Which is one more reason we are easily fooled.

Creation. The Bible begins with the two creations stories, as we saw last week. God made everything, and God sustains everything. He made it at the beginning, and he keeps it all going. The Apostles Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth."

And God keeps it going. Daniel tells the Babylonian king Belshazzar, “You did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.” Paul told the philosophers in Athens, “God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

God made everything, holds it all in his hand, gives it all it has, and he keeps it all going. He is the Creator and Carrier of the universe, this is in Genesis and in the Psalms and in the teaching of Jesus and in Revelation, it is right through the Bible. This comes up against the other voice ...

The great invention of the West: Western society, by which I mean western Europe and North America, over the last 500 years, invented a particular view of Creation, of Nature.

The great invention of the West is that Nature can be understood and carefully explained *on its own terms*. Nothing outside of Nature is needed to explain Nature. Everything we see can be understood by what we see and observe and study. No God necessary.

The great invention of the West denies that there is any interaction at all between the spiritual world and the material world. The the natural world and the supernatural world have nothing to do with each other. There are no spiritual forces, good or bad, there is no magic, there is no Creating God behind what we see. Nature began on its own and continues on its own.

This view (which I am calling “the great invention of the West” because I read that line in a book) is a profoundly spiritual statement. To say that the spiritual world does not act on the material world assumes significant knowledge of the supernatural world. Which of course science does not have.

Rain falls because of evaporation over the oceans and the sun and wind and temperature change and land elevation. All of these we see and understand. We have no idea whether or not any spiritual force acts on these things. But the great invention of the West proclaims its answer: no spiritual or supernatural force whatsoever is in action here. That’s the second voice.

There has never before been a society that understood Nature this way. There may have been individuals, but not a society. One way or another, all people everywhere assumed some kind of interaction between the natural and supernatural realms. But not anymore.

I am getting this from *A Secular Age*, by Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher from Montreal, published in 2007. It’s 800 pages long, and the print is small, and it is not an easy read. I read it a few years ago. It took a long time.

Taylor wants to answer this question: why was it almost impossible *not to believe* in God in the West in 1500, and why is it so difficult *to believe* in God in 2000? What happened in those 500 years to cause this great change? How did the West become thoroughly secular?

Taylor believes in God, he's an old R Catholic, but he's not arguing for God. He writes the book because *how this we explain* this change, how both believers and unbelievers explain it, is *not how it happened*. Today, we're just talking about Creation, about Nature. I am doing this to help us understand the society we live in, and so that we will hold onto the Bible's creation teaching.

Two Views of the World. One, the Bible's view, a Creator God who made everything and keeps it all going. Two, all of Nature began and continues on its own without anything supernatural. We could hardly exaggerate how different these two are from each other. (And in the West, Christians have absorbed much of the great invention. But let's not get into that now.)

We live in a society that in 1500 assumed a Creator God who made everything and kept it going, and in 2000 we live in a secular age, that believes all of Nature began on its own and continues on its own, without any spiritual force. It has been a gradual change and also a huge change. It is hard to imagine a most significant change in a society's understanding of the world.

Reason and Evidence are Overrated. I think that reason and evidence are overrated by both sides. Within the view that Nature began and continues on its own, there are many supporting arguments, some persuasive. That view can more or less explain everything. In that view, if you look around you and you see a Creator God, you have been deceived, you've been fooled.

The other voice, that God made everything and keeps it going, has many supporting arguments, too. The Bible explains everything. If you can step outside and look around you and *not* see clear evidence of God, you've been deceived, you've been fooled.

I don't like this, I want the evidence to clearly show that my faith in God and the Bible is right. I do believe, without doubt, that reason is on my side. But so do many people who believe the great invention of the West, and I am not smarter or better than they are. We will end with some reasons for our faith, but let's cover some other things first.

Attractive Truth. We spoke at the start about seeking truth while being attracted to one view more than another. In the year 1500, a man or woman that believed God and the Bible, attended Christian worship regularly, and lived a godly life was a respected person. Not all did this in 1500, by any means, but society viewed such a person as noble.

In 1500, a person who violated all of these was deviant, an erratic thinking, a social problem.

By 1750, before Darwin and *Origin of Species*, this had changed a lot. By 1750, a person who questioned the Bible and the old faith, who ignored the long traditions of the church, was a noble and courageous person. They were honorable because they let clear thinking and reason and evidence take them away from what was old and comfortable.

They were courageous, willing to leave behind their faith in God, which had been a comfort and help to them, and now they were following their higher human intuitions and thinking.

Boldly going where people had not gone before. That was not the only view in society, it has become stronger since then, but it was a clear voice by 1750, and it shaped many, and grew.

(And it did NOT develop because of science. We all think that now, but that's not how it happened. Christianity and science were friends through this time, often supported each other.)

By 1750, a person who trusted in God, believed the Bible, attended worship, lived according to the instructions of Scripture, was choosing comfort and tradition over reason. The godly person lived in chosen ignorance, not paying attention to modern developments, and lacked the courage to follow higher human thinking and reason.

Now a young person grows up in the church, and believes that God is the Maker of heaven and earth, and then as a young adult this believer meets other teachers and educators that say God the Creator is old, quaint, naïve, out of touch with the evidence and what all of science has proven. Two voices, and one of them feels good and one does not.

We are talking about one truth being more attractive than another. The person rejecting God is more courageous and thoughtful than the believer – this came to be a common view.

In a society like that, if people can choose between believing in Nature that began and continues on its own without any God, or believing a faith and a God and a book and a church that's been around for centuries and centuries, which will people choose?

Make no mistake, the great invention of the West is a lot more attractive in our society than “I believe in God our Father, Maker and Carrier of heaven and earth.”

Sounds like another old conversation. God speaks first in the Bible. The second speaker is not human, but another part of God's creation. The second voice says, “Has God said these things? Here are reasons to doubt God. If you don't listen to God, you can be like gods yourselves.” And the second voice was more attractive, and it carried the day. It didn't end well, though.

What's important is that we hold onto the faith we profess, which includes faith in God our Father, the Maker and Keeper of heaven and earth. When you see things in nature that reflect God, tell him so. In the eyes of heaven, the glory of God fills the whole earth. Say that to him.

Darwin and Evolution. I do not think Darwin and evolution are the core of the problem, people. Some evolution of species is not the enemy. Why is it improbable that God made species to adapt to harsh environments? I don't see why God would not do that.

In Genesis 1, it says “Let the earth produce living creatures according to their kinds.” That's different than, “let there be living creatures according to their kinds.” It says, If I was a Christian evolutionist, I would get a lot of mileage out of that line. Let the earth produce living creatures according to their kinds.

Darwin said it was all by chance, that species adapted randomly. He has no knowledge of that, whether what he sees evidence of happened by God or by chance.

When Darwin's book was first published, it was not unusual for Christian leaders to accept what he said. They took Darwin's "random chance" with a grain of salt, they assumed God was guiding it all, but they did not see why God should not use evolution of species. Other people after Darwin used his work to discredit our Scriptures and our faith and our God.

Evidence for evolution is *not* the enemy of our faith. Here are some more important questions: Why does Darwin say that species adapt by random chance? Why did he assume that? Why not by God? Why is our society willing to accept that development of species is totally random not guided by God? Why does our society accept evolution as reason to leave God? Why was a decent amount of society ready to go down this road before Darwin ever wrote?

That answer to those questions is the voice of our enemy much more directly than how much evidence there is for evolution. Evolution is not the problem, it is a tool in the hands of a deceiving enemy.

God the Father is the Creator and Carrier of the heavens and the earth. God made everything, and God sustains everything. He made it at the beginning, and he keeps it all going. The Apostles Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth." God made it all at the beginning, and he holds in his hand our lives and all our ways. God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

How exactly God did this and does it is not the issue. The essential biblical truth is that God began everything, and he keeps everything going, and he's not finished with it. We live in a society in which this is generally seen as unattractive and backward.

I'll end with three reasons to keep believing. One, God thinks that Creation itself has made him abundantly and overwhelmingly clear. Creation itself, Nature itself, shows a God of power and beauty and life and order, a God who pays attention to tiny details and incredibly vast spaces.

If we can walk outside and not see God, not see reason to worship and thank him, God himself is mystified. In God's mind, his glory fills the whole earth. He thinks he made himself obvious to people. He knows it is not working, but he made it to show his invisible qualities.

Two, God acted in history, one overwhelming OT story, and a NT story. The OT story is the exodus. God freed a nation of slaves in Egypt, a nation that descended from Abraham, to whom God made promises. God freed this nation without any rebellion on their part, and without anyone's army. And he led them into a fertile land.

God did this to show himself to the whole world. He acted not only in Creation, but also in human history, to show himself to the world, and he says that repeatedly in Exodus.

A nation of slaves does not get freed and led to a good fertile land without rebellion or some army. But it happened, God introducing himself to the world in human history. Not just that God is real, but also the kind of thing God does, how he uses his great power.

Three, God acted overwhelmingly in human history one other time. He raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Jesus was famous for miracles, not show-off signs but all acts of healing and helping and freeing. He was executed, and then God raised him from the dead on the third day.

And we get careful stories of how his followers first discovered the empty tomb, and told each other, and then how they met him, and how they started talking to the world about it.

We can say, I don't believe these stories. That's fine, suit yourself, but God thinks he made himself evident in Creation itself, and also in these two stories, in human history, that show his power and also the kind of things God does.

We live in a society that teaches itself to doubt all such things, a society that prides itself on being skeptical, on questioning everything. Doubting has become virtuous. Our society is slanted away from God's voice, and we can feel that. Let us hold fast to the First Voice. Amen.