

1st Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.8.17

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

I've never read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*; same with *The Descent of Man*. This is a confession; I'm not proud of this. But it's also by way of saying I'm familiar with what (I think) these books have to tell us, and I'm comfortable with the world as (I've come to believe) Darwin discovered and described it to be. Even though a life-long church-goer, I've never understood what all the fuss is about for many Christians when it comes to what Darwin had to say.

But then, I've never depended on as actual fact the creation stories that are in the Bible. (There are two of them, let's not forget, and they're different from one another.) My Christian faith depends not at all on the historicity of those storied seven days. My faith in a personal and universal God whose mind and imagination make possible all existence, not least this most glorious of all its creations, the human mind and imagination: my faith in this depends not at all on the factuality of God removing a rib from Adam to create Eve. These stories are, in important ways, true, but not as historical fact or scientific insight.

It's useful to bear in mind that science is a process. Verifiable proof, replicability of results: this process is brilliant, a brilliant addition to the various ways humans gain knowledge and even wisdom. But that it should ever be considered the *only* valuable, or even valid, way of gaining knowledge is bizarre to me. Bizarre

Also bizarre, I remember, as a kid, when there was a report from the recess playground that men *really did* have one fewer rib than women, which of course proves Genesis 2 as true. Except that it's not true: all people, barring some anomaly or surgery, have exactly the same number of ribs. The rib cage, as it turns out, is not sexually determinative or determined. So, you know, the playground: the original site of fake news.

All this said, all this comfortable unquestioning of my two realities set parallel to one another—the world that Darwin (I've been led to believe) described and the world as God's creation and dominion: I've come to think there's something more here to think about, to think *critically* about. Actually, I've come to suspect that Darwin's picture of reality should be something we as Christians are to resist; or, better to say, that reality as Darwin came to understand it to be is something we as Christians should resist.

During this season of Epiphany, the on-going project is the church's coming to discover who Jesus is. This season between Christmas and Lent, as its name suggests, is to be as a sudden moment of revelation, of insight, as to who this person, born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, sought by Magi and then Herod, given shelter by the unmentioned strangers from Judea to Egypt and back again: who this baby, this child, this man really was. The Christ! The Messiah. The anointed one of God. "Here is my servant," God said through Isaiah six centuries before Jesus came and lived among us. Six centuries earlier: it's an introduction that might have foretold Christ, or an introduction that Christ might have learned in the synagogue of Nazareth and come deeply to identify with as he learned and grew. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

Who is this person, Epiphany would have us ask. Why has he come? What is he here to do, and what would he have us do? "I will put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

This season always begins with the reading of two events in scripture. The actual day of Epiphany, January sixth—which we also know as the twelfth day of Christmas—is marked by the arrival of the Magi to Jesus' birthplace. They'd followed the star and now they've finally arrived. Thus, the star is often a symbol of Epiphany, and thus we often sing as we heard earlier and will sing later, this classic text set to countless compositions: "Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid. Star of the East the horizon adorning, guide where our infant redeemer is laid."

The other event that inaugurates this season of coming to understand is the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit makes the introduction: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This, it seems to me, is by way of saying that the character of this one whom we'll follow over the course of this season and indeed the whole church year will tell us something about the character of God—what pleases God, what God intends for all in the created order.

"A bruised reed he will not break; a dimly burning wick he will not quench." These are two images we ruminated on at the lectionary meditation group on Monday night—two images that are so specific and also surprising.

It's easy to break a reed. Tall, slender, often hollow, reeds can be tough when taken together—which is why they're used for thatching as on a roof or the seat of a chair. But a

single reed is easy to break, and a bruised even more so. In that case, the job is already half done. In fact, the real challenge regarding a bruised reed is *not* to break it.

Same with a dimly burning wick. In a pillar candle, if the wick is but burning dimly, just moving the candle will extinguish the light. The melted wax, now pooled, will quench it just by swishing around. So, to keep that wick burning: that's the real challenge.

The Messiah as one who would favor such fragility; the Christ, this anointed one and servant of God, as someone who'd nurture and protect what cannot protect itself: this goes against what a lot of Messianic expectation was, and still is. Hoping for a strong man to come along and set things to right, hoping for an uber-mensch—a superman—to deploy force so to demonstrate such force as God's law and way, Messianic hope often did, and often still does, fit neatly, if dominantly, into the way of the world. The world will be brutal, but the Messiah will more brutal, because God, in all God's might, is the most brutal of all.

As I understand it, Darwin's discovery about the origin of species being founded in a long, slow process of the survival of the fittest somehow threatens Christian faith and confession—because it calls into question the creation of the world as the Bible tells it. But, if it does this, it also underscores the radical nature of the Christian faith and call. That even amidst a world in which might makes right, that even amidst a world wherein only the most fit survive, we are to live otherwise, we are to live in such a way that bruised reeds yet stand a chance and dimly burning wicks might yet shed light, might even yet grow! And, if this somehow makes the Bible seem less true, it yet makes the Christian imperative that much more urgent.

As it happens, I'm the sort of Christian for whom the Bible is a revelation of truth but is not truth itself. I'm the sort of Christian for whom the truth itself is Christ and him crucified. The Bible tells of this Christ, but Christ has dominion over the Bible and its telling. So, if "Darwinism" calls into question the Bible but makes imperative Christ and his way of self-emptying, self-giving love, indeed his way of the cross, then I'm okay with that.

I listen to a podcast called "Working Preacher," that features three biblical scholars from Luther Seminary who work through the lectionary texts for the following week. One of them will often speak of even the creation being in rebellion, even the creation in need of Christ and salvation. See, it isn't just humanity that has become ensnared in sin; it's the whole of creation, it's nature and its way.

Whenever this scholar begins to speak in these terms, I get my hackles up. I'm hesitant to think there's a problem with nature. I'm given over to the idea that humanity is problematic, and is problematic indeed as regards our relationship with nature. That we're in it and yet above it, that we rely on it and yet alter it, manage it, control it, but we do so to the end of its striking back—and many times over more forcefully, with the likes of superbugs and superstorms: I'm given over to the idea that nature is fine the way it is, that humanity is the source of problems and perhaps even because of the pervasion of sin. So, the notion that creation is also in rebellion, and therefore also needs yet to be perfected, yet to be made peaceable: this rests on my funny.

But then I saw this film clip, which I told about on Monday (so forgive me if you've heard this before, but don't stop me because this is what I've got this week). An excerpt from the BBC program called "Earth 2," it featured an iguana hatchling on a Galapagos Island. For this iguana, as for all of its kind, the first order of business after hatching is making its way from the rocks where it, as an egg, had been laid to the edge of the sea where its mother is waiting to feed and nurture it.

But the journey from rocks to sea, short though that it is, isn't the only challenge for the just-born iguanas—for as it happens there are snakes there, racer snakes in fact, so called because they are snakes that will race after you. Their diet is mainly of iguana hatchlings, and they're fast, and, though cold-blooded, they work together. Their one handicap is that they can't see, can only manage to sense motion.

As for the iguana's one advantage: its instincts, when sensing mortal danger, has it stand utterly still.

As for everything else, I don't know. Why the mother doesn't wait on those rocks by the eggs, I don't know. Why the mother lays the eggs on the rocks up shore rather than by the edge of sea where she'll be, I don't know. Why nature, or evolution, or intelligent design made it this way, I don't know—because, really, there's nothing intelligent about this. This is *Hunger Games*, but for babies. This is *Game of Thrones* for the pre-verbal set.

This one iguana was caught on camera standing still, utterly still. And a snake slithered by it—then paused. Did it sense something? It poked its head toward the iguana's tail, and gave it a little nibble.

The iguana shot up into the air, and began to run. The snake began to race after it. Then, out of the rocks, came more snakes, lots more. They raced and caught the hatchling, and knotted themselves around it to the degree that you'd think they'd get their bodies mixed up with one another's, would tie themselves so tightly they couldn't get themselves unknotted again.

Remember that game at camp? Remember Twister?

Meanwhile, the hatchling worked at slipping itself out of the knot. Slowly, slowly so the snakes could only squeeze harder which only made the slow slip of the iguana increasingly inevitable, the hatchling was suddenly and free, and off it scurried up the rock piles.

The racer snakes unknotted themselves and were on the chase again, slithering up the rocks that the iguana had scurried up. The snakes leapt at the hatchling's tail, and bit at its feet. Seconds more of the suspense, and then the iguana hurled itself off one rock and across a chasm to land onto another rock. The snake closest behind hurled itself too (did I mention that racer snakes can jump?) but it fell into the chasm never to be seen again.

Whew. That was *close*.

Breathe.

But now the hatchling was further from the shore than before and still had to make that treacherous journey.

I watch it all and wonder, whose idea was *that*? Because it's a terrible idea. Why would nature expect a newborn to know jujitsu to that degree and at such high stakes?

And I know, on the one hand, it's just right. It creates balance. It makes it so only the strong iguanas survive and breed and thrive in such a hostile environment, and it makes it so racer snakes have sustenance so they can live another day to terrorize the coastlands of the Galapagos Islands as only they can. I know, if humans were to intervene on behalf of those helpless hatchlings, we'd make a mess of a delicate balance. We'd doom iguanas, now helpless and dependent, to a life of micro-management at human hands, and racer snakes to...well, if it were up to me, non-existence.

I know, I know.

And yet, something's revealed here in this "survival of the fittest" that, though natural, needs to be disciplined out of us humans, right?

Doesn't it?

Well, maybe not. We can have a world in which might makes right, in which only the strong survive. That certainly has its appeal. I'd even argue this is what we voted for in the election in November, what we're about to inaugurate to the presidency just two weeks hence. Some who did indeed support Trump at the polls admitted as much: Yes, he's a bully, but he'll be *my* bully.

Going deeper, if sillier, this might be for the good of the species. I bought Jack a pair of much needed glasses a couple months ago—he being the exact same age I was when I needed my first pair. I did so knowing I was contributing to devolution—because, really, should the nearsighted be allowed to survive for further breeding? Actually, at this point all three near-sighted Goodmans might just be holding Toby back, putting him at risk. I mean, if a lion were to come at us in the middle of the night and we none of us had our glasses on to see it coming, it'd be a shame if Toby didn't feel free just to take off on his own, watch out for himself.

But this brutality, this survival of the fittest and every man for himself: we're called to something higher, we're called to something more self-giving. What's more, the whole creation is called to this. The whole creation, though now obedient to jungle law, is called to follow the teachings of Christ and his self-emptying way.

Impossible as it seems in regard to human beings, it seems even more impossible as regards the workings of nature. Humans can be taught, or most can, anyway. Humans can be taught to be compassionate, to be self-giving, though we might shrug off such teaching when the going gets tough. Racer snakes, however, can't be taught not to terrorize iguanas; or at least I very much doubt they can. Wolves can't be taught not eat lambs. Lions can't be disciplined not to eat calves and fatlings. Leopards can't become disciples in the way of not eating kids and goats.

And yet.

And yet.

A favorite image of mine when it comes to the notion of all of God's creation conforming to the way of life free of death is the burning bush—which I also said on Monday night. This bush that, though burning, is not consumed; this fire that, though burning, doesn't exhaust its own fuel: this is what the peaceable kingdom looks like, this is what creation no longer in rebellion looks like. No one to have life at the expense of someone else's life; nothing

to be sustained by the death of something else; everything that exists to exist by pure being: this is the will and way of God. And, yes, it's impossible; and yet it's God's aim, it's Christ's aim, and it therefore is to be our aim as well.

Of all the impossible things I've ever said from this pulpit, this one feels to me the *most* impossible. And yet I believe it to be true. Yes, I'll go home to a pack of terriers who've got it all figured out: the alpha male will get his dinner first, and the skittish littlest will work her way around the dining room until she finds a bowl everyone will let her have. I'll go home to a pack of boys who'll feel pleased that they, having bumped into the school bully on the ski slopes, really let him have it because now a big brother was on the scene. But I'll also doze on my sofa dreaming of a teacher who brings justice to the nations and even wise teachings to the coastlands and all creation, and it will warm my heart like a fire that burns but doesn't consume.

Thanks be to God.