

Archaeology

If I had it to do over again, meaning my career as a minister, there are two things I would place far more importance on, two subjects I would emphasize much more than I have, both in my preaching and in my teaching. It's not that I haven't talked about these two things at all. In fact, some people may think I talk about them too much as it is. It's just that I'm more and more convinced that if the church is going to regain some degree of intellectual credibility in our society today, and in particular regain a foothold in the field of higher education, it's going to have to have a much firmer grasp of these two things. One is the doctrine of the Trinity and why it's so important. The other is the church taking much more seriously the world of the natural sciences. It's no coincidence that it is these two subjects that I'd hold up, since the two are very closely related and always have been.

Why, you might ask, is there a connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the world of the natural sciences? Well, to answer that question, I'd like—appropriately enough—to try a little experiment with you. I want you to try to imagine the Bible beginning not with the story of creation, but instead with the story of Abraham. That is to say, imagine the sacred story beginning with what is now the 12th chapter of Genesis, the story of Abraham and Sarah leaving their ancestral home and journeying to the Promised Land, without any story of creation at all. No mention of creation, or Noah's Ark, or even the Tower of Babel. If the story of God's relationship to humanity began with Abraham, and not with creation, what difference do you think that would make? How much would that affect the way we think about God?

My guess is you would have a very hard time actually doing that, even imagining the Bible beginning any other way than God creating the heavens and the earth, so ingrained is the story of creation in our minds. Yet the fact is that for most of the history of ancient Israel, the sacred story did *not* begin with creation, but rather with the story of Abraham and Sarah leaving the land of Ur and traveling to the land of Canaan, the land that eventually would be peopled with their descendants. In fact, it was only very late in ancient Israel's history, during the time of the Babylonian exile, that the story of creation was added to the sacred story, in effect writing a new beginning to the story.

That new beginning would make an enormous difference, so much so, that the full extent of that difference, the long-term implications of that difference, took a very long time to unfold and became fully apparent only with the rise of Christianity. In fact, it was that change, that new beginning, that would eventually give rise to Christianity's emergence out of Judaism. That's how much difference it made!

Why a difference? Because how you begin a story makes all the difference in the world. The beginning sets the stage for everything that follows. It creates the context in which everything after it unfolds. In fact, there is an ancient Greek saying that "archaeology is teleology," teleology being the knowledge of the end, the telos, and archaeology the knowledge of the beginning, the

arche. Thus, to know the beginning is to know the end. That's how much difference the beginning makes.

In the case of the Bible, beginning with the creation story dramatically affected the way Christians in particular think and talk about God. Because if you begin with creation, and think of God first of all as the Creator, you are going to think of God in a way that reflects the creation, using words and ideas borrowed from that context, what the ancients called natural philosophy, and what we call the natural sciences. In fact, it was the ongoing effort in the early centuries of the church to correlate the understanding of God found in holy scripture, with the language about God borrowed from the realm of science, that ultimately led to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Today is the Sunday in the church year that is dedicated to reflection on that doctrine, the doctrine that lies at the very heart of Christianity, and yet a doctrine that is too often neglected, particularly among Protestants, casually dismissed as the fruit of a theology on steroids that has little if any real connection with our day to day lives. Nothing, I am utterly convinced, could be farther from the truth these days, since traditionally it was the doctrine of the Trinity that provided a way for the church to integrate the truths of the natural sciences into the church's view of creation and the Creator. All of the classic language of the Trinity, all of the terms that were used in the church to express the mystery of the one in three and the three in one, were drawn from the world of contemporary Greek science.

Unfortunately, though, that clear connection was not maintained in the subsequent translation of those terms first into Latin and later into English. So, a word like "pantocrator" which in Greek clearly means the all-powerful creator of everything, the Lord of all creation, ultimately makes its way into English merely as "almighty," which has none of that special sense, and is for us just a generic way of saying big and strong without any connection to creation at all.

But all of the creation language that found its way into Christian "god-talk," or theology, would have only gone so far if the church had not found a way to somehow include Jesus within that framework. Clearly, Jesus—his life, death and resurrection—is the ultimate revelation of God's being and nature, and I'm sure it was not obvious to the early Christians just how that related to the God they knew as the Creator, the Pantocrator, the Almighty. It was the genius of the Gospel of John which provided the answer to that question, provided the answer by placing the story of Jesus quite literally within the framework of that sacred archaeology in its opening words, the famous words "In the beginning—in *arche*—was the word—the *logos*." Literally arche-logos! With these words, John united the revelation of God in the creation with the revelation of God in the incarnation of the Word, all in the person of Jesus Christ, the logos of both creation and incarnation (and everything else). While it took the church a couple of hundred more years to fill in all the blanks, and fully articulate the doctrine of the Trinity, it was just a matter of time once John had pointed the way.

In a sermon a few weeks ago, I mentioned how important it was for the church to re-establish some tie with the world of the natural sciences, a tie that until the middle part of the 19th century was for Protestants still quite close. Since that time, sadly, that tie has been badly frayed, if not completely severed, in part by scientific claims that seemed to challenge traditional Christian teachings, perhaps most dramatically with the theory of evolution, but even more so by the failure

of the church to take seriously the scientific understanding of the world and its implications and continually appropriate that understanding within the theology of the church.

It's not that science can tell us everything we need to know. Far from it. But a scientific understanding of the ways things actually work in this world, beginning with creation itself, can keep us from making claims about God and the world that at some very basic level simply don't make sense, claims that are too often rooted in an ignorance of natural processes, or reflect an understanding rooted in the outdated science of an earlier era. The latter has been a particular problem for the church, since very often the problem with the church's theology is not that it is anti-science as much as it simply reflects an outdated science. Galileo did not set out to challenge the church's theology but rather the science of an earlier era—but because the church's theology was still wedded to that outdated science, it refused to accept Galileo's scientific discoveries. Ditto with evolution, with quantum theory, and on and on and on.

Science is not infallible, but in a sense, that's the point. The sciences continue to develop and change as new understandings of the world emerge. It is critical that the theology of the church evolve along with it, reflecting as much as possible contemporary understandings of the world. Science won't show us the way, but it can be a valuable reality check on the claims of the church, by insuring they are based on something more solid than merely wishful thinking. But most of all, the church cannot be afraid of the truth, and it cannot run and hide from the truth. For it is the truth that will set us free and ultimately open our eyes to a clearer understanding of God and God's world.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*