

THE MISFIT GOD
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University Congregational God
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Reading: Genesis 1:1-2 (NEB)

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters.

More than one of my children came to the conclusion early in life that God was not to be believed in, and the Holy Bible an unreliable source for faith and life. They based their conclusions on a simple fact there is no reference to dinosaurs. They heard or read the first two chapters of Genesis and asked, “Where are the dinosaurs?” If you have reared children in the past three decades you know there is a “dinosaur stage” of life that neither Erik Erikson nor Dr. Benjamin Spock ever anticipated.

Fundamentalists have worked hard to overcome this glaring omission. You would be surprised to read all of the material both electronic and in print trying to figure out what happened to the dinosaurs and why they are not in the Bible. Some believe that the devil went around planting dinosaur fossils over the face of the earth in order to seed doubt in the minds of people. It all reminds me of the debate between the two theories of the origin of children. The first is the theory of the stork and the second is the theory of sexual reproduction. The theory of the stork is one that many of us grew up with in our childhood home. But you might be surprised to learn that there are many scientists who favor the stork theory of human origin. They further argue that if the theory of human sexual reproduction is to be taught in public schools, so must the stork theory.

Allow me to share with you the evidence that supports the stork theory:

1. It is scientifically established that the stork does exist. This fact can be confirmed by every ornithologist.
2. The alleged human fetal development contains several features that the theory of sexual reproduction is unable to explain.
3. The theory of sexual reproduction implies that a child is approximately nine months old at birth. This is an absurd claim. Everyone knows that a newborn is a newborn.
4. According to the theory of sexual reproduction, children are the result of sexual intercourse. There are, however, several well documented cases where sexual intercourse has not led to the birth of a child.
5. Statistical studies in the Netherlands have indicated a positive correlation between the birth rate and the number of storks. Both are decreasing.¹

I grew up in public schools and we did not fight about science and the Bible. I was taught the scientific process, natural selection, and medically based human sexuality and reproduction. Yes, the radio and television preachers condemned all of that, but it was not an issue in my local church.

The truth is, of course, that the first two chapters of the book of Genesis were not written with the understanding that either represented a scientific view of the world. They are ways to talk about the presence of God in life and even in primordial chaos. When we assumed that Genesis was about an end product that we call “earth” we started down a rough and tumble path that serves neither God nor science. It has distorted our view of life, of God, our place in an expanding universe, our sense of

¹ “Science Jokes” at <http://sciencejokes.blogspot.com/search/label/creationist>, downloaded 6/2/2011.

being, and the suffering that attends every life form. It has distorted both our fragility and our sense of self-importance on this planet.

The universe is 13 billion years old. The earth is about five billion years old. Life first emerged from the oceans 3.4 billion years ago. The dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. The first homo sapiens appeared about 100,000 years ago. Human recorded history reaches back only 10,000 years. Think of it this way. Imagine a full roll of toilet paper that you are going to unroll down a long hallway. There are 400 squares in the roll and each square is 11 cm long. If the earth is 5 billion years old each square of paper equals about 12.5 million years. Each billion years of the earth's history uses up 80 squares of toilet paper. Human history is recorded on the last square, 0.1 mm from the end. ²

We know that in the 4,999,990,000 years, give or take, tectonic plates shifted and glaciers moved to create the Great Plains and the Great Lakes, the Rocky Mountains and the Alps, and the Mojave Dessert. Continents shifted and separated and the great oceans divided them. There was earth, wind, and fire. Asteroids hit the planet. Species evolved and were wiped out. Out of the oceans, tidewaters, and swamps life forms emerged to engage the struggle to survive and perhaps even dominate some ecosystem for a short time. We would be fools to imagine that any of this has changed just because human beings arrived on the scene. The events of natural history in the past year alone bear the truth that the earth is a cauldron of energy boiling for life and the preservation of self and species. Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD and buried Pompeii in 6 meters of ash and pumice. In the past few years we have seen

² "The Toilet Paper Timeline: A History of the Earth One Square at a time," found at: <http://worsleyschool.net/science/files/toiletpaper/history.html>, downloaded 5/2/2011.

devastating tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan, earthquakes in Haiti, and life swept aside by the flooding Mississippi River.

W. Paul Jones reflects on this reality in a brief essay entitled “Evil and Cross-Purposes.” Jones is a Roman Catholic priest, Family Brother of the Trappist Order, a social activist, and retired professor of theology at the St. Paul School of Theology.

He is most known for his work on spirituality and spiritual discipline. He wrote “Evil and Cross-Purposes” after spending a day hiking down to the Colorado River Gorge. Paul wrote:

“As I lay sleepless that night beside the Colorado River and its relentless eroding of the Canyon Walls, there died the possibility of ever again believing that a loving God designed a creation in which the routine activity of every organism is to devour something else in a bloody clawing to survive. What on earth was God doing for over thirteen billion years before we arrived? Could it be that God in some way is likewise a late arriver? For me to remain Christian necessitated another option than the past thinking which bequeathed us either a sadomasochistic Designer or an impotent Watcher.”³

Suddenly the child’s question, “Where are the dinosaurs?” becomes an incredibly complex issue for theology. It does not help that the universe is expanding and that there are, perhaps, 100 billion observable galaxies in our universe.

Designer or Watcher the challenge is deeper than a conversation about astronomy. It can be a profoundly personal and existential question that pulverizes our bodies and our souls. I have entered many hospital and hospice rooms and watched the eternal battle between life and death; one species fighting an organism that cannot be seen with the human eye. The rage of age makes a specter of our cherished friends and family. Or consider the mother who came to see me years ago to ask if I would visit

³ W. Paul Jones, “Evil and Cross-Purposes,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Vol. XXVI, #2, pp. 44-45.

her daughter in the Tulsa County Jail. Her daughter had a history of drug abuse and had been in a relationship with a man who used and dealt cocaine. No one knows what happened but they quarreled and she emptied the entire clip of a 9mm pistol into his body. He had been abusive to her and the prosecutor might not have charged her with felony murder, if she had not fired all nine bullets into him.

If you are a military family and someone knocks on the door and you look out the window to see a captain and a chaplain in dress uniform on your porch, a volcano is about to erupt. If my uncle Bobby shows up at your work place and starts interviewing people a storm is brewing. You will know uncle Bobby straight away. He is over six feet tall, wears a Stetson cowboy hat, Western cut trousers and sports coat. His cufflinks are horseshoes and his white Western dress shirt is smartly pressed. He is an investigator for the country prosecutor's office. Friday evening I got a text message from my daughter, Jamie. Her stepbrother's two-month-old baby has been diagnosed with cancer. She asked that we pray for them. There's a tsunami! In every one of these scenes, and countless others that you could tell, we witness the "bloody clawing to survive" in our families, communities, and across the planet.

I submit to you that only people in pathological denial would not wonder where has God been in the last 13 billion years. Is God a late arriver, a youngster of only 10,000 years? W. Paul Jones concludes that in this cauldron of life God is emerging. Jones asks, "What if the loving and compassionate God of Christian devotion is the goal giving meaning to the dynamism of the whole?"⁴ What we know as sacred or what we call "God" labors to be born, even in the throes of natural,

⁴ Ibid. p.45.

human, and social childbirth. Again, said Father Jones, “Life thrashing about, grasping, hoping, expanding, experimenting, groping, reaching out in tentative directions for inchoate reasons – this image was making claim on me as the pulsating work of God as Holy Spirit.”⁵

Let me offer a down to earth example. I have told you in the past a little about my niece, Vita. Vita is 24. She was born with Noonan’s syndrome with a related heart defect, and lymphatic disorder. Before she was a year old she had open-heart surgery. By the time she was two years old she had cancer. Surgery removed a tumor on the left lobe of her liver. Noonan’s syndrome creates a wide range of learning challenges for children. Her mother and father employed tutors to help her through school and Hebrew classes to prepare her for her *bat mitzvah*. Vita has one semester left before she graduates from Georgia State University. She has maintained a 3.0 GPA.

Vita has had a problem with a pulmonary heart valve for years and the doctors decided this past year that it needed to be replaced. Given her medical history doctors decided they needed a heart catheterization to determine the real condition of the heart before open-heart surgery. They saw virtually no chance they could replace the valve in the catheterization process. But when Vita woke up she was overjoyed to find that the cardiologist was able to perform the procedure. Vita is one human being who knows more about clawing, surviving, and making meaning out of suffering. Vita knows what it means to trash about, grope, experiment and insist that life has meaning.

⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

Somewhere in the mix of family, an ebullient spirit, dedicated physicians, and disease Vita is claimed by the pulsating love of God.

Listen to how she describes a pre-op procedure:

I got pricks of local anesthesia so I wouldn't feel the tube inserted in my neck. The pricks definitely hurt and there was major discomfort and pressure. I ask for a hand and the guy that seemed in charge (Chris) said 'you can squeeze mine' or something along those lines. It was an amazing and efficient team. I love them all. I tried to read nametags because I wanted to remember everyone's name. Yes that is semi what I was focusing on. Even though I knew soon I was having a procedure. I wanted to be able to do thank you notes for everyone and also it was better to focus on that than what was actually happening to me.⁶

She is teaching us something about grace and chaos. Without a doubt she knows pain. Vita is so courageous she asks someone to hold her hand. She knows none of these people, asking a hand from perfect strangers. Chris extends his hand and says, "You can squeeze mine." Then Vita tries to learn names of the people who are treating her. Who are the people that make up this healing community? We are all engaged in a momentous project and I want to know who you are. And who do you know that tries to remember the names of a pre-surgical team so thank you cards can be sent? That is the genius of Vita's faith. When in chaos write thank you cards!

Vita goes on to write that she also thanks God and thinks that her faith in God grew somehow in this procedure but is not quite sure. I'm not either. But Vita has reminded me that none of us gets through chaos without a loving community, caring hands, and deep thankfulness. God does not get through the chaos without a loving community, caring hands, and deep thankfulness. It

⁶ Vita Brown, "Heart Reflection," on *Facebook*, May 31, 2011, used with her permission.

is the caring and thankful community that offers a real alternative to bloody clawing. It is the caring and thankful community that makes God possible in the hearts and minds of that community.

And don't overlook the obvious. We begin to thrive in the midst of chaos when we tell our stories. When Vita wrote "Heart Reflection" she was no longer a victim of fate. She became a storyteller with something to teach us. Vita became a witness to life and love, a most radical alternative to death and destruction. So it is that the faith community gathers in this helter-skelter world once a week to tell stories. You know the kind of story I mean:

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters.

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