

“Seven Words We Don’t Use in Church”
7 Week Sermon & Worship Series
Sundays, July 15 – August 26, 2018
First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Preaching: Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert

Date	Theme	Holy Scriptures
July 15	SMILE	I Thessalonians 5: 14-18
July 22	CURSES	Psalms 19; Matthew 15: 1-13
July 29	GOSSIP	Proverbs 12: 18; James 3: 9-12; 1 Corinthians 13
August 5	SCIENCE	Genesis 1 and 2; Job 38
August 12	PRONOUNS	Matthew 7: 7-12
August 19	SHAME	John 4
August 26	SEX	Song of Solomon

Sunday, August 5, 2018

“SCIENCE”

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 2:4-9

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Job 38:1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation

of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸ “Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—⁹ when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

Science and Spirituality are Personal

Two summers ago, our church was approached
by the director of the Atlanta Science Festival.
Dr. Meisa Salaita, PhD, a local resident in Oakhurst, chemist and educator,
coordinates a festival that includes 100 events spread around the city of Atlanta.
The Atlanta Science Festival is offered over two weeks in March.
The Science Festival includes free events, workshops and lectures
that encourage & engage people of all ages to connect with science.
Meisa came by the church because Daren Wang recommended she do so.
Daren Wang managed the Decatur Book Festival,
and his office was here, on our second floor.
Meisa said Daren told her that First Christian Church is a terrific host;
our ministry of hospitality is real;
and maybe we’d let them meet in a room two hours a month
while they planned the science festival.
Hey, flattery will get you everywhere.
We counter-proposed an equal exchange of services.
You see, we--First Christian Church of Decatur--meet God and one another
at the intersection of Faith and Reason.
We invite folks to open hearts and souls and hands.
However, please don't check your brains at the door!
God gave you a brain and intellectual curiosity.
God gives you empathy and a passion for justice.
God in Christ models how to use these gifts to make a difference.
So, in exchange for the Atlanta Science Festival using a room once a month,
we asked they allow us to sponsor a panel discussion
on Science and Spirituality...right here.
We'll gather scientists and theologians to be on the panel; you promote it.
Deal! We shook on it.
Since then we have hosted two panels on Science and Spirituality;
Since then Dr. Meisa Salaita and her festival staff became tenants on the second floor.
The first time we hosted a science and spirituality panel,
we didn't know what to expect.

88 church members and city neighbors sat in these pews for two hours.
Our panel included a Tenzin Topden, a Buddhist scientist from Tibet;
Arri Eisen, a Jewish biologist with a focus on ethics;
Steve Kraftchick, a Christian theologian
with expertise in technology and mathematics;
and this pastor who served as moderator.

[Sounds like a joke, right? A Buddhist, a Jew and a Christian walk into a panel...]

The first hour was heady as panelists addressed prepared questions,
pondering the intersection and divergence,
tension and collaboration of science and spirituality.

The second hour was personal.

We took questions from the audience.

"I'm a medical doctor. I have an intellectual approach to life, yet my heart is full as well. Is there a place for someone like me who is both a thinker and a believer?"

"I am a Christian and a scientist but how do I talk with my fundamentalist parent who refuses to acknowledge evolution?"

"I grew up in a mosque that only deals with matters of faith; now I am a biologist and my colleagues only deal with matters of science. How do I reconcile the two?"

Feedback afterward from participants affirmed the first hour was okay;
our second hour was profound, deep, enlightening.

The difference: The Q & A talk was personalized.

At 9:30 PM, Russell and I flipped the sanctuary lights off and on, off and on
because people wouldn't leave.

Our neighbors wanted to stay here, in the church, to talk and share in a safe space.

Folks here and all around us have questions.

People are looking, searching for answers, from within and from without,
seeking out someone to sit with them to ponder whatever bubbles up from
within.

Church, this is What we do;

this is Who and Whose we are;

this is Where we are going, being, becoming, together.

We're so incredibly blessed by God to have a venue to live out our questions, together.

Science and Spirituality are Personal

The Agnes Scott College campus is around a mile from our church facility.

When my children were three and 7,

they tagged along while I attended a community meeting in Oakhurst.

Afterward, the way home took us past Agnes Scott College.

Henry, 7, looked over at the campus; he asked what was stored in the old warehouses.
I explained they were not warehouses.

Those are dorms where students live and classrooms for learning.
“Well, when I grow up,” said Henry, “I am going to go to Agnes Scott College.”
“I’m sorry, son. Agnes Scott College is for women only.

You may go to a different college.”
There was a pause in the conversation while Henry absorbed this information.
Then he said, “Well, when I grow up,
I am going to go to college to learn to be a helper like you.”
“And when I grow up,” said 3-year-old Katie from her car seat in the back,
“I am going to go to college to learn to be a princess!”

There’s a professor at Agnes Scott College named Paul Wallace.
Dr. Wallace teaches physics and astronomy.
His PhD is in experimental nuclear physics.
One of his prize students at Agnes Scott was our member Jasmine Heath,
who just completed her master’s in Science Education.
This summer Jasmine is serving Christ’s church as a Disciples Peace Fellowship Intern.
She plans to serve God by becoming an astrophysicist and teacher.

Astronomy and physics professor Paul Wallace is also a Christian.
He is a member & deacon at First Baptist Church here in Decatur.
He has a Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory.
He is an ordained minister...and a scientist.
He is a physicist...and a practicing Christian.
He is equally interested in the ages of rocks and the Rock of Ages.
He cares about the genesis of atoms and Adam in Genesis,
the energies that sustain life and the lifeline of energy,
God’s creation of the Cosmos and our part in creating Koinonia.

He is content.
In his spiritual formation and scientific exploration, there is no conflict.
They are both personal to him, his love for God, for God’s creation,
for the intricacies of creation.
You know, the more we know of the intricacies of this wonder God made,
the more we have awe, reverence, respect for the Almighty.
The fields of science and spirituality overlap perfectly,
like a perfect Venn diagram.
Underlying Paul Wallace’s faith and thought,
his belief in God and his becoming a scientist
is an acknowledgement that all this is personal.

He has a sense of wonder.
Awe. Curiosity. Amazement.
Marvel at the miracle of life, creation, evolution.
Marvel at an ever-expanding universe, an overwhelming love.

Marvel that the God who sweeps over the face of the waters and makes life
also loves him, loves you, loves us all, for ever and ever, amen.

Science and Spirituality are Personal

There is nothing more personal than your birth, your borning cry, your beginning.
What could be more personal than why you are here, and how you came to be?
Genesis is Hebrew for beginning.

"In the beginning..."

If only it was that simple.

Yet, there we have it, staring us in the face,
once again the Holy Bible in conflict, arguing with itself.

The Bible does that, you know.

We have four Gospels that offer conflicting views and stories and sayings.

How about the Prophets who differ with God and God's people,
who can be disagreeable,

who reserve the right to differ next week with what they said last week.

The Epistles are missives that offer varying perspectives and teachings
on how to live, to love, to get along.

Chapters 1 and 2 in Genesis offer different creation stories.

Is one right and the other wrong?

Is one more accurate than the other?

What are we to believe or think?

They were crafted and set down in their final form so long ago.

Genesis 1 was formalized by a Priestly order around 2,500 years ago.

Genesis 2 was written even before, possibly one of the oldest surviving scriptures,
possibly around 2,600 years ago.

These stories of how we began evoke emotion, as well as deep debate. (Brueggemann)

These stories of how the world came to be,

stories how it came to be formed and to look like what we see now,

these creation stories are theological reflections

on God's amazing, loving, creative activity.

It is uncanny how closely the creation story in Genesis 1

—the universe and earth formed and planted over 6 days,
with a sabbath day of rest—

how closely it overlaps with modern scientific theories of creation,
simply spread out over billions of years.

Who is to say that the first 6 days were not millions and millions of years,

for "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years,
and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Peter 3:8)

Paul Wallace reflects on Genesis.

“The Genesis accounts of creation (there are two) were not written with modern science in mind, and scientific accounts of origins cannot be made to match up in any specific, chronological ways with biblical stories.

...The real point of the Genesis stories is theological and relational: they tell us how God, human beings, and the cosmos are interrelated. They tell us who we are and what the cosmos is in the context of divine creativity and love. And it does so using the primary medium of the age: prose and poetry, not the abstractions of modern physical science.” [“Questions Christians Ask Scientists”, May 27, 2016, Baptists Today, July Aug. 2016]

Consider the creation story told in Genesis 2.

Here is found the tale of the Garden of Eden.

These passages address age-old questions we ask today,

sometimes daily, questions we lift to each other or in the dark of night.

What’s the essence of our bonding, our connections to one another?

What is the source of evil?

Why are we always looking for scapegoats, to pin the blame on someone else?

Why do we have pain in childbirth, and pain in our relationships?

What is the purpose of work, of earning a living by the sweat of our brow?

Why must we die?

Why aren’t we immortal?

Why is it that the Spirit of God seeks out a relationship with you and me?

And, ultimately, what’s up with these fig leaves, these cotton and rayon vines?

Anthropologists vigorously debate whether the first humans stood upright

in Ethiopia around 200,000 years ago,

or even earlier, maybe 300,000 years ago in Morocco.

Were Adam and Eve from Morocco or Ethiopia?

If you have been to or seen images of either of these beautiful lands,

you understand why God placed the first people in such a garden,

a garden of Eden.

Science and Spirituality are Personal

[Now would be a good time for us to put on our crash helmets and grab a parachute, ‘cause this is the point when the message gets to meddlin’.]

An ecclesial shortcoming of the Church

has been to present the Bible to the world as news coverage, as reportage.

You and I have often heard people advocate that the Bible be read literally,

as a literal, historical document of God’s activity.

I’ve heard tell that to not read the Holy Bible literally

is akin to doubting God’s Word, to doubt that God exists.

Such a dogma, a teaching of the Word,

gets to the heart of the Church's problem with science.

If the Bible is read literally and without question, is perceived as inerrant
(does anyone really know what that word means?)
then we miss out on the awe, the poetry, the prose, the music,
the exclamation of praise that it is meant to be.

The Bible is a beautiful, amazing, transformative work of living art,
a theological testament of the power of God
to transform people and nature and the cosmos.

The Bible is as personal and relevant as the air we breathe and the Bread we share.

The Bible speaks to us, for God is still speaking.

The Bible is a book, a good book, inspired and enlightening,
and it is not the only book
that God has inspired and offered to us
to share, to ponder, to absorb, to examine.

This follower of Jesus affirms and celebrates
that the Holy Bible offers to one and all
God's blessed gifts of mythology and legends,
narratives and the stories of restoration.

I accept these offerings knowing they do not diminish God's power and love in the least;
as a matter of fact, such an affirmation increases my appreciation,
knowing that God trusts us to grapple with the hard questions
as well as inviting us to seek God's wisdom
for discerning our way forward, together.

Science and Spirituality are Personal

"All stories are true. Many actually happened."
[Rev. Jane Ann Groom, Presbyterian Minister in NY]

Something that is so cool and intriguing
is the relationship between science, spirituality, and mythology.
Mythology, Theology, Science serve to help us understand Who and Whose we are.
They dance these three, twirling and guiding us
through our discernment of Who and Whose we are.

In *"The Masks of God: Creative Mythology"*

Joseph Campbell pointed out that myths help us to gain an Awakening,
a sense of awe before the mystery of being, before the Holy One.

A myth can also help to explain the shape of the universe.

Myth may function as a proto-science,
offering explanations for the physical phenomena
that surround and affect our lives.

And they may help guide us through the stages of life.

I hope and pray the Church is not afraid of mythology.
Legends, narratives, stories, myths, personas, histories, and the sciences
help us to glean a sense of the Truth,
and of Eternal Truths,
and of the joy of living in the presence of God for eternity.

Science and Spirituality are Personal

Are you like me, at times befuddled,
wondering why it is that “science” is a word we so rarely hear or use in church.
Yes, I know.

The Church has a long and at times violent history
with science, scientists, and scientific thought and research.

A relationship that has been far too often antagonistic.

Ask Copernicus, Bruno, and Galileo;
Descartes, Newton, and Halley;
Hubble, Bertrand Russell. and Charles Darwin.

Darwin studied in seminary as well as in laboratories and libraries and in the field
before writing On the Origin of Species,
an ode to the power of God to create and to give the gift of evolution,
not as a puppeteer but as a liberator, an empowering force,
a will for the betterment of species, including but not limited to
humanity.

Tragically, the Church responds to science with fear.
Fear of not being the center of the universe.
Fear of being questioned.
Fear of possibly being wrong.

We cannot undo everything that has stymied the relationship
between science and religion, but there is one thing this congregation can do.
We can remind one another that it's personal.
And therein lies the solution.

The Church has promoted the teaching that the only way to God is through faith.
Belief in God is offered as the prime requirement
for accepting Christ as Lord and Savior.
I say to you today there are other avenues to God of equal value and access.
Who is to say we cannot approach the Holy from an intellectual perspective?
Why must faith from the heart, from an emotional starting point, be the only way?
There are so many, many souls whom God created, shaped and molded
whose starting place is with their head,

people who are thinkers, philosophers, scientists, intellectuals.
Each of us knows people who exude awe and marvel and amazement,
who would love to connect with God
yet have been discouraged from doing so
because they do not speak the language of faith
or relate to the language of belief.

They would be here right now, if they knew they would be welcome.
Yet for millennia the Church has pushed them out or away.
Because the Church cannot imagine otherwise.
Or is insecure.
Or it's afraid to change.
Or insists on being right rather than being reconciled.

Just because the Church responded out of self-righteousness
does not mean we are locked into such a position.

I speak for the Church, and I do not imagine being painted into a corner.
I speak from a place of authority and grace, of confidence and hope.
I dare say we have so many neighbors who are atheists or agnostics or unaffiliated,
so many on the outside looking in
who are seeking a spiritual connection, a home to belong to,
a God to speak with, a Church family to call their own.

It is not too late, Church!
It's never too late and it's never too early to change your ways, attitudes, or dogma.
Rather than trying to convert a thinker into a believer,
how about the Church celebrate and affirm the brain that dares to think,
with clarity, with wisdom, with test tubes and telescopes and theorems.
May the Church stop fighting or rebuking or ignoring folks
who think analytically or philosophically or scientifically,
May the Church instead say, "Welcome home."
Church, this is What we do;
this is Who and Whose we are;
this is Where we are going, being, becoming, together.
We're so incredibly blessed by God to have a venue to live out our questions, together.
We have so much to learn from each other.
Come in, my friends, and let's watch the stars and break Bread together.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

EXTRA MATERIAL:

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics; that no energy gets created in the universe, and none is destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every Btu of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got.

And at one point you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off like children, their ways forever changed by you. And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that are her eyes, that those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

And the physicist will remind the congregation of how much of all our energy is given off as heat. There may be a few fanning themselves with their programs as he says it. And he will tell them that the warmth that flowed through you in life is still here, still part of all that we are, even as we who mourn continue the heat of our own lives.

And you'll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time. You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they'll be comforted to know your energy's still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly. Amen.

(“Planning Ahead Can Make a Difference in the End” by Aaron Freeman, June 1, 2005, All Things Considered -- NPR)