***Is Evolution True?***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, Feb 17, 2019

Genesis 2:4b-11

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 I sort of believe in the theory of evolution like I sort of believe in the theory of gravity. Think about it. That means evolution is not up for discussion. But while the theory of gravity bores me, unless I’m falling, the theory of evolution fascinates me.

 Here’s why. I went to Toronto District Christian High, in Woodbridge, as a teen. Unlike many Christian schools, at Toronto Christian we were taught all about evolution. We were taught, in fact, that evolution was how God created the universe. This is called theistic evolution.

 However, there was a single exception. Humans. According to my teachers humans were sinless special creations God made in his image. We were not part of the animal kingdom. We did not evolve.

 This was pretty much the line I was taught at seminary, too. After seminary, I spent a year of graduate study digging deeper, comparing the Bible’s several creation stories, like the one we read this morning, to similar older creation stories told by ancient Israel’s neighbours. I learned that the stories in the Bible were very intentional, shabbat-night-live satiric commentaries on the more ancient creation stories of Israel’s neighbours.

 Since then, studying human evolution has become a hobby. And one of the reasons I finally left my previous denomination was because I couldn’t, finally, pretend to play along with my denomination’s official view on human evolution.

 More recently, scientists have unraveled the human genome and the DNA within it. Doing so not only allows us to find relatives several generations removed through sites like 23andme’s DNA kits, but unravelling the human genome has helped us find criminals by the DNA they leave behind, and now even cure some diseases rooted in genetic problems. Within that genome, we’ve also discovered the deep evolutionary roots of humankind that ties us to the rest of the animal kingdom. We humans evolved from other earlier hominids, as have the Great Apes and yes, even monkeys. We are also related to other branches of the homo species, like Neanderthals and Denosivans—both now extinct.

 But why am I telling you all this? Because as I’ve studied cosmic and biological evolution, I’ve begun to ask myself, more and more, “so what role *does* God play in all this?” If everything evolved, and if science can describe that evolutionary process without needing a God, then what use is God?

 And this is what I came up with. It is tentative. It is the best I can do. And I am very, very open to better ideas.

 Imagine a car. The car loosely represents the cosmos. And imagine God. God can relate to the car in several ways. For example, perhaps God is the driver.

 That is, God gets behind the wheel. God has the key, turns the ignition, and gets the car going. God as driver is in complete control. God chooses the destination. He’s the driver, after all. God steers the car around every corner. In fact, God even built the car he drives—he’s a cosmic Henry Ford. This is how most conservative Christians think of God—he’s completely in charge of the whole cosmos—starting it, directing it, and so on. It’s why, when someone dies or they get a new job, such Christians will say things like, “well, it was God’s will. That’s God’s plan.”

 Prayer, then, could be imagined as us asking the driver, God, to steer the car in a certain way, and get us to places we want to go. But *God* is the driver. God might listen to us, as passengers, but God might not. God is completely in charge of our journeys. Nothing is up to us. In its most extreme, Calvinist version, God actually never listens to us. He decides everything ahead of time. This is called predestination—God decides everything about the destination and our drive there. Humans don’t really have a choice. No free will.

 But many Christians (and people of other faiths) disagree. For example, some Christians imagine that God is not much like a driver, but more like a passenger in a self-driving car, a next-generation Tesla, say, that he invented and built. In this case, God provides the blueprint, gets things going, comes along for the ride, but doesn’t personally steer the car himself. This is called deism.

 Deists have their own favourite analogy. Imagine finding a watch in a field. You pick it up. You wind it up. And the watch ticks and tocks. It keeps time. Perfectly.

 If you found such a watch, you would have to presume that it was made by someone. Watches don’t just appear, by accident, as it were. So, if you found a watch, you would have to believe that there was a skilled watchmaker who designed and manufactured it.

 Well, when deists look about the cosmos what they see is something even more wonderfully and fearfully made than that watch. The planets in their circuits, our blood coursing through veins, and all the laws of nature suggested to these ancients that, as with the watch, the cosmos must have a designer and a manufacturer. But it runs by itself, once it is wound up. God is the inventor, the creator, but once God is done, God lets the whole mess run by itself. Deism.

 I’m more inclined to a deist view of God myself, than to driver God who predestines everything. My problem with deism, however, is that actually, modern science *can* pretty much explain everything—the big bang, the appearance of life, evolution. The physical world doesn’t need an inventer or watchmaker to be properly explained. Which is why Richard Dawkins wrote a book about evolution called, *The Blind Watchmaker.* So, according to the latest scientific theories, we don’t actually need God to create the cosmos.

 Well, as you can see, if you don’t need God to create the cosmos and just come along for the drive, and if you don’t need God as the creator and driver either, there isn’t much room left for God. So, some Christians—liberal ones, like us, for the most part, have begun to think of God not as the driver, not as a quiet passenger who just set things in motion, but as a backseat driver.

 You see, while science can explain a lot, some people don’t think that science can explain morality—our human notions about what is right and wrong. And so, these Christians turn God into a backseat driver who is always telling us what is right and wrong, what direction to take our lives, which pedestrians and hazards to watch out for. This is a nagging God, a pushy God, a “you better get this right,” God. A liberal works-righteousness God who seems, always, to be saying, “Be better. Do more. Divest. Rally. Protest.” I don’t like this God much.

 So, as it turns out, not one of these pictures of God ring true for me. Is there another possibility? I think there is. Perhaps God, in some wild but mysterious way, offers guidance when we, alone in the car by ourselves, or together with each other, seek that guidance. That is, instead of nagging us, perhaps God is more like Google Maps or the Waze app. Only when we turn to God for direction do we receive it.

 But where might God provide such guidance, in real life, outside of the analogy I’ve been building? Well, I’d say that scripture is where we find it; and in the cumulative wisdom we’ve built up about scripture as a community, over thousands of years. Scripture, and our reflection on it, is the divine roadmap we have for arriving at our desired destination.

 I’m not saying that scripture is dictated by God, or that every word is inspired. But overall, scripture—including the scriptures of other religions and the Testament we received from the Jewish people—scripture does represent thousands of years of listening on the part of humans to a mysterious divine wisdom that permeates the cosmos and is deeply rooted in our own selves, as well. We argue about how to understand scripture, we question some of its odd suggestions that belong to another place and time, but overall, in scripture and in the communities that listen to it and seek guidance in it, we find God gently, kindly, offering direction when we seek it, encouraging us to live full lives that benefit each other and help us find our place in the cosmos.

 Scripture in this sense is a lamp that prevents our feet from stumbling when all is otherwise dark (Psalm 119:105). Keep in mind that when scripture is described as a light, it isn’t talking about a modern flashlight or streetlight that reveals all. It is a flickering, uncovered olive sputtering wick that gives just enough light so that we don’t trip over what would otherwise be obvious rocks and chasms in the path.

 My view is that God has given us a gift—*meaning* in a universe that exists by chance, *direction* in a universe without a moral code, *hope* for a better day in a world ruled by survival of the fittest.

 Scripture is a divine gift. But gifts, to be true gifts, must be given unconditionally. There is no expectation of a return, no nagging about thank-you cards, no obligation to give something of equal or greater value back. If we were given a gift conditional on how we responded to it, it would be merely a financial transaction, a debt to be repaid, rather than a gift. For a gift to be a real gift, there is **nothing** you have to do, there is nothing you **have** to do, there is nothing you have **to do**. It is pure gift all the way up and down.

 And the divine gift we find in scripture’s direction and insight, and in communities such as ours, is the gift of meaning and purpose. Science, and theories like evolution, explain a lot—everything, really. And yet, for such a world as this, we also have this one thing more, the divine gift, the divine map, for how to live a life—not just for survival, but for the love of all things bright and beautiful.