



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Synod 2021

Thirty years ago at the end of May, I was ordained a Deacon. In some ways it is hard to believe that it has been thirty years. In other ways, especially when I look in the mirror, I realize that a lot has taken place in those thirty years that has formed and transformed me.

And so I have been reflecting a little bit about my ministry and my calling and my time before ordination. My undergraduate studies were in zoology, part of the Biology department at UBC. My studies investigated great variety in the vertebrates and invertebrates that fill this world with their beauty and how they move us to awe. I studied much about evolution and ecology and genetics and biochemistry and physiology.

At a point a little later in my studies I felt a calling to the priesthood and eventually engaged in conversations with parish and diocesan leadership to explore this more fully. Soon I was off to seminary.... I pause here because, as I reflected on all of this, I realized that at that time I had no idea how to link my studies in Science with my studies in Theology and preparation for ordained ministry. At that time, I could not see how Science and Faith could be reconciled

and linked, even if in my mind I felt that they should be. The fields of study were miles apart on a campus... and in life. Evolution and Creation did not seem to be speaking the same language, the wisdom of the Bible seemed distant from the academic learnings of laboratory and experiment, the knowledge gained in careful study of genome or mitochondria did not seem connected to the golden rule or the beatitudes. How to reconcile. Mostly I just moved away from much of my studies in science and made room for a theology that was content with keeping the division between the two.

Well a lot has changed for me and for the connection of faith and science. What once seemed intentionally and purposely separated now are finding many more ways to link and join hands. The universe, the exploration of ocean depths, the study of spider webs or ecological webs seem to be opening to other angles that allow awe and wonder and thanksgiving into God's purpose and vision and wisdom. There seems to be more room to recognize that faith in God does not exclude a link to scientific study but that the two may have greater symbiosis than I once thought.

Some of you will know the name of Ilia Delio. If not, in a quick summary she is a Franciscan and holds the Josephine C. Connelly Endowed Chair in Theology at Villanova University. She earned doctorates in pharmacology and in Historical theology. Listen to a few words from Ilia Delio as she wrestles with how science and faith might be more closely linked: "I developed two brains: a science brain and a religious brain. Science meant serious study, thought, inquiry, and examination while religion evoked wonder, awe, mystery, and order. With religion I had identity and purpose, while in science I had a drive to know and discover." She went on to say, "Science discloses the power of nature to orient itself toward relationships and complexity but it cannot define or constrain the power of transcending love. This is what I finally came to realize through my years of exploring science and religion. There is an absolute wholeness of truth and beauty that lies at the centre of even a single cell. It cannot be observed or measured because it is elusive in nature; it draws the observer into its field of activity and at the same time awakens within a desire to pursue its ever receding horizon. I went in search of this powerful lure and I discovered a God who is hidden and humble; a God of overflowing love in whom I live and move..."¹

¹ Ilia Delio in an essay, *The Entangled God of my Heart* in the book *How I Found God in Everyone and Everywhere*. Page 44 and 60

For her, in the study of science and a deepening interest in how this world works and functions, she discovered something unexpected. She discovered the presence of God.

Psalm 137 describes it in this way...

9 If I take the wings of the morning *
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
10 even there your hand will lead me *
and your mighty hand hold me fast.
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, *
and the light around me turns to night."
12 Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; *
darkness and light to you are both alike.
13 For you yourself created my inmost parts; *
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I will thank you because I am marvellously made; *
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.

As we face the Climate Emergency that confronts every human being, this division between science and faith is part of the issue. We are not always sure how to build bridges between living out God's grace and accepting new scientific understandings. We are not always sure how God might be acting now in the world to lead us to deeper purposes and meaning to life. Which is intriguing for us Christians who follow the way of Jesus Christ, one whose life, teachings, death and resurrection opened up new possibilities of connection to God and how to live in this world. Being salt and light in this world, it seems, should include exploring how the Holy Spirit continues to move amongst us in ways we might not have predicted before.

In terms of the Climate Emergency, the Marks of Mission of the Anglican Church and our own Baptismal Service remind us: To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

We are not meant to be bystanders to simply observe our world but to be intimately connected with the world around us. Recognizing the fingerprints of God in a huge variety of ways and places. The divide between science and faith has caused us to lose sight of our greater purposes and God's calling within it.

At our last regular Synod we affirmed that we are living in a Climate Emergency. That part is not what we are debating and determining at our Synod this year. Rather we are determining what our response will be. While the world around us is being rocked with destruction, warming, pollution, reduced fish

stocks, burning forests, extinction of species, to name but a few concerns at this time, the voices of people of faith are not always heard. How do we want to respond to what is taking place in the world of our time? How do we want to respond to the plight of those for whom Climate Emergency will affect the most: those who live in poverty, those not in the majority, those whose voice is rarely heard or heeded.

Pope Francis said recently: “When people are driven out because their local environment has become uninhabitable, it might look like a process of nature, something inevitable. Yet the deteriorating climate is very often the result of poor choices and destructive activity, of selfishness and neglect, that set humankind at odds with creation, our common home.”²

And so what does our faith teach us about how we should respond to this current crisis and emergency? And at this same Synod we will also wonder, what does our faith teach us about how we treat the homeless, the unstably housed, the crisis of housing all around us? In this coming week, on May 17, around the world people will be recognizing International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia... what does our faith teach us about respecting the dignity of every human being? Tomorrow Anglican Churches across Canada will be praying for peace in Jerusalem... our prayers are needed, how are we offer the words blessed are the peacemakers? As we continue to live in a pandemic and a world racked with racism... how do we respond and live out Jesus’ words to us today in the gospel reading: for the least among all of you is the greatest? Well these are difficult questions to answer quickly and simply but we do need to respond. To respond by seeing that God is calling us to new vision and new hope. To explore how faith and science might just need to seek reconciliation. To recognize that the Holy Spirit is inviting us into a future of new possibilities. May we invite that same Spirit to lead and guide us.

² The papal preface appears in “Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People,” a document released March 30 by the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development