

HEARING THE VOICE

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Praetorium, an Interrogation

At a tense moment in the praetorium, Pilate queries Jesus, “So you are a king?” to which Jesus responds, “For this, I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth, hears my voice.” And then Pilate asks Jesus a cynical question, “What is truth?”

I’d like to begin with three examples. Unfortunately, I don’t really know what they’re examples of, so bear with me.

Example No. 1: Infant Brain-Cell Die-Off. I learned an interesting fact a number of years ago that really caught my attention. So I followed it up to find out more about it. The fact was that a child born between birth and two years old undergoes one of the periods in life when more brain cells die off even than in old age. I thought, “Really? That seems like the opposite of what it ought to be.”

Researching this curious fact, I found out that the brain, while the child grows from infancy into toddlerhood, realizes that its owner uses only two legs. Initially, this being is capable of supporting a millipede, a centipede, a mammal with four legs, a spider with eight legs, it doesn’t matter. But it seems as though this human is only going to use two legs so it doesn’t need to cover the bases for more than two legs.

It also appears that this being doesn’t have any wings at all, and so the capability of fly-

ing, operating in three dimensions, doesn’t have need for wings either. And it looks like this being doesn’t swim, at least not for locomotion to live, and so the capability of navigating three dimensionally with fins will also not be essential for life. In addition, this person has bicameral vision, so it looks straight ahead and is able to judge distances by looking through the two eyes pointing ahead rather than 360-degree vision like a fish. Okay, that capability of the brain will be unnecessary as well.

Most kids — not all, but most of them — grow up with one language, even though they are capable of learning two, three, four, or five languages if they’re spoken regularly in the home. But for the time being at least, it looks as though most kids will get along with learning just one language, so they usually don’t need that capability either. Considering another capability of the brain, it looks like locomotion takes place largely by sight. Not by smell, not by hearing, not by echolocation like a bat. As the brain realizes that it’s pretty much located in a particular type of body, all these extraneous capabilities are not going to be used, so they sort of get shut down on the side.

A cool thing about the brain, though, is that sometimes you can get these capabilities back. There’s a blind man in California who taught himself to echolocate like a bat. He learned to make a clicking sound with his

mouth and got to a point where he could distinguish the step of a curb versus a flat sidewalk. He could tell the difference between a parked car and a car that was moving. Basically, he became able to walk down the street just fine by echolocating.

The brain has vastly more in the way of capabilities, but it also won't bother retaining such capabilities if they're not going to be used.

Example No. 2: Science Is More of an Art than Is Philosophy. Following is a quote from Freeman Dyson, a Princeton physicist who wrote a book called *Nature's Imagination*, which came out in 1995. The quote is about math, but humor me, please. In his introduction, he wrote:

“Science in its everyday practice is much closer to art than to philosophy. When I look at Kurt Gödel's proof of his undecidability theorem,¹ I do not see a philosophical argument. The proof is a soaring piece of architecture, as unique and as lovely as the Chartres cathedral. The proof destroyed David Hilbert's² dream of reducing all mathematics to a few equations, and replaced it with a greater dream of mathematics as an endlessly growing realm of ideas.”

Example No. 3: Theology of Evolution. This is something that's been going on in the realm of theology. Only about 20 years old,

¹ Gödel's (1906-1978) two incompleteness (sic) theorems demonstrate the inherent limitations of every formal axiomatic system containing basic arithmetic. It is considered to be one of the most important results in modern logic.

it is the development of a theology of evolution. There have been a number of theologians, Christian and Jewish, who have stopped trying to understand the world exclusively in the notion that God created it and handed it to humanity on a silver platter to enjoy. Rather, this relatively new theology of evolution is considered as an adaptive, fluid, living, growing thing.

Some of the books in this field are listed in the minibibliography at the end of this sermon.* You know I am interested in such stuff, so this will be the second and final time I'm asking you to humor me.

Seeing evolution theologically is something we need to understand rather than to battle it as though we need to cut its throat and bury it. Rather, we must realize that there is a way of understanding evolution theologically and a way that it informs our theological understanding as well as the meaning of the world. The result, even though still in its infancy, is that a theology of evolution is dramatically more beautiful, fruitful, fecund, and solid than a theology of creation ever hoped to be.

Those are my three examples. Neuron death in a child, that quote about math, and a theology of evolution. So what I'm doing this morning is to take a springboard off Barry Downing's incisive comment last Sunday.

The Truth of the Church Has Been Swept Under the Rug by Science

We recognized Barry in the service last week with a sort of honor/roast of the guy and brought him up front to receive a blessing.

² Hilbert (1862-1943) is recognized as one of the most influential and universal mathematicians in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Then we gave him a chance to get in his licks at the podium. Janet had preached on the centrality of love in the Christian gospel last Sunday, and Barry remarked, “We need love, yes, but we also need truth.”

He went on to say that the church has promulgated Truth with a capital T for centuries. But the church has pretty much had the rug pulled out from under it by science. Particularly in Europe, this has resulted in the decimation of churches throughout the Old World, and that same cancer then moved into the United States. This raises two questions: Do we have Truth with a capital T? Do we have a gospel to preach?

For the scripture reading during Lent, I of course brought up the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, in which Jesus answered his interrogator, “I came into the world to bear witness to the truth,” to which Pilate queried, “What is truth?”

Concerning truth, let me ask two more questions, and I’d like to answer them both. I’m going to try to be fair, but I’m also going to try to be realistic.

The first question is, “What does science do with a new scientific idea? And what it does is, first of all, you’d better not publish until you’re pretty darn sure of your calculations.

For example, the Higgs boson, when that announcement came out a few years ago, met the standard by which Higgs and Englert³ were finally willing to publish their results.

³ Peter Higgs and François Englert were joint winners of the 2013 Nobel prize in physics. The Higgs boson is an elementary particle in the Standard Model of particle physics. It is the quantum excitation of the Higgs field, a funda-

mental field of crucial importance to particle physics theory. Reputations and jobs were at stake on their work. It’s called a six-sigma standard,⁴ meaning that there is now a one in ten-thousand chance that Higgs and Englert would be wrong. So when they reach that six-sigma standard is when they are willing to put their reputations on the line for this new understanding, this new scientific advancement.

But then a cool thing happens. When you get published, your results go out into the world electronically and by paper, and then you have scientists across the globe aching to find a mistake, aching to prove it wrong, trying desperately to find some way in which your results aren’t exactly right. And then, when finally they give up because it looks as though your results are true, then they start refining your work, improving upon it, and letting it go out into different directions to address other kinds of questions that are out there in the scientific realm. That’s usually what happens with new scientific ideas.

The second question is: What does theology do with a new religious idea? Well, for much of our history, the resulting effects have been violent. Innovators have been burned at the stake, silenced, tortured. Reputations are destroyed.

For example, a new religious idea is that perhaps it’s not sinful after all to be gay. Many, many clergy and other forward-looking leaders have lost their reputations, have lost their jobs, have been defrocked because of that recent development.

mental field of crucial importance to particle physics theory.

⁴ A six-sigma standard is a disciplined, data-driven approach and methodology for eliminating defects in any process

There's a pair of Lesbian women a few houses down the street from me who recently got married. They didn't ask me to do the service for them, and I thought, darn it, I'm one of the few clergy in town who do that kind of thing, and so my feelings got hurt. But later, I found out that they had lived up in Rochester for many years before moving down to Binghamton, and a Methodist minister up in Rochester had married them. As a result of that, he lost his job, got defrocked, and was even jailed for a short time, about a week. So they invited him to come down and do the service for them in Binghamton now that it was legal in New York State. My feelings were no longer hurt, and I was glad when I heard that story.

You see what happens in a new theological idea? The resistance is powerful. There is shunning and massive defensiveness. Science advances, but theology doesn't want to. Instead, theology harkens back to an older time, the 1950's, the Reformation, the early church. And so therefore, theology is behind science. However, my belief about this is that God's truth is marching on! Glory, glory, hallelujah.

Here Is What I Have Come to Believe

Pilate asks, "What is truth?" I, of course, can't tell you what Truth is, with a capital T. But I do have a tip for you, and that is, "Do not buy a used car from somebody who says that they do know what the Truth is."

However, I can tell you about two major categories of things that I have come to believe:

⁵ One light-year equals 5,880,000,000,000 miles. Trappist-1 orbits its sun much closer than Mercury orbits our sun. It is an ultra-cool dwarf star

I. I have come to believe that our universe is more magnificent than *we ever could have imagined*. I'm going to list a few things for you:

- Galaxies, plural.
- The Trappist-1 planetary system,⁵ is 40 some light-years away from our solar system, with seven planets, all of them terrestrial, with atmospheres and liquid water, three of them in the habitable zone.
- The understanding of the birth, ignition, life, and death of stars, seeding the universe with the ingredients for life.
- Stable orbits that last for billions of years, allowing the necessary time for life to emerge.

Of the four things just listed — galaxies, nearby planetary systems, understanding the life cycle of a star, and stable orbits — none of which was known, with the exception of stable orbits, until the last century. It wasn't until about a century ago, before World War I, that we realized there was more than one galaxy in the universe.

Our universe is more magnificent than *we ever could have imagined*. Therefore, our understanding of divinity needs to expand. It needs to grow, evolve, and most of all to keep up.

II. The other major category of things I have come to believe is that the integration of spirit and matter, of the invisible with the visible, of God and humanity is more magnificent, is

located in the constellation Aquarius. It is named after Belgium's famous Trappist beer, which was used to toast the new discovery.

deeper, and is more profound than *we ever could have imagined*. For most of the history of humanity, God is a kind of king up there someplace, mildly upset about something, and our job is to be a good servant, a faithful, loyal servant doing what we're told. The integration, the understanding of God as humanity, spirit and matter, visible and invisible, turns out to be more magnificent and more profound than *we ever could have imagined*.

Therefore, our insight into the love affair between Spirit and the individual — Spirit with a capital S and you and me as individuals — is more magnificent and profound than *we ever could have imagined* or that we ever could read in our ancient scriptures. This then leads to healing, guidance, solace, joy, and meaning in our lives as we apprehend that love affair between Spirit and us.

And so at the core of such things — the universe, the atom, our mind, our soul — is something that I would call gospel.

The good news:

- That brings life out of death.
- That brings forgiveness out of conflict.
- That brings healing out of disease.

***A minibibliography of books in the field of theological evolution:**

Honest to Genesis: A Biblical and Scientific Challenge to Creationism by Margaret Gray Towne, a marvelous author.

The Evolution Dialogue, published by The American Association for the Advancement of Science.

- That brings hope out of despair.
- That brings love out of hatred or fear.
- That brings meaning out of confusion.

And that is about as true as anything I've been able to find in my lifetime.

Our brain is more magnificent and intelligent and capable than *we ever could have imagined*.

Even mathematics cannot be reduced — that's what Hilbert, the German mathematician, was trying to do. Rather, it is an ongoing and beautiful and infinite edifice.

Our evolving earth and the life forms upon it are more adaptable and more responsive and more successful and therefore more alive than *we ever could have imagined*.

All infused with Spirit, so

- That's my good news.
- That's my gospel.
- That's my truth.

Amen.

Science, Christianity, and the Quest for Understanding, John Haught, a professor at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Deeper than Darwin, John Haught.

Thank God for Evolution, Michael Dowd, a fellow who preached for us one Sunday a few years ago.