

# The Call of the Wild

Genesis 1:1-2, 26-28, 31

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

As a new year begins, it seems fitting that we should also go back to the beginning, to the first book of the Bible, to Genesis. We best begin by again laying the foundations for the life of faith, the cornerstone being Jesus Christ himself. This year we are asking the question, “What is God calling us to do, be, or become?” We begin by looking at the very nature and value of human life as described in the story of creation.

Brian Greene is a professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia University. He describes his awakening as a scientist, “Years ago, when I was in high school, my physics teacher gave the class a homework problem: calculating the trajectory of a ball swinging from the ceiling by a piece of chewing gum. That night, when I finished the calculation, I ran down the hallway to show my father – I was utterly and profoundly amazed that mathematical symbols scratched in pencil on a piece of paper could describe things that actually happened in the real world. That’s when I became hooked on physics.”<sup>1</sup>

I never quite became hooked on physics but I find myself increasingly fascinated by the effort of physicists to describe how the creation functions. You see, there was this incredibly beautiful girl in my physics class so I was more interested in biology than physics in that class. So I’ve tried to read a little of what the modern day physicists are saying about the creation. There is an order to the world of our experience. There are laws by which the universe operates. And it appears that the universe is not nearly as mechanical as we thought just a few decades ago, but is profoundly relational.

For example, scientists believed until recently that we are spinning around the center of the Milky Way galaxy at about half a million miles per hour. New observations, however, suggest that we’re traveling much faster — about 600,000 miles per hour — and that the

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Brian “Waiting for the Higgs Particle”, *New York Times*, December 15, 2011 A33

Milky Way is actually broader and has 50 percent more mass than was previously thought.<sup>2</sup> 600,000 miles per hour and I don't even feel like I'm moving! Do you? It blows my mind, when I consider the vastness of space and the complexity of the natural world.

One physicist described it this way, "If the experience of science teaches anything, it's that the world is very strange and surprising. The many revolutions in science have certainly shown that. If that's true of our encounter with the physical world, it's likely to be even truer of our encounter with God."<sup>3</sup> Ordered Chaos is a pretty accurate description of what scientists are discovering about the universe. I tried reading about chaos theory and quickly became lost in the details of the argument. I can't help but wonder what revolution in my understanding of God might be necessary to more completely understand and respond to the Creator and Redeemer.

A month ago, on the church page of the *San Marino Tribune*, three articles appeared. One was written by me, about "The Surprise of Christmas." Another was the obituary for Dr. Roger Nelson, a member of our church since 1961, who died from complications of Alzheimers Disease after more than twelve years of institutionalization. And the third was an obituary about little Darby Jean Rubin, a 15-month-old child born with Trisomy 13, a rare and terminal medical condition. It was the same condition one of our grandsons was diagnosed with while in-utero several years ago. Little Isaac died before he was born. It struck me that the beginning of life and the ending of life present us with many ethical challenges — all somehow connected to the surprise of Christmas, on the same page.

In 1975 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church asked for a biblically-based theology of the nature and value of human life to provide a basis for making consistent judgments about all the various issues and cases where the taking of human life is in question. The request was for "resources for persons as they deal with such matters as abortion, euthanasia, human experimentation, bio-medical ethics, capital punishment, war and other matters (suicide was added the next year to the list) where the issue of the

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2 *New York Times* "News From Home" January 7, 2009

3 Harris, Lyndon F. "Divine Action: An Interview with John Polkinghorne" (*Cross Currents*; Spring 98, Vol. 48 Issue 1, p3, 12p.

beginning or termination of human life must be faced.”<sup>4</sup> The goal was to give some unity and consistency to the ethical reflection on issues of the taking of human life in an increasingly complex world, especially at the beginning and ending of life.

Though the mandate called for addressing the “nature and value of human life,” the council began the other way around placing the value of human life before addressing its nature. They concluded, “From the viewpoint of the biblical tradition and its Reformed development, there is no doubt that human life is a value of the first order superseded by no other value. The composite testimony of Scripture is that human beings are a focal point of God’s drama of creation and redemption . . . Out of the vastness of the entire universe, God creates humans for special vocation which is expressed in terms of the image of God. It is a vocation as representative of God’s care and protection for the entire created order . . . the Bible portrays God as one who is determined to preserve God’s people in order that they may be a blessing to all peoples. Here, too, it is apparent that God is not casually interested in human life as a relatively important matter, but that God cherishes the lives of human beings and pursues their well-being, their salvation, out of an inexhaustible commitment.”<sup>5</sup> To put that more directly, God cherishes you and pursues your well-being, your salvation, out of an inexhaustible commitment. Nothing glorifies God more than a human being fully alive!

How we think about the creation, the universe and human life matters! It makes a difference when it comes to the taking of human life. It makes a difference when we think about the relative importance of the environment, the plants and animals that share the created order with us. It makes a difference when you talk about capital punishment and what happens when life goes astray, and when nations take up arms against one another.

According to the council, “The life and ministry of Jesus provides the ultimate grounding for the value of human life. Even those who were finally arrayed against him in conflict,

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4 [www.pcusa.org/resource/nature-and-value-human-life/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/nature-and-value-human-life/)

5 Ibid.

trial, and crucifixion were never treated with contempt, nor was any violence against them justified. In all its forms and distortions, Jesus acknowledges human beings as precious and valuable. For them he sacrifices himself in history on behalf of God. God's love for human life is unequivocal."<sup>6</sup>

Genesis tells us something we will not learn anywhere else:

1) That God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is the ultimate source and ground of everything in the observable universe; 2) therefore the world and our life in it are good (despite sometimes tragic experiences); and that 3) we need fear nothing in the world but neither can we give ultimate loyalty to anything in the world. God alone is deserving of our ultimate loyalty. So here we are in a profoundly relational universe, created in the image of God, and made to be in relationship with God and one another. We've welcomed new members this morning into our community. The Church is the place where human life and relationships are valued because every human life is precious and valuable.

Rev. Bryant Kirkland, the former pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, used to describe the view of many people of the church in terms of the ships in New York harbor. Some see the church as a museum, like the Queen Mary down in Long Beach. It is simply a nice place to go and see what things used to be like. Others see it as a tour boat, a fun time, if you're not doing anything else, to travel around the island and enjoy the landscape once in a while (these are what Eddie Gibbs, a professor at Fuller Seminary, calls the "submarine" Christians. They emerge occasionally and then submerge again). Others see the Church as a ferry – it's functional. These are the people who phone up the church office and "want to rent the hall" for a wedding or memorial service. Sometimes I want to respond, "You can't afford it! There are people who have been caring for this place for 77 years! You can't afford what we would have to charge you to rent the hall. But we can give it to you as a gift!"

And finally, others see it for what it is, like the hospital ship "Hope," a gathering place for the wounded and those who are prepared to help them, with a heli-pad for sending

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

out teams to rescue the sick and wounded. A place where people are restored to health and life, where real community happens and where lifelong friendships are formed, and where we support one another in remaining faithful to the Christ who has called us into fellowship with himself and with each other.

Like the physicist, we are discovering “. . . that the world is very strange and surprising” and it appears that the universe is not nearly as mechanical as we thought just a few decades ago, but is profoundly relational. God has called us into relationship with him and with one another. So one thing we think the Lord is calling us to this year is for every member to be in ministry somehow, someway. We are called to be part of this community of faith, a place where people are restored to health and life, where lifelong friendships are formed and where we support one another and reach out to others who are wounded by life, or might be sick and tired of the way they are living. What has God uniquely gifted you to do here? It may be as simple as praying or as involved as going to seminary and preparing for ministry yourself. Whatever it is – let’s answer the call together. Thanks be to God! Amen.