

Right up front I need to tell you that this is a recycled sermon. I preached it a number of years ago. But this week there'll be an exhibit visiting Lubbock that purportedly shows evidence that humans and dinosaurs coexisted, and that the universe is only about 6,000 years old, rather than the scientific estimate of 13.7 billion years old. Given that fact, I'm pulling out this old sermon and preaching it again. In the African American church this kind of sermon is called a "horse." It's a sermon the preacher pulls out of the files and preaches again. He gets the horse out of the stable and rides it one more time. Well, giddy up!

In our Gospel lesson today, we heard Jesus say, "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." Famous words by Jesus. In fact, in the musical *Godspell*, there's a whole song based on this text.

But what does it mean to be salt and light? I'm going to answer that in a bit. But I'm going to come at it the long way 'round. We're going to go on a little journey to get back to that question. I'm going to talk about Shakespeare, the book of Genesis, and evolutionary biology to get to that question. But I think it will be worth the trip.

Which brings us to a soliloquy¹ from what is arguably the greatest play ever written, *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare.

Hamlet makes an incredibly poetic and famous statement that speaks of the nature of human beings:

"What a piece of work is a man,
How noble in reason
How infinite in faculty
In form and moving how express and admirable
In action, how like an angel
In apprehension, how like a god
The beauty of the world,
The paragon of animals.
And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

This masterful soliloquy sums up the dilemma of being a human being. It speaks volumes about our nature. It even gets quoted in a song in another musical, *Hair*.

What Shakespeare is saying is something we know all too well.

We human beings are in a strange position in the world. We're animals, we share all the limitations of being animals—we have bodies with hearts and lungs and bones and muscles; we're subject to disease and injury; we have finite life spans; we have DNA in our cells just like all other animals do. And yet, there's something different about us. We have intellect, and willfulness, and creativity. We have gifts the other animals don't have. Hamlet says that we're the paragon of animals. What's more our actions and apprehensions are more like those of angels or divine beings. And yet, at the same time, at a reductionist level, we are nothing more than dust.

¹ Act II, Scene 2

This is a real paradox. And it can be a contentious issue in our society.

Where do human beings come from? There are those who espouse a philosophy of materialism or scientism—they see any religious notions as quaint or even dangerous. There is no God and no place for God in talking about human origins. Creation happened on its own. Life arose on its own. Life developed without God and without purpose.

On the other hand, Christians make the claim that God created the heavens and the earth. God created all life including human beings.

But good Christians differ on how exactly God did that. There are some Christians who read the first chapters of Genesis as literal history, who see God creating the earth in 6 literal days. Thus the earth is 6,000, or maybe 10,000 years old, and no older. This group of Christians often finds themselves in opposition to much of mainstream science.

However, there are other Christians who see the stories in Genesis as something closer to parable rather than history. They have no problem seeing evolution as the means by which God brought forth life. They have no problem accepting that the universe is 13.7 billion years old or that the earth is 4.5 billion years old as best we can tell.

For the sake of full disclosure, I'm in this latter group. I have a bachelor's degree in chemistry with a biology minor. I don't "believe" in evolution. Belief is too strong a word and is reserved for other kinds of statements. But I accept that the best current scientific explanation of creation is that there is evolutionary development of species.

And I believe the first chapters of Genesis are the inspired Word of God, and that they are spiritually true, though not necessary historically true.

So when I read the first chapter of Genesis I have no problem interpreting the 6 days as metaphor or parable rather than literal history. And I also note in that chapter that several times God says, "let the earth bring forth" plants or sea creatures, or land creatures.²

God is not "hands on" in Genesis 1. He commands his creation to participate in the act of creation by bringing forth life on its own, on his behalf and by his orders. And that sounds VERY compatible with evolution to me.

So a Christian, I have to disagree with the first group, the group that says there is no God, and that creation has no purpose. I disagree with those contentions vehemently.

And, I disagree with those Christians who believe the universe is only 6,000 years old. Having said that, I do affirm that these Christians who interpret Genesis more literally, are espousing A legitimate Christian position. It's just one I happen to disagree with. But again, good Christians can disagree and be in the second or third group, and still be good Christians.

² Gen 1:11, 20, 24

One quick side note. And this is aimed at folks in the third group like me. Those of you in other groups can stop paying attention for just a moment.

I was rather shocked several years ago when having a discussion with a group of Episcopal college students. They all apparently considered themselves part of what I've termed the third group. They accepted evolution as God's means of creation. But two things surprised me.

1. Their acceptance of evolution was a gut feeling for them. They weren't very articulate in saying why. It just seemed natural to them.
2. They really felt run over in both directions. They almost universally had experienced derision from Christians in group 2, who questioned their Christianity. And most of them had also experienced derision from at least one science teacher in either high school or college who belittled their faith as being incompatible with science.

This tells me that we parents and clergy in this third group are not equipping our kids sufficiently to deal with disagreements on both sides, and maybe we need to do some more work in this area. OK. Here ends the side note—everyone can pay attention again.

Shakespeare in *Hamlet* speaks of human nature in paradoxical terms, dust and animal in some ways, and yet with angelic and divine attributes.

And scripture certainly proclaims the same message. In the 1st chapter of Genesis, God creates humans as the last of the animals, and yet we are given dominion over the rest of creation, which puts us in a very different place than all other creatures.³

God rules over creation, and makes humanity his viceroys, his assistants to rule over creation on his behalf. Genesis 1 also makes the very strong statement that while we are part of creation and the pinnacle of creation, we are also created in the image of God. This is not a physical image. It doesn't mean that God has a body like we do. But we share with God many of his attributes—the ability and desire to create, to love, to be in relationship.

And in the 2nd chapter of Genesis, we humans are described as being a combination of the dust of the ground mixed with God's own breath, God's own spirit.⁴ A quintessence of dust. And yet with God's Holy Spirit enlivening us. What an amazing paradox.

We stand at the apex of God's created order. Yes, we are very much part of creation. However, we are also tasked with caring for creation on God's behalf. To be co-workers with him. To be his agents in the world.

Which brings us back to our Gospel lesson. Matthew 5 is from the Sermon on the Mount. It's a long teaching by Jesus. But today I just want to zero in on two statements. Jesus uses a profound pair of images:

³ Gen 1:26

⁴ Gen 2:7

"You are the salt of the earth."
"You are the light of the world."

Salt and light are both essential for life.

We might get too much added salt in our diets. But if the balance of salt in our bodily fluids gets too low, we'll be in trouble really quickly. 0.9% is the proper amount for life. If that level of saltiness if it gets diluted down and disappears, then life as we know it ceases.

So don't get diluted. Don't lose your salinity, Jesus says.

The same with light. Too much exposure to the sun can burn. But if the sun were to wink out of existence, life on this planet would wind down and die down fairly quickly.

So let your light shine, Jesus says.

And we miss something in English. Jesus says "You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the Earth." And we tend to hear this as something addressed to us as individuals.

But it's you plural. It's ye. It's y'all. Y'all are salt and light. It's not you personally. It's all of us who are to be salt and light in God's creation.

And we miss something else in our culture. We tend to hear this statement as advice or something we should strive to be. You need to try to be more like salt or light.

But Jesus says, "Y'all ARE." You are salt. You are light. That's who you are. That's what you're created to be. You're created in the image of God to do his work in the world. You're created to be his people in the world. God has made you to take care of the world on his behalf.

This is not advice.

This is our job description. This is our purpose.

After all, this is Epiphany. This is the season where we remember that Jesus is the light of the world, and that his light shines forth in the world. And he is telling us, that as his followers, as God's people made in God's image, we are to let that identity, that light shine forth in us.

At the end of the service during Epiphany we use an ancient blessing: "May Christ the Son of God be manifest in you, that your lives may be a light to the world."

God is light. Jesus is light. And you are created in the image of God. So let that light shine forth. Shine as God's light in the world.