If God exists...then can science and religion coexist?  
Second sermon in series: If God exists...  
Preached on Sunday, January 18, 2009  
By Rev. David Tinney

Text: Genesis 1: 1-5, 26-31  
Theme: Does science keep pushing God to the gaps of our understanding and knowledge with the end result that eventually there will be no need for God? Does belief in evolution mean that a person cannot believe in God? Can science and faith coexist? Yes if one looks at the bigger picture and doesn’t lock God into a literal prison.

The story goes that two young men dressed in black suits were canvassing a neighborhood and came to one house and knocked on the front door. A woman reluctantly opened and after a short conversation on faith the two men handed the woman a booklet. She opened it up and was confused. She started to hand the booklet back and said, “I am sorry but this booklet is completely blank.”

One of the men responded, “Yes mam, we know. We are atheists.”

Today I would like to continue my sermon series that is a direct response to some of the atheists in our culture and the questions they are asking of people of religion. As I said last week these well educated and articulate authors like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and many others are asking questions that are difficult to hear but necessary for us as we examine the things we believe. This morning I would like to ask the question if God exists can science and religion coexist?

There are many voices out there that would answer with a resounding NO! They would say that God was made up – a product of our own minds – and was used to explain anything we didn’t understand. Mysteries like the sun rising and setting, hurricanes and tornadoes, birth and death, famines and droughts, great harvests and rainfall, even the creation of the universe were all attributed to God or gods. But as humankind became enlightened, as we were able to probe the heavens with telescopes, explore clouds, winds, and weather patterns with satellites, dive into the microscopic world of cells and DNA suddenly we were able to explain more and more and the mysteries that once held only divine explanations started disappearing.

Over the years scientific method has pushed hard against faith. Science declared that if it can’t be touched, measured, quantified, and studied then it doesn’t exist. The more science threatened with theories of creation, evolution, genetics, etc, the more people of faith arched their backs in protest. Some hard line fundamental denominations drew lines in the sand and created polarizing faith positions that would not recognize scientific discoveries that were well documented and easily proven.

New discoveries in science demand new responses in our faith. Research in stem cell replication, cloning, genetics, cosmology, global warming and cooling patterns, ecology, and others raise new questions in our faith. The very question of whether or not there is a “God gene” and the idea that some people are predisposed to faith journeys and others not push us to think and rethink our core beliefs.

So the question can religion and science coexist is not a simple question, even if you have been brought up with an acceptance and appreciation for science.

Before I deal with this question let me create some context about belief and doubt. Last week if you remember I asked the question is it okay to doubt and I said things like: “Doubt is a part of faith.” “Doubt can do good in us. It can motivate us to study and learn. It can purify false beliefs that have crept into our faith. It can humble our arrogance. It can give us patience and compassion with other
doubters. It can remind us of how much truth matters.”¹ My favorite quote was from Lesslie Newbigin who wrote, “Doubt is a good servant but a poor master.”²

Last week I spoke of some of the good that doubt can do when it is in a servant role but when it becomes our master then things can change and it can distort our beliefs. John Ortberg writes, “But doubt can go bad; doubt can curdle like spoiled milk. Doubt can seep from the mind into our will and block courage and devotion. It can change our capacity to persevere. It can make us indecisive. It can erode our confidence.”³

Theologians have created continuums for doubt and faith and I think it would benefit our ongoing discussion if you knew some of the key positions. This is going to be a very crude four step continuum beginning over here on the left with atheism. Most simply stated atheism is the belief that there is no God or gods, no heaven or hell, and no angels or devils. Dawkins who is more generous in his descriptions states, “An atheist believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles.”⁴

Agnostics would occupy the next position and they are often referred to as people who don’t care if they believe or don’t believe or as some have labeled them “apathetic non-believers.” To be more charitable, we might define them as people who doubt whether it is possible at all to believe or disbelieve in God so they don’t waste their time in the pursuit.

The next position across the faith continuum would be occupied by deists. They are those folks who believe in a God who created the universe, set the gears in motion, and then went away because he had other things that were more important to do. At his best Einstein was a deist and so were the founding fathers of our nation.

Finally the last position on this continuum is the theist, or the one who believes in a God who not only created the universe and all of its inhabitants but continues to be intimately involved in caring for them. I would dare say that most of us sitting in this room today are theists. We believe in a God who loves us so much that he would send his only son to be with us. Sound familiar?

I have a problem with the position of agnostic because the label and description don’t match up to most of the people I know who are in the middle. So I have used two other categories that I think match up with people in our culture who struggle with their faith – skeptics and cynics.

A skeptic is someone who is divided between hoping there is something to believe in and waiting for there to be enough evidence to prove belief is worthwhile. Skeptics don’t want to be wrong, look gullible, or be hurt. Underneath any skeptic’s skin is a deep fear of being disappointed.

I love the story about a skeptic that takes place in the middle of the French Revolution. People were being executed right and left. Three men were waiting to be executed. The first one was a priest. As he was brought to the guillotine, he was asked, “Do you have any last words?” He answered, “I believe God is going to save me.” He put his head into place, the blade came down, and it stopped two inches from his neck. The executioners said, “This is a miracle,” and they let him go.

The next man came up. He, too, was a priest. The executioners asked him, “Do you have any last words?” “I believe God is going to save me,” he said. They put him in the block, the blade came down, and it stopped two inches from his neck. They said, “This is a miracle,” and they let him go.

The third man came up. He was a skeptic and an atheist. He did not want to be associated with believers. The executioners asked him, “Do you have any last words?” Looking at the guillotine, he said,
“Well, I think I see your problem. There’s something jammed in the gear mechanism.” Skeptics would rather, even at their own expense, appear to be right than take the risk of trusting.

Cynics are the next step down the line of doubt gone bad and they are the folks who are not so much searching for answers but are the ones to lambast you with conclusions, which are usually negative. Give a skeptic a hug and they will wonder if you really mean it. Give a cynic a hug and they will check their wallet to see if you have picked their pocket. Cynics see the worst in life and project it to all they see around them including people enjoying a faith journey.

The good news for all these positions along the continuum is they are not permanent and people can change and move closer to belief by letting go and letting God come into their lives. So let us now address one of the great obstacles to people who are on the lower end of the continuum of faith – science and religion. I mentioned earlier the many new battlegrounds created by new discoveries in science but collisions between science and religion are not new to our generation. One only has to look back to the early 1600s when Galileo turned his telescope skyward and started making some calculations that concluded the sun was the center of the universe and not the earth. Religious leaders called his ideas the work of the devil and “mathematicians should be banished as the authors of all heresies.”

Science and religion have battled for years. The battle lines are drawn on the issue of abortion and when does life actually begin, on stem cell research, on cloning, and on evolution or the one of the newest theories Intelligent Design. I cannot deal with all the places of conflict so for the sake of this sermon I would like to deal with the creation of the universe and evolution because they have for years been very polarizing and contentious areas.

Richard Dawkins is a scientist – more specifically an evolutionary biologist and professor at Oxford University in England. Standing on the principles of Darwinian natural selection he declares that God did not design or create the universe, but the universe randomly designed and created itself. The concept of God or gods came after this creation process when humankind was immature and was looking for an explanation to a process they could not understand. He contends that now that science has explained how the world was created and how humankind evolved from a primordial soup, then God should go away and with it religion.

He would add that disproving the Genesis stories would go a long way to disproving God and would be a great blow to those Creationists who give him great headaches. So let’s look at creation again.

I confess I am a creationist. I am not a creationist with a capital “C” but a creationist none the less. Creationism is a word that was hijacked by the literalists and has lost its beauty and meaning. The smaller “c” creationists, like myself, believe that God had a hand in creation but didn’t do it along the literal roadmap of seven days. I will go gently here because at last count nearly 40% of Americans, and 11% of the respondents to our online survey, believe in what some call Young Earth Creationism. That means that the earth was created in 4004 BC and that all the evidence to the contrary can be explained away. That means the beautiful passages that were read in part today are literal rather than poetic. I believe the opposite. I believe they tell why God created the universe and humankind and not literally how.

Let me tell you another version of the story in which I can still be a creationist and acknowledge the wonders of science. The universe began 14 billion years ago as an infinitely dense and dimensionless point of pure energy and exploded spraying planets, suns, stars, and all sorts of debris across the emptiness. This idea of the Big Bang theory sounds like it is antithetical to the Genesis stories but it is not. Unlike Dawkins’ story of random evolution this story cries out for a divine explanation. Something
initiated the bang, something outside of nature which means there was “supernatural involvement.” But the story continues and gets better.

Cosmologists speculate that over the next nine billion years galaxies are formed, nuclear fusion creates the energy to ignite stars and suns, those suns burned out and exploded sending out carbon based planets. Our sun was probably a third generation star formed 5 billion years ago. Our planet earth was formed 4.55 billion years ago, plus or minus a few million years. 550 million years ago our planet cooled enough to grow multi-celled organisms, followed by plants 150 million years later. Animals appeared 370 million years ago and dinosaurs roamed 230 million BC. Humankind appeared on the scene 195,000 years ago. When you put the creation story into a 24 hour day, humankind has only been around for the last second of the day.

After spending days reading scientific theories that were way out of my field of expertise, I realized two things – the possibilities of creating a planet where humankind could exist are extremely remote and God or a supernatural power was very much involved. My reading of cosmology reinforced my belief that God exists outside of natural laws and launched a process of creation the end goal of humankind. My reading illustrated the beauty and wonder of a story written 3,500 years ago trying to make sense of creation. It explains something scientists can’t – the why. God wanted a relationship with humankind!

But that brings us to the problem of evolution. To answer this I turn to Francis Collins who is one of the world’s leading scientists and was the head of the Human Genome Project where more than 2,000 scientists from around the world mapped the secret of the elusive code of human DNA. This man who broke a code that is 3 billion characters long, this man who could have said now I unlocked the secrets to human life and there is no longer a need for God, this man said it reinforced his belief in a supernatural Creator and he called the DNA code the “Language of God.”

I figured he would be a good one to go to for understanding of where science and faith come down on evolution. Collins is a firm believer in evolution and he says evolution presents no problems with his understanding of God or with his faith. He explains evolution as a process guided by a supernatural force but without all the contrivances of latest theory called “Intelligent Design.” He and other scientists have come up with a concept of evolutionary theory call “theistic evolution” that is entirely compatible with everything science teaches in the natural world while also being entirely compatible with the great monotheistic religions of the world.

Collins joins a number of top scientists who believe there doesn’t have to be a war of worldviews. They understand that science is the best tool to explore and explain the natural, physical, and material world around us but is powerless to answer questions like “Why did the universe come into being?” “What is the meaning of life?” “What happens after we die?” Those are the questions of faith.

I love the words of a modern theologian named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow. He wrote, “Science investigates, religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals, they are complementary.”

Science and faith can coexist as long as we don’t look at them as enemies of each other. When we choose one worldview to the detriment of the other we deny truth and diminish the nobility of humankind. Collins states, “The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshiped in a cathedral as well as a laboratory. His creation is majestic, awesome, intricate, and beautiful – and it cannot be at war with itself. Only we imperfect humans can start such battles. And only we can end them.”
1 John Ortberg, “Faith & Doubt” Kindle edition, highlight location 1830-33
2 Ortberg, highlight location 380-386
3 Ortberg, highlight location 1832
4 Dawkins, p14
5 Ortberg, Kindle edition location 1846-54
6 A.D. White, “A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom,” New York, 1898) see www.santafe.edu/~shalizi/white
8 See “Language of God” pages 181-195 for more details
9 Collins, p200-201
10 King, Martin Luther Jr. “Strength to Love” Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1963
11 Collins, 211