Where Did All This Come From?
Rev. Chandler Stokes
Genesis 1:1-5
The Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 19, 2014

Opening Sentences
For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.¹

Scripture Introduction
Within this longer nine-week series on Confirmation, we are in the middle of three weeks on stewardship. Last week I defined “stewardship” as “care-taking, using ourselves well.” Last week I portrayed Jesus as the Good Steward, as the one who stewards a human life the way God hopes a human life will be stewarded. Today we look at stewardship in relation to the Creator. The answer to the question “Where did all this come from?” has important consequences for how we might steward our lives.

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Last week I referenced the candlesticks on the communion table in the story of Jean Valjean. This week I want to note them in a different manner. I want us to notice that we light them right near the welcome at the beginning of the worship service and take the light out with us at the charge and benediction at the end. Somehow these candles seem to bookend or hold a frame around this entire service of worship.

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Yesterday it was gray for quite a while, nearly all day. I didn’t see the sun until about 6:30 pm, when I was driving west on Leonard, back from the kids’ house, and I came over the crest of a hill. Oh my, what a sunset! The sky was ablaze—yellow and gold, streaming all over the western horizon. Yet the sunset doesn’t come with a signature down in the corner. However glorious, or stirring, or beautiful it may be, the sunset never comes with a signature that says, “Created by your loving God.” It doesn’t even say, “Love, God.” It doesn’t say anything. The sunset doesn’t speak for itself that way.

Long ago I heard a story about a man working with a counselor. The man had been married for some time. He said, “Look at my marriage. I’m worried. My wife and I just don’t have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I just don’t love her anymore, and she doesn’t love me. What can I do?”

The counselor asked, “The feeling isn’t there anymore?”

“That’s right. And we have three kids. What should I do?”


Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
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The counselor said, “Love her.”

“But I told you, the feeling just isn’t there.”

“Love her.”

“Look. You don’t get it. The feeling isn’t there.”

“Then love her. If the feeling isn’t there, that’s a good reason to love her.”

“But how do you love, when you don’t love?”

“Love is a verb,” he said. “Love, the feeling—is a by-product of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to invest in that?”

Karen and I were together on Friday, and I was asking her about one of her congregations in California. When she first came to that congregation, their Sunday gatherings were more town meeting than divine worship. Slowly, she introduced the charge and benediction—the same as we use here, and she said that people began to whisper to her, “I really like that thing you’re doing at the end.” They whispered because it was so subversive to like any ritual. She said, “When I got first got there, they never used the word ritual without ‘empty’ in front of it. To them, if it was ritual, it was empty ritual—as if they weren’t somehow required to fill it with something of themselves.” They weren’t investing in it. The word “invest” comes from putting on clothing. The clothes don’t move unless someone is in them. And if there is “no one” in them they can be just an empty suit, as it were.

When we ask, “Where did all this come from?” it’s helpful to remember that we are a part, an integral part, of the “all this.” Just as instrumentalists need to play and invest in their instruments to make any sound at all, so we need to invest in the meaning of it all.

We live in an age that has been conditioned to value scientific method and detachment. Recently, I found a good description of scientific method: “The chief characteristic which distinguishes the scientific method from other methods of acquiring knowledge is that scientists seek to let reality speak for itself.”

The scientific method has given us countless gifts—from electric lights to landing on the moon, from vaccines to synthetic fabrics... millions of everyday things that make our contemporary life what it is. But the great success of science has been so intoxicating that we now live in an age of scientism that assumes we can explain everything, that science answers all questions, and that has led folks to demand definitive, scientific-like answers to every question. Science is often assumed to be the only means to arrive at legitimate knowledge.

Doug Kindschi, among other things, is the project manager for the Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion at Grand Valley State University. Doug is also the former dean of Grand Valley and is professor

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2 Adapted from Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic (New York: Fireside Books, 1990), pp. 79-80.

of both mathematics and philosophy. I could go on, but I don't want to embarrass him. Doug's also sitting over there.

So, if I get this wrong, this is on me, but Doug has tried to help me and others understand the conversation between science and religion in order to promote mutual understanding between the disciplines. I want to give credit where credit is due, and this is one way Doug explains the relationship between religion and science:

We ask the question, “Why is the candle burning?” In the scientist's story, the answer to that question is, “The candle is burning because there is sufficient heat, fuel, and oxidizer to create the necessary chain reaction.” When the pragmatist asks the question, in his story he wants to know, “Why is the candle burning?” The scientist’s answer doesn’t answer his question; he wants to know why. As in, “Who lit that candle?” And neither of those answers addresses religion's question. Religion's answer to “Why is the candle burning?” could be, “Because it is the Third Sunday of Advent.” Or it could be, “We light this candle to remind ourselves of the welcome we receive and need to offer, and we light this one to remind us how to go into the world.”

They are three different stories: science, pragmatism, and religion. They don't answer each other's questions. And they shouldn't darken each other's answers. I've become a real fan of British literary theorist and critic of the New Atheism Terry Eagleton, when it comes to these questions. He's the one who said, “Believing that religion is a botched attempt to explain the world is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus.”

It's applying the wrong tool to the job. Religion critic Christopher Hitchens said that because we now have the microscope and the telescope, we can reject the explanatory power of the Bible. Eagleton counters that such a remark is “rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov.”

When religion asks the question “Where did all this come from?” we are asking about meaning. Asking science—which by its very nature seeks to let reality speak for itself—asking science the same question while expecting an answer about meaning is like asking a stone to tell you where and how it was born, or like applying an X-ray to a copy of King Lear in order to understand Shakespeare. You don't take a fishing pole to go bowling. Different stories. Different answers.

Science is beautiful but it is not the same as religion. And that is an important thing to remember as we now turn to ask about God the Creator. I want to take you through the journey that I have had in my life in understanding God as Creator, as a person of faith, as someone learning to ask a religious question.

My father was a physicist and an engineer. My brother and my younger son are both physicists. It's the family business. When I was a junior in high school, I worked one day a week at the Ames Research Center, which is part of NASA. It was very cool. I was kind of a lab tech for a biologist working on the first Viking mission to Mars. I was irradiating halophilic bacteria in hopes of finding a possible model for life on Mars. I still love the beauty and resonance of math and science. Those magical moments when mathematics and the physical world coincide are profound.
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And at about the same time I was working at Ames, my father wanted me to join the church, but I was having a hard time with that. Why he wanted me to join—that’s another story, but how he helped me through it is pertinent. I was struggling to say yes to church. I just didn’t understand what they wanted. Dad knew that I loved science and knew I understood enough to grasp what he was saying. He said, “Look, they’re just asking you if you believe in God, and you can think of God as something like the laws of probability.”

All right. Let me unpack that a little bit. I think we, who follow Jesus Christ, actually ask a different question than, “Do you believe in God?” It’s not an intellectual proposition, but Dad opened a door for me. When I was sixteen, no one had ever given me a picture of God other than—well, a picture of an old man with a long white beard sitting in a big chair in the sky, kind of Gandalf in one of these chancel chairs, only... up there.

My knowledge of the universe had mushroomed, but my imagination and understanding around the reality of God didn’t keep up. So, Dad said, “...something like the laws of probability...” That was helpful. Now, my understanding didn’t stay there. That image didn’t turn out to be ultimately satisfying, but at the time it was an important shift in my understanding and imagination around God.

Later, in seminary, I remember someone saying, “Maybe using a noun for God isn’t as helpful, or illuminating, or true as using a verb—like Love. Love, as a verb.” And then I discovered that even in the first century, the writer of 1 John said as much, “God is love.” “Whoever does not love [active verb] does not know God, for God is love.” It’s not a modern concept; it’s biblical. How come nobody told me that before? My guess is they did; it just took a while until I was able to hear it—until I had the intellectual capacity, and the imagination, and the will to grasp it. Eventually, I became quite willing to profess love as the answer to the question: “Where did all this come from?” It came from Love. Love created all this.

So, I grew from thinking of God as man in a chair, to laws of probability, to love. And my understanding of the Creator has grown from there too. I’ve not forgotten what the older brother said to his little brother last week. “No one has ever seen God. That’s what Jesus is for.” And that is, of course, what our profession of faith is about; it’s about Jesus, as Lord and Savior—not first of all about whether God exists. But I do reflect on the reality of God the Creator, too. There are sunsets and other people to grasp.

And this is what I have more recently grown to say: God is not something I believe in. God is Someone I trust. I have come to the language of relationship. It’s more appropriate to the Christian, religious story. Construing God as “something” rather than “Someone” is a bit like using an X-ray on King Lear to understand Shakespeare, or like bowling with a fishing pole.

So if we now try to make sense of God as a “Someone,” let’s ask what tool we should employ to come to that understanding. Al Plantinga, a philosopher at Norte Dame, spoke at the last Grand Dialogue on Science and Religion in April. One of the insights of his work has been to demonstrate that there are things we believe, that pretty much everyone believes, that we really cannot prove. They cannot be proven. He talks about knowledge that does not fit the scientistic paradigm. His primary example is the existence of other minds. At the Grand Dialogue he told a little story that demonstrates his point.

He says that there are some people who are solipsists, who don’t believe that anyone other than they themselves exists—everyone else is a figment. They believe that we are just figments of their
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imagination (one of those un-provable things). He says he was visiting a university once, and he was told about an old professor who was a solipsist. So he paid him a visit in his office. He said the man treated him very nicely even though Al was only a figment of his imagination. It wasn’t a long visit, and, when he left, one of the other professors stopped him in the hall and said, “We really try to look out for the old professor, because when he goes, we all go.”

But you cannot prove to a living solipsist that we really are out here.

Back to the point: it is not scientific logic, that “letting reality speak for itself” or the proof of a scientific proposition, that informs our best understanding of God. How do we get from “something like the laws of probability” to Someone I trust? The proper tool is the logic of human relationships.

I know my wife, Karen, as 1 John uses the word “know”—not by proving that she exists, but I know her, instead, by quite rationally assuming that she exists as another person and then coming to know her relationally—through trust and love. This logic of relationships is the way that I actually know Karen—not by gazing into her eyes and saying, “I know I can’t prove it, Dear, but I’m beginning to think that you really exist.” The logic of relationships is the appropriate analogy for our knowing God—not scientific proof. To quote philosopher Kelly Clark: “To believe that God... exists is to believe that you as a person now stand in the presence of God as if a Person. ...You are no longer faced with an argument which demands your assent, but with a Person who demands your confidence.”

God is not something I believe in; God is Someone I trust.

The appropriate analogy for knowing God is our knowing a person; it is not a matter for proof but a matter for trust, and love, and investment; it’s a matter of inhabiting and filling up the clothes, filling them in.

At the risk of overuse, I offer you the classic example from astronomer Carl Sagan’s novel Contact:

There is a short dialogue in it that clarifies the difference between faith’s and scientism’s assumptions. In the novel Ellie, a scientist, who believes that all true things can be proven, is speaking to a minister, Joss. Joss asks Ellie if she loved her parents. Ellie: I never knew my mother. My father died when I was nine. Joss: Did you love him? Ellie (softly): Yes. Very much. Joss: Prove it.

Is love real? Does love matter? Does any of this matter? When we ask, “Where did all this come from?” don’t forget that you are a part of the “all this.” Is love real? You have to decide that. The universe will be mute on that. There’s no signature. You can’t prove that. To be a person of faith takes more than seeing what the world gives, more than stepping back and waiting for the world to show its purpose. Faith calls for an investment of oneself in the meaning of the world.

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4 When the French want to say that they know a person, they use the verb, connaître—to know. The same is true in German: wissen is for Wissenschaft (science-like knowing) and kennen is for relationships. In Spanish and other languages too—there is a different verb for knowing a concept than knowing a person. Even if I know that Karen exists, I may not know her at all. And the same is true of God—it is in the pursuit of the relationship that I come to know God. The knowing is relational—in the unfolding of the relationship.

5 Kelly James Clark, Return to Reason (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 119.
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Of course, the charge can be an empty ritual, like lighting the candles—it’s just combustion, especially if you don’t put anything into it, if you don’t fill it with something, if you don’t invest yourself in it.

You can wait until that signature shows up in the corner of the sunset to prove that creation is God’s gift, just as you can wait until you feel like loving. Or you can invest yourself in that un-provable Someone.

Next week, you are probably going to come to worship with your pledge for next year. So you’ll sit down sometime in the next few days, and you’ll look at your finances.

There are a lot of questions you could ask yourselves. You could maintain a certain scientific distance, “I’m just an observer here, wondering about return on my investment. How much does it cost to make the candles burn?”

Or you might ask, “What does this mean to us? How do we sufficiently invest in the meaning of this place? What amount of money will keep us more mindful of God’s presence in our lives? Is there some way we can give so that it reflects to us what really matters, our investment in what that welcome and that final charge really mean?”

In the question “Where did all this come from?” the “all this” includes us. We are not just observers; we are called to invest ourselves in the meaning, and in the answer to the question, and in our weekly ritual: Why do these candles burn?

Are you willing to invest in that?