

DARWIN: THROWING LIGHT

Isaiah 40:21-31

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

February 8, 2009 - Evolution Sunday

I.

In July of the year 1620, one of the founders of the congregational tradition, preached a sermon to those religious separatists known as the pilgrims. As they prepared to leave the familiar surroundings they had known and cherished, their preacher shared these words with them:

“If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”

One can imagine the emotion in his voice as Pastor John Robinson said farewell and sent his flock across the great ocean into the distant unknown. One can feel the encouragement. “Together we’ve learned much, but you will learn much more from your new experience. Be open to more truth. Be ready to receive more light.”

More than 200 years after the voyage of the Mayflower, the 22 year old Charles Darwin embarked on another ocean trek aboard the HMS Beagle. Perhaps he boarded Her Majesty’s Ship, ala Jonah, to avoid the inevitability of becoming a country pastor, a position it was assumed he would eventually fill. And, perhaps he went, in a spirit similar to his pilgrim forebears, seeking more light and truth.

2009 marks the 200th anniversary since the birth of Charles Darwin. In fact, the date is this Thursday, February 12, the same day in the same year Abraham Lincoln was born. 2009 also marks the 150th anniversary since the publication of his book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, shortened in 1872 to *The Origin of Species*. Next weekend is being recognized by hundreds of congregations, Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian-Universalist, as Evolution Weekend. In anticipation, we take time today to consider the relationship between religion and science, to breathe through the threats and imagine the possibilities that emerge from this strained relationship. Let us chart our own course out of the familiar and into new territory, seeking the promise that “more truth and light [have] yet to break forth from God’s Holy Word,” still sparkling within the words of scripture and still resonating across the myriad facets of the created world.

II.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” With these words, the prophet known as Second Isaiah offers a new epistemology to his fellow Israelites. He is trying to wake up his people from the stupor of exile in Babylon. It’s been so long since they’d been conquered and dislocated, that they’ve forgotten to hope for better, they’ve lost the ability to imagine newness. Paralyzed by perfidy, their legs refuse to make the voyage home. But Isaiah counters: A new chapter has begun, my people. A new story is being written, children of God. The God of our ancestors is back in play, back in the game. The closed world of exile is opening up into a new possibility: Departure from grey Babylonian assimilation and entry into the Promised Land, a land of new freedoms, new duties, and new relationships.

Their journey is the journey that humans keep making over and over again.

What is it that moves us from stasis to movement, from closed to open, from familiar to strange, from home to journey? With an attitude of reverence, Charles Darwin recorded in his *Beagle Diary* the view from the summit of an Andean peak:

“When we reached the crest and looked backwards, a glorious view was presented. The atmosphere so resplendently clear, the sky an intense blue, the profound valleys, the wild broken forms, the heaps of ruins piled up during the lapse of ages, the bright colored rocks, contrasted with the quiet mountains of snow, together produced a scene I *never could have imagined*. Neither plant nor bird, excepting a few condors wheeling around the higher pinnacles, distracted from the inanimate mass. I felt glad I was by myself. It was like watching a thunderstorm, or hearing in the full Orchestra a Chorus from the Messiah.”

Krista Tippett quotes this passage in her book, *Speaking of Faith*. She observes Darwin’s “great intellectual and spiritual passion, and a touching sense of wonder.” Much vilified within reactionary, parochial, and threatened branches of the Christian church, Charles Darwin undertook his postexilic journey with a sense of purpose and potential, reverence and awe. He was known for his keen observational skills, his attention to the details of the phenomena he encountered. His was a focused attention sought by those who say to God, “Teach me how to pray.”

III.

So, what's the big deal? If Darwin's work was the product of a sense of wonder that could be described as religious, and if his theories of evolution and, more specifically, natural selection, have become the widely embraced basis of understanding how organisms came to be... Why the threat? Why the controversy? Why do we even need an "Evolution Sunday"?

I've been trying to identify and examine my own assumptions on both sides of the religion versus science front. I think that modern people have to contend with this potentially faith-shattering challenge: Without reference to a divine being, Charles Darwin provided a description of the observable process by which species came to be. To put the question in today's framework: How did the 1,589,361 known species of animal, plant, and other living organisms - including 81,000 species of mollusk, 15,000 mosses, and 10,000 lichens - come to be? Prior to Darwin, the answer was, "God created everything that way, decided in his own wisdom what species would exist and which would live where. This is one of those questions that has no answer other than 'that's the way God intended it.' For humans to venture any further is a mark of hubris and a sign of faithlessness."

Furthermore, in Darwin's day, as Tippet points out in her book, the "social habitat was held by Christian England to be divinely ordained - conceived all at once at the beginning of time..." Consider as an example the misery described works such as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, published in 1838. "Religious thinkers in his age," Tippet observes, "were busy formulating a theology to correspond [to] an image of god who instituted poverty and misery for a life of sloth and vice." Darwin's theories had social implications that challenged the prevailing theologies of his day. His theories, and those of his successor evolutionary biologists, continue to threaten any institution or culture that insists that God ordains fixed and oppressive orders.

Our scripture today was one of many to which Christians pointed to "prove" that God made things the way they are: Verse 28: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth."

Darwin himself did not know how to reconcile his theories with belief in what he called "an omniscient Creator." In the concluding remarks of his *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, he admits that the process of natural selection is incompatible with the theology of "an omnipotent and omniscient Creator [who] ordains everything and foresees everything."

IV.

What do we do with Darwin's challenge? How do we respond as people of faith, steeped in, and largely committed to, a modern scientific worldview, and yet trusting in an observable interior universe that is every bit as real as the observable exterior universe? How do we resuscitate scriptures such as Isaiah 40, which encourage us to imagine previously unknown worlds, but which do not provide scientifically accurate descriptions of the world? Shall resign our selves to the same response Jesus gave when Pontius Pilate asked him "What is truth?" As far as we know, Jesus did not reply to the questions.

I will not venture to offer a final answer to these questions. The role of vital religion is to open up conversations, not to close them down. Living the questions, as Rainer Maria Rilke once said, is the joy and the burden of being human.

Venturing out from slavery to the known and the comfortable was chronicled long ago in the book of Exodus, when Moses led the people through the wilderness and into a new world of possibility. Generations later, Isaiah rallied his people from resigned acculturation to a renewed embrace of God's call to establish themselves as "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). Still later, John Robinson soothed his congregants' anxiety, assuring them that God's universe was not a closed system, but one in which "more truth and light [have] yet to break forth."

Darwin's journey was one in spirit with those of his predecessors. Describing the impact of his exploration, he fixed upon a favorite phrase: "Throwing Light." As we humans journey through our chapter of the earth's history, let us be open to more truth and light. Let us have courage to "throw light" upon what we know of ourselves, To throw light upon our understanding of the world of which we are a part, and to throw light upon our sense of the divine "in which we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Let us follow the urge to seek what is truth. Let us embrace truth where we find it. And let us modify our prejudices and assumptions, where appropriate.

Like the shade on a window thrust open on a clear sunny morning, the blinding light of truth may be disturbing at first. The question is will we take our hands away from our face and allow our eyes to adjust. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Truth that is new to us is surely not a threat to the everlasting God.

After all, Darwin's theory described the origins of *species*, not the origin of *life*.

His theory explained the means of adaptation, not the purpose of being. His theory throws light on the mystery of mutation, not the mystery of meaning at the center of existence. What kind of God is threatened by human discovery? Are we not made in the very image of God? God's temple is not a house of cards.

Fear not. The Creator of the ends of the earth does not faint or grow weary,
but gives power to the weak, and strength to the powerless. In the days ahead, God shall renew your strength, and you shall mount up with wings like eagles.

As you begin your next trek, you shall run and not be weary, you shall walk and not faint. Amen.