

26 January 2020

Scientific and Spiritual Truth

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

We're going to be having our scripture reading at the end of the sermon, but as we deal today with scientific truth versus spiritual truth, I want to read a bonus scripture, an example of scientific writing that is found in the Bible: the first 8 verses of Leviticus 13:

38 The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. 3The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. 4But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall confine the diseased person for seven days. 5The priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if he sees that the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall confine him for seven days more. 6The priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the disease has abated and the disease has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean. 7But if the eruption spreads in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. 8The priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

I'm serious here, this is pretty good science. Look at it. The treatment of leprosy is based on observation of data – how big is the sore, has it spread, has it affected the hairs of the body – all obviously based on past observation. It calls for hypothesis and experiment (measure the sore and set a person apart for seven days and examine it to see if it has grown) and follow up experiments depending on the results of the first trial. It's actually an excellent use of the scientific method. It's good science.

It's also wrong. That doesn't change the fact that it's good science, though. Science is gathering data and making reasonable hypotheses to explain that data, and that's what this does. It's just that we have better data today. We recognize that not all skin diseases are leprosy, and we know that leprosy itself is caused by the *mycobacterium leprae*, that it isn't as contagious as was once thought, and it can be treated directly. Now that we have better data, the old hypotheses and plans for treatment are inadequate, so we do something else.

And that's how science works. You observe facts and collect data. Then you make an explanatory hypothesis to make sense of what you've gathered. That hypothesis will remain in place as long as it does that, or rather, until a better hypothesis comes along that makes better sense of the data. Thus science is always moving, as new facts and better explanations arise. To use a more familiar example, ancient people observed the heavens and noticed that the stars

moved across the sky but stayed in the same patterns related to other stars. Then people noticed that some heavenly lights didn't follow those fixed patterns. The sun followed a different path, for instance, and the moon, and few smaller lights, that people called planets. So a hypothesis was proposed. Earth is flat (duh!) but over the earth there is a vast dome, or vault, like the top half of a snow globe, and the stars are points of light fixed in that dome. The dome moves around, but the stars stay fixed in the same patterns. Below the dome, though, are the sun and moon and planets that have their own patterns of movement around the earth. Good science. It explains the basic data. Only true astronomers, who spend a *lot* of time charting the stars, noticed that there were things that didn't add up entirely under this plan, so they kept adding footnotes to the theory. Eventually there were more footnotes than theory, and the theory itself was falling apart, until people like Copernicus and Galileo proposed a better theory, one that explained the basic data *and* the footnotes. Over time, with new data, the rest of us adopted the new theory and no longer believe that the earth is flat and we are covered by a huge vault with stars stuck to it. The old dome theory wasn't bad science. It was fine, for the data that it had. It just turned out to be wrong.

Anyway, back to Leviticus 13. I read that passage for two reasons: first, to show that the Bible does have some good scientific work in it, and second, to point out that as good as that work was for a thousand years BC, today it's worthless. Leviticus 13 has zero value to anyone today. (I'll even toss in Leviticus 14, on mildew. Also worthless.) In fact, I'll go on to declare that any actual science that is contained in our two-to-three-thousand-year-old book is long since obsolete, because – again – science is always moving. Fortunately, though, there's really not much science in here. The Bible isn't concerned with offering explanations for how the physical world works. Instead, the Bible is concerned with a very different sort of question.

The Bible is interested in the conviction that most of humanity has held from the beginning that there is a reality that transcends the physical world. Peoples of all times and in every place have concluded that there is something true that exists beyond measurable space and countable time, beyond the ability of our five senses to perceive. This reality is known by other sorts of senses, such as feeling and imagination and ecstatic experience. Moreover, people have not only concluded that such a reality exists, but also that it matters. This super-earthly reality is the *source* of ordinary reality. In other words, the unseen reality *created* the seen. Furthermore, this greater reality is the source of humanity's other unexplainable convictions: for instance, that justice and fairness are good, that compassion is better than cruelty, that courage is better than cowardice. This Other is why we perceive and arrange random sounds and colors to create beauty – music and art – and why we feel that beauty is of value. This Other is why we believe that behind random experience is meaning and behind death itself is life. None of these are logical beliefs, and humans have always believed them. We lump all these strange convictions that have characterized humanity under the name “spiritual” reality.

Now, I know that not every human shares these convictions, but the vast majority do and always have, even without scientific evidence. Because, here's the thing: if you want to explore this “spiritual” reality, science can't help. Science deals with the physical world. If you want to study a world beyond the physical, science is the wrong tool. That's why the Bible doesn't do

much science. Scripture is interested in spiritual reality and uses tools that are appropriate to that reality: poetry, metaphor, story, imagination, and visionary experience. Beyond the Bible, other suitable tools for seeking spiritual knowledge include music and meditation and visual art and wilderness wandering and, above all, relationship. By these means we experience a world that transcends the physical. If you're trying to figure out the source of an illness, music and meditation and poetry are the wrong tools. If you're wondering what the purpose of your life is, science is the wrong tool. Each reality offers a different sort of truth and different means for discovering that truth.

Given that the two worlds have different goals and methods, there shouldn't be any conflict between them, right? But of course there has been. The problem is that we are strange, hybrid beings that include both worlds. On the one hand, we are creatures of this world – mammals, hominids that share most of our DNA with orangutans – and on the other hand we bear in our spirits the stamp of that Other reality, so that we are capable of being transported by a cathedral or Mozart's *Requiem*. Because these worlds are intermingled within us, sometimes someone picks up the wrong set of tools. For instance, there are those who try to prove by science that God does or doesn't exist. You can't do that. God, by definition, is beyond all the things that science can measure. If you *did* prove God by science, the thing that you proved would not be God. On the other hand, you cannot determine the age of the earth by adding together the numbers of the Genesis genealogies. That's story, no more useful for scientific inquiry than Leviticus's suggestions on mildew. The Bible does contain a little bit of science – all of which is worthless – but you can't treat the rest of it as scientific writing. If you do, you just miss the point.

So we're going to close today with a reading of scripture, the story of creation from Genesis. No scripture has been fought over so hard by both Christians and atheists trying to read it as science, but it isn't. Listen to it today as poetry, asking yourself, what does this say about God? About God's relationship to the world? About humanity and our relationship to both God and the world? We'll be reading from the new translation by Hebrew scholar Robert Alter.

We read from Genesis 1, verse 1, to Genesis 2, verse 4:

When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day. And God said, "Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water." And God made the vault and it divided the water beneath the vault from the water above the vault, and so it was. And God called the vault Heavens, and it was evening and it was morning, second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear," and so it was. And God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of waters He called Seas, and God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let the earth grow grass, plants yielding seed of each kind and trees bearing fruit of each kind, that has its seed within it upon the earth." And so it was. And the earth put forth grass, plants yielding seed, and trees bearing fruit of each

kind, and God saw that it was good. And it was evening and it was morning, third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens to divide the day from the night, and they shall be signs for the fixed times and for days and years, and they shall be lights in the vault of the heavens to light up the earth." And so it was. And God made the two great lights, the great light for dominion of day and the small light for dominion of night, and the stars. And God placed them in the vault of the heavens to light up the earth and to have dominion over day and night and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And it was evening and it was morning, fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters swarm with the swarm of living creatures and let fowl fly over the earth across the vault of the heavens." And God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that crawls, which the water had swarmed forth of each kind, and the winged fowl of each kind, and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the water in the seas and let the fowl multiply in the earth." And it was evening and it was morning, fifth day. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of each kind, cattle and crawling things and wild beasts of each kind. And so it was. And God made wild beasts of each kind and cattle of every kind and all crawling things on the ground of each kind, and God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth."

*And God created the human in his image,
in the image of God He created him,
male and female He created them.*

And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth." And God said, "Look, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the face of all the earth and every tree that has fruit bearing seed, yours they will be for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and to all the fowl of the heavens and to all that crawls on the earth, which has the breath of life within it, the green plants for food." And so it was. And God saw all that He had done, and, look, it was very good. And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day.

Then the heavens and the earth were completed and all their array. And God completed on the seventh day the task He had done, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the task He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, for on it He had ceased from all His task that He had created to do. This is the tale of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

So what did you hear in Genesis 1? Here are some of the things I heard. God created intentionally, for no reason except that evidently God likes to create. God's creation is good and a source of delight. We people have been created with something extra, a stamp of God on our spirits, and have been invited to join God in the delight of this world, and in the care of it.

There's more there. Much more. More every time you read it, which is one of the best things about this sort of truth. Amen.