

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Epiphany 5B (2/8/09) – Evolution Sunday  
Sermon by Ruth Eller

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? . . . The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. (Isaiah 40:21-31)*

A little more than four years ago I learned about something called “The Clergy Letter Project”. Alarmed by recent threats to the teaching of science in American schools, some scientists and persons of faith drafted an open letter. The letter says it is possible to affirm both the discoveries of modern science (in particular the theory of evolution) and the basic tenets of Christianity. The goal was to gather 10,000 signatures for this document. As of yesterday, 11,822 clergy of many Christian denominations had signed; and 434 rabbis and 173 Unitarian Universalist ministers have signed similar letters adapted to their own faiths.

There was also the suggestion that we take a Sunday (or weekend) in February to consider the compatibility of our belief in a Creator with the idea of evolution. Again as of yesterday, 929 congregations from 14 countries will celebrate Evolution Weekend this year.

The compatibility of faith and science: that’s what it’s about. Not just the face-off between so-called creationists and evolutionists. This is about the way we view the wonders of the cosmos and the processes of creation at every level. This is about lifting the limits we place on God who is by definition limitless. This is about opening our minds and deepening our faith.

Our Old Testament reading this morning is a perfect place to begin. Isaiah proclaims the majesty of the creation and of the Holy One who creates—the One who is beyond the limits of human understanding and whose own “understanding is unsearchable”.

Does this mean we throw up our hands and forget trying to understand or explore what we see in the universe? I don’t think so. Isaiah’s mysterious, limitless God, also lifts us up as on eagle’s wings. Such a God would not want us to limit ourselves, either.

I know that some other Christians hold a different view. But my tradition tells me that my brain—the product of millions of years of evolution—should not be turned off when old ideas are challenged. On the contrary—and this is where faith comes in—I think God meant for me to have this brain and to use it. In the words of Bishop Tuttle, the founder of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah, I am blessed with a tradition that holds “a faith not afraid to reason and reason not ashamed to adore.” This is why I am happy to celebrate Evolution Sunday.

And when I look at the wonders of the cosmos, what do I find? I find that the universe, from the farthest galaxy to the tiniest particle, is dynamic. It is constantly changing and recreating itself. Cause for celebration. But with a challenge attached.

There is a great New Yorker cartoon showing a man in pajamas sitting on the edge of the bed, holding a telephone receiver to his ear. The caption reads: “This is your wake-up call. Change or die.”

“Change or die.” And I would add: often something has to die in order for change to occur. This is the truth at the heart of all reality. It is the story of each of our lives. It is the story of the human race. It is the story of this planet. It is the story of the universe.

Michael Dowd calls this The Great Story, and he has become its apostle. He has written a book called *Thank God for Evolution*. He expresses an enthusiasm I share, an

enthusiasm for the amazing universe that is daily, even hourly, being revealed to us through the discoveries of modern science. To him, as to me, these are revelations from God: “Faith not afraid to reason, reason not ashamed to adore.”

Here it is, The Great Story: 13.7 billion years ago something big happened. A giant expansion of something out of nothing—we call it the Big Bang. A cloud of particles spread outward. Within an amazingly short period of time what we now call atoms started to appear. Very light atoms—hydrogen and helium.

Then these atoms started to clump together. These clumps compressed, got hot, and exploded again. Because of the pressure, atoms changed. The stuff of the universe died, changed, and lived again in a new way. The first kinds of stars became other kinds of stars. These kinds of stars had other, heavier elements in them.

As one of these later stars was forming, a disk of matter, elements of all kinds, spun out from its center. Bits of this disk clumped together. This was about 4.5 billion years ago. Still circling this medium-sized star, these bits, which we now call planets, were very hot. They gradually cooled. The third one from the star was bumped by another one and part of it spun off, making a satellite we now call the moon.

About a billion years later, the first life-forms appeared. They lived on carbon dioxide. But when they produced too much oxygen for comfort—guess what? They changed. Some of them were able to live on oxygen now.

You can fill in the rest of the story. A fish had trouble finding water. It changed, so it could haul itself from one puddle to the next. And about four million years ago someone like us started walking around. She had to change, because the trees just weren't helping anymore. And now here we sit, in our lovely church, remembering her, and the fish, and the flaming ball, and the clouds of gas, and that first moment when there was something.

Why is this a great story? Well, think of it. If there hadn't been a beginning—well, that's obvious. If there hadn't been stars dying so they could change—there would have been no heavy elements. If there had been no heavy elements, there would have been no earth. If there had been no collision with another object, there would have been no moon—and the earth would have been way more massive than it is. If the earth had been more massive than it is, there probably would have been no advanced forms of life as we know them.

And if all of this had not happened just when it did, on the cosmic timescale, we would not be in a position to see what we see, to know what we know.

One way to respond to The Great Story is to say: It's all blind chance. There is no meaning to the universe or to human existence. It all just happened.

But there is another way to respond. That is to say: Yes, there is chance. Things bump into each other. Things die. Things change. It all seems random. But we are here. We have the gift of self-awareness. We are, as some have said, the universe looking at itself. We are, in the most literal way, the stuff of which the universe is made. Think of it: the hydrogen atoms in the water in your blood are some of the same atoms that coalesced from the Big Bang—the same atoms! The iron and calcium inside you were contributed by generations of stars. They exploded and died so you could be here, marveling at the Great Story.

And the structure and size of your brain—they are as they are because your ten-thousandth great grandparents changed and died and changed again. It was chance, yes—genetic mutations that just happened to suit their needs. But the change happened, and the race did not die. God did not need to tinker. But that is not to say that God was not there, at the beginning and through it all, in everything. We Christians, of all people, should believe this. After all, we are incarnationists: we believe in a God who is with us in the

flesh, who chose to participate in the Universe, sharing the star-stuff that comes from—well, that comes from God knows where.

Celebration—and challenge.

There's a great book by Joel Primack and Nancy Abrams called *The View from the Center of the Universe*. They say, "There's a joke among cosmologists that romantics are made of stardust, but cynics are made of the nuclear waste of worn-out stars." Of course, "stardust" and "the nuclear waste of worn-out stars" are two names for exactly the same thing, the atoms contained in the human body. How we choose to see the realities in and around us makes all the difference, doesn't it? It even affects how we behave. Stardust, or waste? If it's just waste—well, who cares what we do with it? There is a moral dimension to accepting our place in The Great Story. Something lifted us up on eagle's wings so we could see and think and be grateful and love. Gave us the awesome responsibility of choice, too.

What to do? It's not like we don't have an example. The One who made and came to share our stardust chose to love and to teach and to heal. That's what the gospel today is all about—the choice of using our privileged place in the universe to work for others and change the world for the better. Or, of course, not.

"Change or die": what is the God of the Universe, the source and the sharer of The Great Story asking of us now? Life continues to evolve, on every level. The difference between us and Lucy, who lived in East Africa four million years ago, is that we know what we're made of and where we come from. We have the choice of working with the universe, with God; or not. We can choose to change, and live. Or choose to remain as we are, and die. (Think: carbon emissions. Think: the economy.)

It's not just those who say everything is random and meaningless who may refuse to change. It's also those believers who reject the truth God is revealing to them today. It's those who would prevent American children from learning the Great Story. If they succeed, they will warp our children's understanding of the world and cripple their ability to make the changes necessary for survival.

If we choose the first option, we will change and we will live. We will take advantage of all the truths God is revealing through science. We will learn how to stop destroying our world and our fellow-creatures—including one another. We will learn to adapt by cooperating—because that's much more important to evolution—and to religion—than the slashing, merciless individualism or imperialism that some people believe in. Such violent behavior is one thing that will have to die, if we are to change and live.

If we choose the second option, we will ignore the reality of the Great Story, either by viewing the world as random and pointless, or by shutting it out because it does not match our old ideas. So we will not change, and we will die. Maybe some other medium-sized star will spin out a disk of debris that will clump together, and . . . and . . . The Story will go on somewhere else.

But wouldn't you rather be a part of it?

Celebrate it. And accept its challenge.