



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Where God Is Going”

Revelation 21:1-6a; John 1:1-18; Isaiah 25:6-9; Romans 1:18-25

All Saints Day

The Lord’s Supper

It’s great to be back with you. For some ten days, I was in Los Angeles to help a church, where I had interned and decided to enter pastoral ministry. They were celebrating their 50th anniversary. To my delight, I reconnected with some people I care about, and I saw how St. Peter’s By the Sea Presbyterian Church has found faithful ministry and good church health.

Then I flew to Kansas City for a conference on developing leaders to help make a difference in communities for people in need. At the end of that, my friends Al and Carole picked me up to take me to their home overnight, and then to a mini-conference on environmental issues that they had a hand in producing. And at the end of that, my brother Dave picked me up, and we spent a day together, going to a church he is checking out—and that’s a big step, if you knew his story. I got a chance to show my care for him there—in the flesh—and, I hope, a deeper friendship will continue to grow. Yes, it was an intense but very good time.

Today’s message is the first of two times we will have together that may really twist your brain. This first piece lays the groundwork for a discernment of where God is going. Next week, we apply that awareness to the issues of how can (anyone) know God’s will for their lives.

Because this is one of those “big picture” sermons, I’m going to start with a variety of sources, and illustrate the points with Scripture. Here we go.

As you think back over your life, can you identify times when your whole view of the world changed? I can think of several. For me, given my family’s difficult history and God showing up in my life, I had not planned to marry. Oh, I could sing lots of current popular love songs, but they didn’t mean much to me. Then I fell in love. Whoa! Suddenly, spending my life with someone made sense; now I wanted to marry, if and when the time might come. My life was going to be different, I knew.

Jean Piaget, a French psychologist, studied how children learn. They all go through shifts in the way they think. For example, the youngest infants do not perceive a difference between their caregiver (usually their mother) and themselves; “it’s all THEM”, to them. But by a certain age, each child develops the ability to distinguish “mom” from “me”. Similar shifts occur about how they perceive the world around them. At the earliest stages, as a parent plays “peek-a-boo” with them, when the parent ducks below the crib mattress, the baby thinks the parent is really gone—disappeared. Suddenly (dad) pops up, and the baby thinks he has come back from a trip, and squeals with delight. In other words, only what the baby can see in front of her “exists”. Later, each child can understand that something can be out of their sight, but still exist. We all went through this.

OK, let's shift to a wider, cultural level. For most of human history, people had a picture in their mind that the earth was the center of the Universe, and that everything revolves around us. (Sounds like infant perceptions "writ large", don't you think?) But then Galileo shook the whole of human educated society by proving that the earth revolved around the sun.

I can hardly exaggerate how hard this was for people to accept. Indeed, church people thought he was an evil heretic, and he was persecuted for daring to publish such ideas. Remember a few years ago when astronomers "demoted" the planet Pluto to a mere "dwarf planet" with other objects in the Kuiper Belt that intersects our solar system? Didn't that seem a bit unreal? Well, multiply that odd feeling by a million, and you have an idea of the impact of Galileo's discovery. All kinds of questions arose. If earth is not the center of the universe, then isn't humankind less important than we thought? If earth is just one of several planets, was God shooting blanks until He got earth right? People had to change their paradigm—their picture—of reality, because more and more experience was not explained or contained in the traditional paradigm they had been taught. Think about that: if all your teachers were wrong about something so basic, can you trust *anything, or any one*? Paradigm shifts are very unsettling, every time.

Believers have been challenged by other ideas, too—and we should be. For example: what is your picture of heaven? How did we ever get the picture of heaven as an eternal day with us angels sitting on clouds, idly strumming harps? Listen to God's Word from Isaiah and from the Revelation to John, as God imparts a vision of the fulfillment of His will.

Isaiah text.

Revelation text.

In these and other portions of Scripture, God's Rule (as Jesus called it) is not some other world; God means to fix the world **HERE**, and to set His rule **HERE**. Yes, there will be many changes, and God knows what kind of conflict and energy and even violence will be required to set things right. But picturing heaven as a place somewhere else is not Biblical, and to think that way deceitfully excuses us from joining God in bringing His Kingdom alive in our time. We have to change our picture of heaven, too, and changing our paradigm/picture is not easy.

But just as when the earth got demoted from the center of Universe by Galileo and the whole culture shook, a similar intellectual and cultural earthquake came with the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and ripples and ricochets of his ideas keep creating public upset to this day, especially in some quarters. The greatest challenge of Darwin's evolutionary theories seems pointed at the Bible Creation stories in Genesis. So far there have been two basic responses to Darwin's ideas from Christians: there are literalists who attack evolution to discredit it, and accommodationists who try to somehow squeeze evolutionary concepts into the verses of Genesis 1 and 2. Neither response seems adequate. Is a paradigm change needed here, too?

I first heard of Michael Dowd a year or two ago, then he came to Auburn last month to speak. He and his wife Connie Barlow have been traveling the country giving illustrated talks to all kinds of adults and children, to overcome the animosity between evolution and religious faith—of whatever kind. I finally had a chance to read Dowd's most recent book, *Thank God for*

Evolution. I'm going to give it to skeptic-atheist friends and to anti-evolutionist Christian friends.

Dowd makes several brilliant contributions to our understanding of the Universe. Most important for us as Christians is his analysis of how we talk about the world. Science, he says, is a discipline of facts—only what is measurable and replicable is real. Dowd calls this fact-based thinking, “day language”—it’s what we all use when we’re trying to do our business in the world—facts, figures, contracts, laws, engineering, and the like. But we also have another vocabulary which Dowd calls “night language”. Night language is all about meaning and metaphor, symbol and story, and humans need these as much as they need “day language”. For example, if you are deprived of the opportunity for “dreaming sleep”, your body begins to break down rather quickly and alarmingly. Dreaming is a survival necessity, and nothing could be more real than that! Also, symbols and stories are used by all cultures to communicate their deepest truths, to share their understandings of life, and to elucidate their values and pass them on to their children. The night language of visions and values and missions excites and inspires. “Day language” does not inspire nearly so well.

Dowd’s big point here is that both “day language” about our world and “night language” about our world are true. They are speaking about the same thing. And both are necessary. So there is no need to fight over evolution or to fear it. In fact, it can be downright inspirational if we use “night language”, as Connie Barlow has done, to stretch the story of God’s creation over billions of years as “The Great Story” we are all living together. In The Great Story, you are the product of God’s unfolding research and design. You and I are truly made of stardust; God has taken 13.7 billion years to bring us to this moment! Far from demolishing human dignity, this night language enhances it, and calls us to join God in his work. (More on that next week.)

Our Bible, of course, also takes the world seriously. From the very start of Genesis 1 and 2, to John 1 where Jesus is the “true man” in a new beginning—he’s the “new Adam” with whom God begins again--and then finally in the Revelation given to John, we get clear messages in night language about where God is going. And there are strong parallels between what the Bible teaches and what scientists have observed about the unfolding of the Universe which we read about in Romans 1. Let me show you.

First, the Universe is changing and growing at an accelerating pace. Genesis 1 uses the term “day” to put into a story sequence a pretty-darn-close-to-evolutionary understanding of the order of organisms. Cramming parts of this into ‘days’ portrays very well (to me) the ordered but accelerating pace of change. The amount of data about our world used to double every 7 years, they said in 1997. Now the rate has accelerated so that the amount of recorded data in the world is doubling every 3-5 years—or it could, if we kept putting money into science and engineering as we used to do. This is an enormous, accelerating change.

Second, the Universe is growing in its diversity and complexity. We keep finding species that we knew nothing about before—especially with the recent effort to create a comprehensive on-line “Encyclopedia of Life” that includes the guestimated 1.8 millions species on the planet. Why so many butterflies? Because God loves variety and diversity—and so does evolution.

Here’s a big one: the Universe shows increasing cooperation and interdependence. Of course, this focuses mostly on human culture, but shows up among other animals as well, though not consciously. And though there are people who deny and reject such unifying efforts, it is

clear that unless we cooperate together, for example, to combat global warming, we are going to lose a lot of land and people to the rising oceans expanding from melting ice. Did you see the video of the council of elders of the Maldives Islands? They staged an underwater meeting, everyone in scuba gear, to dramatize how the rise of sea levels is and will be impacting their lives. Their islands will soon be totally submerged as the temperature and oceans rise. Big problems like this require bigger and bigger alliances—another word for cooperation and interdependence.

With this cooperation and interdependence naturally goes an increase in awareness and communication. The Internet is perhaps our best example; but also in many fields such as aviation, English language is a requirement to play. Using a single language is a huge step toward a world of interdependent people.

And lastly, Dowd writes, the Universe is increasing in its intimacy with the Whole. By this he means, an awareness of our responsibility to care for creation, and the wonder and preciousness of life. Isn't that what we read in the Bible, in those passages that celebrate God's plan for His rule?

This is where God is going—this is how the Universe is unrolling as God is continually creating.

Here's one more picture for us to change. The Bible's people understood creation as constructed in three stories. The Earth was created out of nothing, at the center, with God acting on it from outside. There was an "upper" realm where God lived and from whence He came to visit from time to time. And there was a "lower" realm called Gehenna, Hades, or Hell where the dead were stored and/or sinners were tortured forever, depending on which passages you read. Let's call this the "vertical paradigm".

What if, Dowd asks, the more adequate picture were a "horizontal paradigm" that emphasizes time, continuing from the earliest moment of the Universe through billions of years to now, and beyond? But expand time in all directions. And think of the realms of creation—particles to atoms to elements to molecules to organisms to invertebrates to vertebrates to fish, reptiles, birds, mammals, and humans who are also evolving in the directions God is going. Picture each of these realms as a single nesting Russian doll, each set inside the next larger (more diverse, more complex) doll. And imagine each larger doll having responsibility for care of the dolls nesting within it. Now imagine that God is the biggest doll, beyond which there is no thing bigger.

All this is moving, vibrating, each doll expanding in space in its scale, a multi-level unfolding of life! And God as "the biggest doll" is in, behind, and pulling ahead every activity, every doll. What a wondrous, awesome picture!

Now we want to bring all this abstract night and day language down to something we can more easily understand. This is when we move from hearing words about God, to getting in touch with gifts of God, given for us, as we gather at the Table of Master Jesus.

Apply today's brain-stretching pictures to what we are about to do here. This is bread. But it is more than bread. It was seed, then plant, then grain, then flour, then dough, then bread in the Sacramento factory, then bread in the local market, then bread on this table. Between all

those steps God was pushing it along with life, including human hands and transport. So, is this just bread? Or is it something more?! Same with the grape juice—all the steps until it got to this Table. Isn't that a wonder?!

But that's just the beginning. This is the Table of the Lord, where we eat and drink now with Jesus!

When we gather here, we stand and deliver what we know to be the truth about God and life and ourselves. We use night language. And today, we will use a different piece of night language, from the newest "Brief Statement of Faith" of our Presbyterian Church, for which I am grateful. Instead of theological terms stated as dogma, this statement tells the unfolding story of God's great desires for us and care for us. So let's stand and use these words from the Brief Statement of Faith. We say together. . . .

Prayer

Words of Institution

Eat, drink

Prayer of Thanks

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 1, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]