GOD LOVES SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PREFACE TO GOD LOVES SCIENCE

“One of the great tragedies of our time is this impression that has been created that religion and science are at war with each other.” - Francis Collins, former Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute

Is it possible to be a rational, thinking person and believe in God? At University UMC we think it absolutely is. We created this six week sermon series, “God LOVES Science,” to talk about how faithful people can engage with modern science. We believe that our faith can be enriched by science and that we have nothing to fear but much to gain from dialogue with science and scientists. We are, after all, partners not competitors.

To prepare for the series, we used a wide range of resources. Among the most helpful books were: Science and Providence: God’s Interaction with the World by John C. Polkinghorne, The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion by Barbara Brown Taylor, and The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith by Keith Ward.

We hope you enjoy the series and we’d love to hear back from you.

Rev. John Elford and Rev. Lisa Blaylock
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUG. 19, 2018</td>
<td>“THE REALITY OF GOD”</td>
<td>JOHN ELFORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUG. 26, 2018</td>
<td>“THANK GOD FOR EVOLUTION”</td>
<td>JOHN ELFORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPT. 2, 2018</td>
<td>“THE POWER OF PRAYER”</td>
<td>LISA BLAYLOCK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPT. 9, 2018</td>
<td>“THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND EVIL”</td>
<td>JOHN ELFORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPT. 16, 2018</td>
<td>“WHAT ABOUT MIRACLES AND HEALING?”</td>
<td>JOHN ELFORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPT. 23, 2018</td>
<td>“FAITH AND SCIENCE”</td>
<td>JOHN ELFORD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GOD LOVES SCIENCE

THE REALITY OF GOD
Several years ago, we were so fortunate to have Marcus Borg here for a weekend of lectures and preaching. If you don’t know his work, please get your phone out now and order one of his books from Book People. He is an incredibly wise and sure-footed guide into making sense of Christianity in the modern world.

Marcus told us that students would approach him on campus, knowing that he’s a professor of religion and a Christian, and say that they don’t believe in God. His stock answer, which I love, was: “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.”

Over the next several weeks, we’re exploring the many ways that our faith intersects with modern science. And we’re starting off with the biggest topic of all – God and science. Can we honor the tenets of modern science – the accepted scientific understandings of the origin of the universe, evolution, etc. – and still hold on to belief in God the creator of the heavens and the earth?

Okay - I’ll give away the end of the sermon. I think we absolutely can. I think belief in God is at least as good if not a better explanation of reality than imagining that the world is simply a “strange but happy accident.” (John Polkinghorne) But we won’t get very far in our conversation unless we pause and say talk about the God we believe in.

The God that most people don’t believe in is almost always the God that I don’t believe in either. A supernatural God, an authoritarian finger-wagging parent, who doles out lots of rules and is mostly pretty unhappy with us. When I went through my own period of agnosticism as a college student, that was the God that I could no longer believe in.

The God that our sacred scriptures point to - and our scriptures have their own evolution - is not a separate being who lives in another corner of the universe. God is an all-encompassing reality, a glorious presence that permeates everything that is. God is a mystery, one who is so far beyond the world and yet so deeply within the world that we struggle for words to describe God. The apostle Paul said it well, that we see these mysteries through a glass darkly.

A second thing to touch on is that the conflict between religion and science, between reason and faith, is greatly exaggerated. Hence the title of the series – God LOVES science.
Years ago, you could actually see this conflict play out in bumper stickers. First there was the fish emblem, a sign that the driver was a Christian. Then there was the fish emblem with the two little feet attached and Darwin written inside the fish. I guess this person believes in evolution but may also be Christian. Along came a third emblem, a big silver fish gobbling up little fish. The little fish said Darwin and the big fish says Truth. Even though this conflict makes little sense to me, the bumper stickers are evidence that these battles drag on. And they contribute to something I think is simply not true – that there is some kind of inherent conflict between religion and science.

Religion and science have different methods, different aims and interests, and different ways of knowing the world. When they get in each other’s business, there’s trouble – like when the faithful decide that the big bang doesn’t belong in school textbooks; or when scientists say that belief in God is like belief in fairies. This is not helpful.

What we need is a healthy and ongoing dialogue between science and religious faith. When we pay attention to each other, we provide a nice check on each other’s tendency to overreach. If our religious faith is to be more than stagnant belief, we need to listen and learn from science, biblical studies, social movements and other religions because they will constantly push us to reformulate what we believe and rethink how we can best say it. This may be unnerving for some, but for me it’s energizing and renewing.

Science not only pushes us to refine what we believe, science has over the centuries made it more challenging to believe. Scientific discoveries in the 17th century led to explanations for many things that had been left to God, and so the sacred was pushed more and more to the periphery. You no longer needed God to explain all kinds of events – you had science. This wasn’t intentional – it just happened.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, several philosophers began to challenge the idea of God and found it lacking. Ludwig Feuerbach said that God was a projection, that we all create God in our image. Sigmund Freud said that God was an illusion, that we need God to fulfill our wish for a protective human father. Some theologians in the 60s pronounced God dead. Christian faith was thrown into a crisis. Is there room for God in a world that seems almost completely governed by scientific principles? I think there is. And there is much that points to the reality of a spiritual dimension that undergirds the material universe.
For example: one of the things I find interesting to ponder, and this comes from science, is how finely tuned our universe is for the development of life. The technical name for it is the anthropic principle – the idea that the universe is not only headed toward life, but moving purposefully toward intelligent life. If the universe expands too quickly, it will cool off and nothing will happen. If it expands too slowly, it will collapse back on itself. The expansion has to be just right.

Another example – you need stars for the heavier elements and so I’m told you also need just the right balance of two forces – gravity and electromagnetism. There are dozens of examples of this – of course none of this is really proof and none of it will convince a hardened sceptic. But for me it’s at least evidence that points in the direction of a level of being that is deeper, a universal mind that has something like purpose and value, God.

Let’s take it a step deeper. After all, this is a university church and you didn’t come in this morning for chicken soup for the soul. Somewhere along the way in science class, you may have heard of the two slit experiment. Sub-atomic particles are fired at the slits. If one slit is closed, what you see is the impact of the particle. If both slits are open, you see the impact of a wave. That’s kind of weird, right. What scientists have found in working this experiment is that if you also observe the particles, the observations we make not only affect the particle, they somehow affect its past.

That’s really weird. It gets even weirder. Stephen Hawking looked over these experiments and concluded that “we create history by our observation, rather than history creating us.” In other words, nothing really exists until someone watches it. It’s hard to know what to make of all this, and to be fair, Einstein himself struggled with this one. But think about this for a moment. If minds somehow make things that are possible actually happen, then would it not make sense to say that the Big Bang was not actual, until some observer at the beginning of the universe actually observed the Big Bang. And then it happened. And a good candidate for that original observer might be, hmmm … God.

This is interesting stuff, you say, but why does all of this matter? I’ll tell you why it matters to me. When I go through a tough time and I’m pushed up against the wall and pressed flat as a dime, I don’t need to wonder if the one who made heaven and earth is just a figment of my imagination. I need to know in that moment that the reality of God makes sense. I need to know that at the heart of reality, there is One in whom I can place my trust.
I think it matters because I’m your pastor and I know you. I know that there will come a time that will be like walking down a dark path, like walking over a chasm on a narrow bridge. And I’m hoping that something we share in this series will be a light for your path, and a hand-hold for you in the darkness.

I share this because the reality of God is the central conviction of my life. My life has been filled with many good things, but at the core is a deepening relationship with God especially as God is known through Jesus. I’m not just convinced that this whole God thing makes sense. I’ve known God in the depth of experiences, where I knew that something more was going on, where I’ve felt connected with that all-encompassing and radiant spirit.

My hope is that you will find your way to a deeper love and a more expansive trust for the One who is pure, unbounded love. Amen.
THANK GOD FOR EVOLUTION

GOD LOVES SCIENCE
When you go to the movie theater, there's something you do. All of us do it. This is after you get a giant tub of popcorn with jalapeño butter. Even though you know that it's on the screen, and there are movie sets and actors and CGI, for the movie to work, you and I engage in what is called the willing suspension of disbelief. What that means is that you are willing to grant reality and to engage in something as real even though you know it's made up. And so you're crying and laughing and cheering right along with the actors on the screen because you have left your disbelief at the door.

One reason we're doing this series on faith and science is, I hope this isn't what's happening in worship. That we're singing and praying and listening to sermons and it's great for an hour, but that it's really a fantasy unconnected with reality in the 21st century. I hope you don't ever have to leave your doubts and questions at the door – they are the path we're called to follow, of living the questions. I also believe that we can be faithful people and respect and embrace science. We can believe in God and we can honor the evolutionary processes that we learn about in biology class.

There are some hurdles to cross along the way. One is the scripture we read this morning, Genesis 1, one of my favorite chapters in the Hebrew Bible. Most of us accept the conclusions of modern science, but we have stories like this in our sacred book. What do we do with them? Do we suspend disbelief?

Our creationist friends want us to take these verses literally – that Genesis 1 is a record of events that happened a few thousand years ago. And they will be quick to tell us that if this is not true, and evolution is, then the whole Bible and everything we believe collapses, like a bad move in Jenga.

So what is the first chapter of Genesis about?

First Genesis 1 is ancient poetry. It’s set to the days of the week and it’s set in parallel sections. Day one is parallel to Day 4, Day 2 like Day 5. It belongs in a worship service where a priest would say the first part and the congregation would respond, And God saw that it was good!

It’s a text that was written down while the people of Israel were in captivity in a foreign country, in Babylon. This was not a happy time and so this creation story is written as a kind of reply to the stories of creation that were all around them in Babylon.
Stories that creation was an accident, that creation was the byproduct of a war between two gods, that creation was a procession from an evil demi-god that rules the world. Stories that suggested that the God of the Hebrews had been defeated by the gods of Babylon. And so Genesis 1 loudly proclaims that creation is none of that – it is the work of one God, the creator of the heavens and the earth. And it’s all good.

The climax of the story is the seventh day, which is what? (We imagine the climax is the sixth day – of course we do, because it’s about us.) The Sabbath, when God rests – a practice which was especially important in exile just so that they could keep their identity!

So there’s no conflict between Genesis 1 and evolution because they’re talking about two completely different things. One is ancient poetry; the other is modern science. To force Genesis into the strait-jacket of modern science, to compel it to answer questions of biology and anthropology that it knows nothing about – disrespects this sacred text, doesn’t take the Bible seriously and insults the intelligence of God’s faithful people.

The other hurdle we have to cross is the one posed by Darwin. How does the presence and the activity of God relate to what seems to be a closed evolutionary process?

Before evolution, there was no problem. God was pictured as a monarch and creatures were all crafted by divine wisdom. But we know now that this is not so – that our gorgeous world is “the result of innumerable, infinitesimal adaptations of creatures to their environment.” (E. A. Johnson) And those variations are part of a process of natural selection that appears to be random and subject to chance.

One way out of this corner that we’ve backed into is to join many of our founding fathers, folks like Thomas Jefferson who believed that the Creator was like a clockmaker and wound the universe up and left it to tick away undisturbed. For many that works, but for me, that gives away the store. I hate to get all traditional, but the God we worship is not only the one who created all things, but the one who continues to create all things, the One who holds everything in existence, the indwelling spirit who is the ground of birthing and perishing, of hitting dead ends and finding new paths.

When I sit with someone who just lost their spouse or their child, when I call someone who is sitting in ICU with their loved one hanging by a thread, I’m counting on the One who continues to make all things new, who accompanies the evolving world, the one who is ever with me and ever for me and for you. (Not the one who started off the world and then went out for a smoke.)
So I’m a bit greedy. I want to hold on to two things at the same time. I want to hold on to the theory of evolution and I want to hold on to my faith in God who created and is still creating. But how exactly does that work? Let me share with you something that has helped me make some sense of this.

If we were analyzing what’s going on right now in this room, we could talk about how sound is produced and received, how the brain interprets those sounds. In other words, we can talk about a room full of objects and processes that make communication possible.

But there’s something else going on here. You and I are not simply objects bumping up against each other. We’re subjects and many factors other than physical causes that can be measured influence our decisions. As I speak, I’m influenced by the strong bond of feeling I have as your pastor. I’m affected not only by the scripture and things I’ve read this week, but by thoughts I’ve been thinking about this subject for decades. And you are affected by your feelings toward me as your pastor, toward this congregation that you care about. And all of that affects not only our thinking right now, but it will affect the way we act in the weeks ahead. How do you measure all of that?

So where is God in this process? It makes far more sense to me to understand God as a subject, than an object. If God acts in the world, and I wholeheartedly believe that She does, then God acts on us as a subject, as The Subject, the one who is constantly before us and with us, drawing us into truth, beauty and goodness, opening up a new future for us when all we saw was a dead end. And God is Subject not just for us human beings, but for all of creation. God is not an outside force, intervening in creation, but is at work in every moment, pushing, pulling and luring all of us into loving relationships, into connection with others, while still leaving us with our own creativity and freedom.

Because God’s presence and activity in the world isn’t like an object pushing another object, we’ll never observe it under a microscope. We’ll never be able to prove it scientifically. Which means that there will always be room for doubt. But here’s the thing - we may not be able to measure and calibrate these interactions but we can look back and see the contrails of God’s presence.

Years ago, I took a break from ministry and taught in the public schools for seven years. In my second year, I was teaching English at a high school in McAllen. In first period, there was a student who fell asleep every morning, about ten minutes into class. I’ve gotten used to people falling asleep when I talk, but back then it really bothered me. I’d gone through the drill of walking over to him and tapping on his desk, calling on him. But nothing
seemed to work. So one morning, I asked him to stay after class and I was going to read him the riot act.

As I walked to his desk, I felt something change in me. Instead of raising my voice, and signing him up for detention, I found different words spilling out of my mouth. I asked him: “What’s going on with you that you fall asleep every morning?” And he opened up to me about what was going on – that he worked after school until late at night, that his mom needed that income and she needed lots of help with younger siblings, and he was worn out. So we began to build a relationship. And we worked together and he made it through that year.

You can see that as just a simple kindness from one to another. The way I see it is that the spirit of God swept over me and new possibilities and a new future opened up in that moment. And I chose to partner with God on a path of compassion.

So why does all of this matter? Almost half of us in the United States do not accept the conclusions of evolutionary theory. We need to be clear that to do that is to embrace scientific ignorance. We need to have faith based conversations about science and faith and how they are not enemies, but are partners. We need to pass on to others and to our children and to our school boards the importance of teaching science in our schools and that evolution is a core component of human knowledge, not “just a theory.” We need these conversations for our future. We need good science and we need scientists who can lead us to a more equitable, just and green world. That’s why it matters.

Thanks be to the One who creates and is still creating.
Thanks be to God for creation and evolution.
Amen.
GOD LOVES SCIENCE

THE

POWER

OF

PRAYER
Today we continue our worship series “God LOVES Science” with a look at science and prayer. At first glance, it would seem that there is no connection between something as measurable, tangible, and repeatable as science; and prayer, which is more of an art, or maybe a mindset. We will explore how these two seemingly incompatible things intersect, but to do that, let us begin with prayer.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus is in the middle of his ministry. Word has gotten around and great crowds of people are following him about the countryside, watching, waiting for a miracle, listening to his words. Jesus has had several run-ins with the Pharisees and church leaders. He knows they are angry with him and are plotting to take him down. Several of these encounters happened on the Sabbath, and the religious leaders were using that as an excuse to discredit Jesus. It’s stressful knowing that powerful people are plotting against you.

But the crowds continued to grow. Jesus continued to heal, to teach and to build his brand as the One who came to preach the good news of God’s love. This was exhausting work. We pick up the story today as Jesus went to the mountains to pray. He needed a break, a retreat from the craziness of the crowds, the vitriol of the Pharisees, and the pressure to perform. Luke tells us Jesus prayed all night. “He spent the night in prayer to God, and when the day came, he called his disciples, and chose twelve of them, whom he named apostles…”

It’s easy to overlook that first sentence, “he spent the night in prayer to God.” Our attention naturally focuses on the calling of the Apostles. But let’s think about this for a minute. Why would Jesus, the Son of God, need to spend the night in prayer before making a momentous decision? Wouldn’t God already know who Jesus should name as apostles? Wouldn’t Jesus already know what God wanted him to do? Why would he need to pray?

The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas once said “We must pray, not in order to inform God of our needs and desires, but in order to remind ourselves that in these matters we need divine assistance.”
John Polkinghorne, theologian and physicist puts it like this. “Prayer is neither the manipulation of God nor just the illumination of our perception, but it is the alignment of our wills with God’s, the correlation of human desire and divine purpose.” Jesus needed to pray, not because he needed God to do something, but because he needed to be sure that his will and God’s will were in alignment, working together, to fulfill Jesus’ mission on the earth.

Imagine with me for a moment, Jesus out there on the mountain praying all night. Imagine he found a large, flat rock, maybe by a stream where he could spread out his cloak, sit comfortably, and be fully present with the world around him. He could look up and see the stars, the moon, the planets in space. He could close his eyes and hear the night sounds, the insects, the night-hunters, the distant calling of an owl. He could smell the water in the stream, the lingering scent of the plants that grew nearby.

Imagine the tenseness leaving his shoulders. His muscles relaxing. His breathing slowing. He reaches out to God in his mind, opening himself up for an encounter with the Divine. Of course, Luke doesn’t give us any of these details. We have to imagine it. But let’s think for a moment about what happens to our bodies when we pray. The science of it, if you will.

Through many research studies, science has demonstrated that there are many benefits realized from praying.

Prayer reduces stress. An article in the International Journal for the Psychology of Religion suggests that prayer for self-benefit, prayer for riches, beauty, and personal gain had no impact on stress levels. However, people who prayed for others were found to be less impacted by stress.

Prayer builds self-control. Studies show that just like physical exercise, self-control is physically fatiguing to the body making it difficult to sustain beyond short periods of time.

Researchers have found that prayer prior to a mentally exhausting task improves a person’s ability to complete the task. They also found that prayer can even help through such difficult situations as reducing drug dependency and improving exercise behaviors.

Prayer improves our health. Stressful situations fuel bursts of adrenaline which boost the body’s immune system and help us better deal with the situation. However, over time, stress overworks the body’s immune system, breaks it down causing illness, depression, and anxiety. In other words, short-term stress boosts the body’s immune system, but long-term stress destroys the body’s immune system. Prayer increases immune function and decreases pain.
Research shows that one good method to cope with stress is to change your way of thinking about it – and prayer does just that. Prayer lets us isolate stressful situations by placing trust in God to help resolve it. Prayer calms us, removes worry, and as a result, reduces our long-term stress.

Other research shows that prayer boosts your happiness by increasing positive emotion and decreasing depression and anxiety. So we understand scientifically that prayer has definite physical and emotional benefits. Is that the only reason to pray? As Christians, we believe that prayer connects us to God, helps us to build our relationship with God and enables us to hear God’s voice.

We don’t subscribe to the belief that by praying, we change God’s mind, or convince God to act in a certain way. We believe that prayer builds our connection to God’s amazing divine work in the world.

John Polkinghorne describes it as a “personal encounter between God and humanity by which a new possibility comes into existence.” In other words, the usefulness of prayer is in the ongoing relationship between us as humans and God as divine that continues God’s creative work in the world. Let’s go back to our scripture.

Jesus steps away from the chaos of the crowds, the stress of his ongoing dispute with the Pharisees, the demands of his disciples to spend the night in prayer to God. He returns down the mountain with his stress level back in check, his immune system boosted, his ability to make difficult decisions enhanced, and ready to take the next step in his ministry. He looks at all the people who have been his followers, his disciples and chooses 12 to be his apostles. Disciples are followers or students, Apostles are ambassadors or leaders. This was a very difficult decision, and one Jesus only made after significant time in prayer, because in choosing the twelve, he was choosing not only those who will build the Church after his is gone, he is choosing the one who will betray him.

After naming his apostles, Jesus came down and stood among the great multitude of people. He had the physical and emotional and spiritual strength to heal, to teach and Luke says the “Power came out from him and healed all of them.” The power of prayer, then is not its effect on God, but its effect on us. Through science, we can understand the effect it has on our mind and body, but the effect on our Spirit is not as easily measured.
Science, producing repeatable, measurable results to gain knowledge of a subject only goes one direction when studying prayer. Science can measure what happens to us when we pray, but science cannot measure what happens to God when we pray. That is where faith enters the picture. Grace cannot be calculated, measured, scrutinized.

Because at the end of the day, we pray to God, not so much to reduce our stress, or gain self-control, or even to better our overall health. We pray because we have faith that God hears our prayers. That somehow, someway, those prayers make a difference. That somehow, someway, we will experience God’s presence and Divine connection.

When I first began exploring my call to ministry, the pastor of the church I was in asked me if I would lead a cancer support group. At the time there were a number of our members and our community who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. I said yes and for the next five years, we met together every Thursday evening to talk about what it is to live with, and sometimes die from cancer.

Those meetings were holy time. Together we experienced miracles, and great loss. We processed through just about every emotion possible. We laughed with sometimes gallows humor. And every week, we would end with prayer. We didn’t pray for miracles, although everyone wanted one. We prayed so that we could connect to God through our faith to make it through. You know the words.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.
I am not a scientist. I’m not a theologian. I’m a pastor. And I believe that God did grant the serenity to accept difficult diagnoses. The courage to face treatment, and the wisdom to see things through.

That is the power of prayer. God giving us what we need to make it through. God’s divine love touching us, healing us and giving us peace. Amen.
GOD LOVES SCIENCE

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND EVIL
November 1, 1755. All Saints Day. That morning, in Lisbon, Portugal, most folks were in church. Lisbon was one of the most pious cities in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. At about 9:30 that morning, the first wave in a massive earthquake ripped through the city. The walls of churches shook, stained glass windows exploded and many ran into the streets, only to be met by a second and more powerful shock wave, which demolished the city.

Survivors ran down to the harbor and saw the water mysteriously vanish, sucking all of the boats out to sea. As people looked on, stunned by all they had witnessed, the water returned with a vengeance. A huge tsunami swept over them and thousands more were lost. Some say as many as 60,000 people died in Lisbon on All Saints’ Day.

Historians tell us that the word Lisbon was used then as much as Auschwitz is today to name the shock to the moral and theological systems of the day. What was different about the Lisbon earthquake—because there had been natural disasters before this--was that it came in the midst of Enlightenment ideas and seemed to support the growing view that the world was a closed system of cause and effect and that God, if there even was a God, was outside the system. Where was God, when the city of Lisbon on its knees in prayer, was destroyed?

The belief in a powerful and loving God is deeply challenged by the horrors of natural disasters and the suffering of innocent lives. I don’t believe this is simply a theoretical problem for philosophers and theologians. This isn’t just about the logic of how God can be good and all-powerful and so how do we explain evil and suffering; it’s also about coming to some kind of a meaningful and coherent worldview that can stand up in the face of the experiences of our own lives.

Our pop Christian culture is full of answers—bad answers—to questions about suffering and evil. Harriet Schiff, in her book The Bereaved Parent, writes about her child who died in surgery to correct a congenital heart defect. Her pastor took her aside and said: “I know this is a painful time for you. But I know you’ll get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear.” Schiff’s reaction was: “If only I were a weaker person, my son would still be alive.”
So what do you say to someone who has gone through misery and loss? Not what that pastor said! For many of us in progressive mainline churches, and especially for many pastors, there’s a reluctance to say anything at all. Our fall back is a ministry of presence. There’s nothing wrong with that—many times just being there with folks in the hospital room or at the funeral home, speaks more powerfully of our love and God’s love than our best theological explanations. But there comes a time when we need to put things back together again, to understand what happened, when we need to “repaint our portrait of God.”

One of William Sloane Coffin’s most treasured sermons was the one he preached about 10 days after the death of his son Alex. It’s one of the best pastoral responses to the problem of evil and suffering I’ve ever heard. He opened with these words: “a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander—who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family ‘fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky’—my twenty-four year old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.”

Coffin was sitting at his sister’s house later that week and a woman came in the door with food, shook her head and said, “I just don’t understand the will of God.”

Coffin jumped in, “I’ll say you don’t. Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he probably was driving too fast in such a storm? …. Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guard rail separating the road from Boston Harbor? …. God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels …. My own consolation lies in knowing that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all hearts to break.”

God is with us and for us, working for good in and through every situation. Yes, God has created a world with a great deal of freedom, where bad things, even terrible things can happen. It’s precarious to be sure. But isn’t that the nature of love, the nature of creativity, that each step is a precarious step into the unknown?

The scripture text for the day is a parable from Matthew about the wheat and the weeds. You may be wondering, what does it have to do with a conversation about the problem of evil and suffering?

Matthew’s audience was a young Christian community who were trying to make their way in a larger, confusing world. The culture around them was morally suspect and the church was turning out to be not so pure and holy after all. The parable
of the wheat and the weeds is addressed to people who look at evil and good mixed together and wonder, what is the point of even trying? It’s a pastoral conversation between the risen Christ and the early church about the presence of good and evil, mixed together in the world.

When the servants in Jesus’ parable see that the field is overgrown with weeds, they go to the landowner and demand an explanation. This is the first and the very human response to evil. God, did you do this? What were you thinking?

The landowner makes it clear that an enemy has done this. In other words, the landowner/God is not the source of the weeds. They’re not there to build character. They’re not there for some hidden future purpose. The weeds are not part of the plan.

Where did the weeds come from? In the parable, Jesus says, from the devil. Few of us find that very persuasive as an explanation of the origin of evil. But we’re aware that the evil we experience is more than the sum of its parts. Take the evil of racism – it’s not just a few racist people carrying tiki torches, but it a weird kind of power built into our systems. There’s a trans-human, almost cosmic dimension to evil. But where did it come from? In humility, sometimes we must confess that our light shines only so far, and we may have to admit that we simply don’t know.

The workers ask the landowner, “Do you want us to gather the weeds?” In other words, what do we do about evil? Do we root it out? Some days, we might wish that God would swoop in and wipe evil off the face of the earth. Only one problem – who would be left?

What God does, and what we join God in doing is not battling evil with the power of the sword, but fighting with the weapons of love. God is not standing by watching from a distance as the song goes, but God is working in and through each moment of creation to bring truth and goodness out of suffering and pain. That is God’s job.

So what is God’s power like? There are two ways to think about power. There is the unilateral power to compel or force someone to do something. This is the kind of power that bullies and bloviates, that builds walls and silences opposition, that makes decisions without consultation and separates the world into us and them.

God’s power, as we see it in Jesus, is completely different. It’s relational – transforming the world by calling on our best angels, allowing for freedom and moral responsibility, saving the world by love and embrace, not alienation and division. In between the parable of the wheat and the weeds and the interpretation there’s a little parable – that the kin-dom of God is like
a tiny mustard seed. That’s what God’s power is like—a mustard seed—undercover, hidden, but nevertheless at work in powerful, transforming ways.

Several years ago, I was fortunate to hear two remarkable people speak at a luncheon sponsored by iACT, our Austin interfaith organization. It was the most unlikely pairing of speakers you could imagine. Do you recall the horrific Ft. Hood shooting in 2009? The speakers were the daughter of a man killed in the Ft. Hood shooting, and the cousin of the man who shot him. Nader Hasan’s cousin killed Kerry Cahill’s father, Michael. And there they were, telling their stories and fighting back tears as they spoke, their emotions still so raw from the tragedy. Nader, the cousin of the shooter, was interviewed by Bob Woodruff on ABC News and Woodruff surprised him by asking if he would meet with the family members of the victims. If they’d want to talk to me, he said, I would.

The victim’s daughter, Kerry, watched the interview and contacted Nader. Her first email bowled Nader over. She asked him, “How are you and how is your family?” Just two years after the tragedy, the two families planned a visit. Kerry stopped at a bookstore to find a gift. She joked: what do you say when the clerk asks you, now who is this gift for? Emily Post has no advice either; she checked. They gave the family’s toddler Mouse Soup, which had been one of her dad’s favorite books to read to their kids.

Kerry has joined Nader in his work with the Nawal Foundation, dedicated to moving interfaith conversations from simple tolerance to mutual respect and understanding. They’ve spoken together around the country. To a high school group, Nader said: “We’re hoping that you can find comfort and strength by seeing what Kerry and I are doing. That she and I could work together and be friends and travel together and laugh together might seem impossible. And yet we’re doing it.”

When I see the impossible occur, when I see “that will never ever happen” happen, I know that the kin-dom of God is coming to life right in front of me and I know that God is at work in this world of wheat and weeds. I know that God has the power to take the broken pieces of our lives and make them whole again. And I give thanks. Thanks be to God! Amen!

WHAT ABOUT HEALING AND MIRACLES?
What About Healing and Miracles?  
Matthew  
University UMC, Austin TX  
September 16, 2018

This series – God LOVES Science – never looked easy from the outside. As I’ve sat with the topics each week, I feel like I’m on the edge of a huge canyon, whose far edge now recedes beyond the horizon and that all we can do in our hour together is talk about the small patch of ground right in front of us.

We’ve talked about the reality of God – that even in a thoroughly scientific age it makes sense to speak of God as an all encompassing spirit. That speaking about God acting in the world, in our lives, in each moment makes sense. That God’s work in and through the evolutionary processes makes sense – God has created and is still creating. We’ve talked about prayer and we came out on the side of Søren Kierkegaard, who said that “the function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.” And last Sunday, we said that God is not the author of evil and suffering, but that in creating our world, God also allowed for an enormous amount of freedom.

Wow! We’ve covered a lot of ground. And today, we continue the journey, asking about miracles and healing. Does it even make sense to talk about them in an age of science and technology?

There was a time when miracles were considered proof of the existence of God. Miracles were understood as a violation of natural laws, as a direct intervention of God in the operation of the world. I remember reading about an NFL player who survived a horrific car accident where other passengers lost their lives. He said that he kept praying to Jesus while the car was flipping over and over and he believes that Jesus saved him. Perhaps so. But why didn’t Jesus see fit to save the others in the car as well? Did lives literally ride on a prayer? When we buy into a God who lets nature roll along and then suddenly intervenes here and there on a whim and a prayer, we end up with a God who looks more like a petty dictator, very parochial and mean-spirited.

So if miracles are not violations of natural laws, what are they? My favorite United Methodist theologian, John Cobb, says that miracles are astonishing events in which God is seen to work dramatically. This isn’t a precise scientific definition because it’s not easy to draw the line between what is ordinary and what is astonishing. But it does recognize that even though God is involved in everything, sometimes we see God more in one event than
in another. After all, if God is always involved in the world, drawing us toward truth and beauty, wouldn’t we expect to see hints of God’s presence shining through in particular times and places?

The fall of the Berlin wall, the shift without violence toward an inclusive democracy in South Africa – I think of those events as miraculous because they are pretty much the opposite of what anyone expected. And it’s interesting to me in both cases that some of the key players were folks who had a deep belief in God and were open to divine guidance.

Some of us have experienced astonishing events, miracles – surviving a horrendous auto accident, pulling through a serious illness, finding that the cancer that was there last week is gone. Even though we may not believe that God intervenes, we may pray for miracles. I have. And I think that’s okay.

Miracles are shrouded in mystery. There is no magic formula for a miracle - they come as an astonishment and we receive them as the marvelous gifts they are. The idea that miracles don’t happen because someone doesn’t have enough faith is more of that cruel bumper sticker theology that we need to jetison from our vocabulary.

Another thing that is confusing when we talk about miracles is the word healing. What happens in many of the miracle stories, like the one we read in Matthew today is that someone is cured – someone who could not see, now sees. We call it healing. But there’s a difference between being healed and being cured. What Jesus was about in many of these stories was more than just making someone well – when he cured someone of leprosy or blindness, in his day, he was restoring them out of isolation back into their community. Healing is not just physical cure; it’s about restored relationships.

When I pray with a family by the death bed of a loved one, what I’m most aware of is that there can be healing even when that loved one dies. Memories and relationships can be healed. Love can be restored. Forgiveness can happen. Healing is broader than curing and when we expand healing in this way, healing becomes part of our job description. This is work that we can do. With these hands, these eyes, these words, we can heal.

Ann Weems, sometimes called the Presbyterian poet laureate, writes: “What is all this touching in church? It used to be a person could come to church and sit in a pew and not be bothered by all this friendliness and certainly not by touching. I used to come to church and leave untouched …. Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be; I could just ask the person sitting next to me: How are you? And the person could answer: Oh, just fine, and we’d both go home … strangers who have known each other for twenty years. But now the minister asks us to look at each other.”
She continues: “Now I have to get involved. Now I have to suffer when the community suffers. Now I have to be more than a person coming to observe a service. That man last week told me I’d never know how much I’d touched his life. All I did was smile and tell him I understood what it was to be lonely.”
If we reduce healing to curing someone we miss out on so much, on all the other ways God is healing our relationships and our spirits, even our memories. And we miss the ways that we might be healers, too.
In the gospels, the miracle stories are remembered at least in part as a kind of street cred for Jesus. You wouldn’t get far as a holy man in the ancient world, unless you had a few miracles under your belt. Of course, the stories were also seriously good news for the ones who were healed. But there’s more going on in these stories. In John’s gospel, these miraculous stories are called signs. If Jesus’ message was that the reign of God has come near, these miracles are signs of that reign. They’re like windows into God’s intention for the whole world and for us, a world where folks are cared for, where our bodies matter, where those who are pushed away are brought near, where no one is cast off.
Last Thursday, some of us from University church headed over to the Blanton Museum of Art on a field trip. We saw several remarkable pieces there, but one has really stayed with me. It’s title is The Broad (rhymes with road). It’s a huge wall-sized painting, mostly of a museum in LA that houses the Broad modern art collection. In the foreground, on the sidewalk, there is the small, faceless figure of a worker, pushing a trash can. Ramiro Gomez, the young artist, portrays LA cool in his work, but somewhere in his paintings you will find the workers, the housekeepers, the custodians, who make it all happen. Gomez draws us from all that glitters toward those in the shadows who keep the whole world going.
You could say that the miracles and healings of Jesus are literally signs, pointing to the ones we have forgotten, pointing to the ones that matter. Reminding us that no one is cast off. No one is incompatible. No one is disposable.

Writer John Pavlovitz puts it uncomfortably – Blessed are those who give a damn. Blessed are those who give a damn about brave refugees, about beautiful families who have no health care, about young black men born into a mass incarceration world, about brown skinned toddlers torn from their parents’ arms, about transgender teens struggling against cruelty, about first graders who have to endure active shooter drills, about wonderful Muslim families and homeless families and working class families.

Blessed are those who give a damn. Blessed are you, for you bring heaven to earth. Blessed are you, for you bring healing to a wounded world. Thanks be to God. Amen.
GOD LOVES SCIENCE

FAITH AND SCIENCE
When I went to high school in the 70s I felt like I was in the heyday of scientific discovery. Quantum physics was entering the science classrooms. Computers were getting smaller – they took up only half the classroom in the lab where we typed out our Fortran cards and learned our do-loops. It seemed that robots and flying cars were just around the corner.

Fast forward to our time – sadly, too many annoying robots and still no flying cars - and we find that science has become to many a matter of convenience. It’s like going to the cafeteria. We love science when it creates new gadgets for us. But when scientists talk about global warming and our role in it, we look the other way. Or worse, we find alternative facts to support our way of life. And strangely, many of those who ought to be most concerned with the truth of anthropogenic climate change, those who sit in church every Sunday, seem to be at the head of the opposition.

And so one of my hopes through this series is that what we’re doing here nudges the public conversation back toward sanity, toward honoring the place of science in conversations about the future of the planet. Making the case that science might actually offer ways to complement our faith and even deepen it. God does love science. And like the proverbial horse and carriage, faith and science go together.

John Polkinghorne, a living example of the happy union of faith and science, because he is a physicist turned Anglican minister, has written on some of the startling connections between faith and science. Take the nature of light. The scientific puzzle about whether light is a wave or a particle was resolved with the equally puzzling answer that light is both. But here’s the key. How we ask the question determines the answer we arrive at. If we ask a wave-like question, light appears as a wave; if we ask a particle-like question, then light appears as a particle.

Polkinghorne suggests that the way we now understand light helps us understand how we express our experience of Jesus, as both human and divine. If you ask a human-like question about Jesus, you get a human-like answer. If you ask a divine-like question about Jesus, you get a divine-like answer. To fully describe Jesus in our experience as Christians we need both languages. Just like light, the answer is not either this one or that one, but both. Jesus is fully human, but Jesus is also for us the fullest revelation of God in a human life.
Theoretical physicists are a fascinating bunch. One of the most engaging of the 20th century was David Bohm, who worked in the area of relativistic quantum field theory. I’m pretty confident that I do not completely understand Bohm’s ideas, but as best as I can figure, Bohm suggested that the universe was not made up of many different separate things. Rather the universe behaves more like one interwoven thing in a perpetual dynamic flux so that we experience it as many different things. Everything that unfolds in space and time was present at the very beginning.

What I hear in this theory is that from the beginning, from the big bang, there is something like a memory that endures, a memory when all things were together. What if all things continue to retain this stubborn memory somewhere deep within us – swans and toads and plankton and javelinas – all of us have this memory of being one?

Part of what drove Bohm to this theory was what physicists call quantum entanglement – the bizarre ways that particles can be in relationship with each other even at huge distances. Things seem to have a desire to be in relationship. The evolutionary biologist Brian Swimme called it “the urge to merge.”

Think of our solar system, which we have featured in worship for the whole series, including little Pluto. The earth has been revolving around the sun for about 4.5 billion years. Now that’s what you call a long term relationship! And we are born out of that relationship with a desire to be in relationship with others, to be in right relation with all things. This stuff is in us and through us like the elementary particles that move through us without our even noticing because of this persistent memory that we are all one.

The writer of Ephesians put it this way – “There is one body and one Spirit … one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Creator of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Our faith expresses that one-ness. Our faith is not about detaching ourselves from others or separating into our own groups or walling off others. Our faith is about embracing others.

In the Qur’an, there’s a description of the creation of human beings. God draws us forth from the earth and when the first man and the first woman emerge, God instructs the angels to bow down to them in reverence. All the angels do this, except one, the greatest angel. Satan. The point is clear, right? When we refuse to honor the humanity that we see in another, the sacred image that is deep within us, we are out of harmony with God’s purposes for us. And we come in touch with what is at the heart of so much conflict and division in the world.

Confucius put it like this – Not feeling compassion for a
stranger is like not feeling when one’s foot has caught on fire.

How important it is to nurture that primal memory, that we are one – all of us. Not just the church. All of us. One body. One humanity.

John Philip Newell has been writing for years now about reclaiming the ancient Celtic tradition of honoring the sacredness that is in each other and in everything that has being. Some years back he was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City for St. Francis’ Day. He got up early – he was staying at the cathedral – and outside there were already hundreds of people gathered with cats and dogs and pets of all kinds. They were waiting for the celebration, for the blessing of all creatures. I was surprised to learn that on St. Francis’ Sunday, the cathedral is fuller than on Easter or Christmas. Think about what that means for a moment.

The liturgy was magnificent – Paul Winter who composed Missa Gaia was there and wolf and whale sounds were wrapped into the liturgy. Birds perched on people’s shoulders and squawked in response to the prayers and songs.

At the end of the service, the west doors opened, and the silent Procession of the Creatures began. Silence both to honor them and not to startle them. And so in they came, this incredible procession of creation – a camel in the lead, straining its long neck as if to get a glimpse of the crowd. A boa constrictor followed the camel, then a pig and a goat and the whole gamut of God’s good creation. Newell said at times he felt like he was on the set of Lord of the Rings.

What surprised him was how deeply moved he was by the presence of creatures inside the cathedral, moved to tears at points. He noticed that no one had to say, This is what we believe. Everyone already knew. It was that primal memory re-asserting itself. The wisdom that the earth is sacred, that we are dependent on every living thing as they are on us. It’s something we know deep in our bones.

The theologian Thomas Berry says that we are living in a moment of grace. We are aware of the oneness of the earth, of the way all things are so deeply related to each other in ways that we have never known before. What will we do with this moment? Will we find ways to move more in harmony with the earth? Will we embody the justice that all of us and the planet long for? Will we live in ways that show our deep commitment to the poor?

This is a moment of grace, my friends. A time when we can translate all that we see and all that we know into action. But like every moment of grace, like the flowers of the field, it is fleeting. Will we meet this moment? Or will it pass us by?

1 Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for this insight. See The Luminous Web.
2 See John Philip Newel, The Rebirthing of God, 6.