

To Begin at the Beginning

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These two books sit beside by side on my bookshelf - this Bible that belonged to my mother-in-law. She was a gentle and kindly woman. After one dark, dark night she found herself bringing up 5 small children single-handedly. So I open this book with immense respect and read these majestic words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". And in the margin the date 4004 BC. It was put there by Dr. John Lightfoot - an Anglican clergyman. And because he was writing at the same time as the King James version of the Bible was being produced the date 4004 BC became almost holy writ.

And beside it this book by Professor Brian Cox based on an acclaimed BBC Television series. Its opening words are very different. They read: "At 13.7 billion years old...the universe is humbling in scale and dazzling in beauty". 13.7 billion years old. So the question this morning is which is right? The Bible or science?

Now let's suppose I were to ask Brian about how things are going in Chestnut Hill Church he would tell me that the youth program has more than quadrupled over the past few years. He would remind me that the future of this church lies in its youth. And he would be right. And if I were then to move on to the lovely Liz Podraza & the smart Sandy McClintic and ask them about the church they would immediately tell me that the people of this congregation walked to the front two weeks ago and pledged well over \$1 m. for its capital renovation. They would note that Chestnut Hill is a highly committed congregation - and they would be right.

And then looking towards the back of the church I would spy bright Laura Brobyn. Laura is chair of the Personnel Committee. I know what she would say if I were to ask her about this church. She would say that Chestnut Hill is strong because it has a great staff led by two gifted women ministers, Cindy and Austin. They are top of the line. If you agree with her give me *a robust, from the bottom of the heart, full-throated, strong "Amen"*. But bright Laura would go on to remind us that behind the scenes are other hard working women in the office who keep this place going during the week. There is Evelyn, Jo Ann, Hillary and in the kitchen Owintier. They are indispensable. If you think that is so give me *a robust, from the bottom of the heart, full-throated, strong "Amen"*. Then bright Laura would undoubtedly look up at the gallery and remind us that Ken fills this sanctuary week by week with glorious organ music. And beside him is Dan who is about to become our newest Ph.D. in choral conducting and we are very proud of him. They make a brilliant team. If you agree with that give me *a robust, from the bottom of the heart, full-throated, strong "Amen"*. What a staff!

Oh, I nearly forgot his Lordship. Last week he told me I wasn't needed because the service was by younger people. How cruel can you be? I know you think he is a great guy and if you must give me *a robust, from the bottom of the heart, full-throated...!!* All his enthusiasm is not very Presbyterian! But if you must.....

Here's the point. Brian, Liz, Sandy and Laura are all talking about the very same place, the PCCH, but answering it quite differently according to their special interest. And that is the first step in understanding the Genesis story. Now three simple things we need to remember.

Firstly, the Hebrews were Bedouins. They were late arrivals in the Middle East. Great civilisations had risen and fallen for thousands of years before they arrived. As they settled down they heard very ancient stories about gods and goddesses, and how the world got started. One of those stories came from Babylon, today's Iraq, and it stayed with them. Indeed in 1876 we found the clay tablets with the actual story that they would have heard. They listened to it and then re-told it in a way that reflected their faith. In the original story the sun and the moon are to be worshipped, and there are many gods. In Genesis there is just one God and the sun and moon are to indicate time. So the biblical story was passed from one generation of storytellers to the next, and that went on for hundreds of years. It wasn't actually written down until about 600 years before the birth of Christ.

And the second thing to remember is this. When asked to talk about the beginning of the universe the storyteller will answer in terms of his interest. He lived in the late Bronze Age. He knew nothing about the ages of rocks, or the existence of black holes, or the theory of big bangs. His interest has to do with religion - and religion has to do with two questions that are profoundly important to us as human beings. Firstly, is this an orderly universe, and secondly is there Someone in this universe who cares about me?

And the third thing to remember - maybe this is the most important - is that the writer in Genesis is giving us a *picture story*. It is not literal. He isn't factually trying to describe how gravity first separated from the other forces of nature. Instead he is giving up a picture, a parable that expresses his faith.

So this morning *picture* in your mind the Master Creator about to start a brand new job. No previous work experience, no blueprint, no manual of directions. Where should he start? "For the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep". And then it comes to him that the very first thing you need to make a world - or indeed make anything - is light. And God said: "Let there be light, and there was light". In nearly all early traditions light is the supreme god. He was called "the eldest of the gods of the eastern sky". With light comes all of creation. It is light arriving just now that allows us to look back at the beginning of the cosmos.

And then, as David Kossoff tells us, God looked at the endless water and said: "Too much in one place". But there is a problem. There is no place to empty it. So if you can't go down you must go up. And God put half the water high up in the sky, and it made beautiful clouds and God smiled and said "That's good". I'll call that heaven. Nice place. And he moved right in. From there it was all go to get the order forms filled before the weekend, before the Great Sabbath. And before you could blink we had chickens, cows, cockroaches, crocodiles and chihuahuas; we had ferrets, falcons, fleas and frogs; we had hedgehogs, hamsters, hyenas and hushpuppies. Hm!! And after 6 hectic days it was all done. And God said: "Not bad for a first effort. And God saw that it was good".

Take another small step. You are not frightened by thunder because you know what causes it. But your dog is frightened and your baby is frightened because they don't understand what is making the big bangs. They don't understand cause and effect. So the first thing the storyteller is saying is that there is cause and effect, there is order in the universe. Big rabbits produce little rabbits. Big hedgehogs produce little hedgehogs - though I am not quite sure how! Nothing, nothing in all creation, is more important for my well being than order. Put me into a world of total chaos and I will quickly lose my bearings. I will in a very short time go mad. The storyteller is affirming his faith that this is my Father's world and there is order in it.

But there is one thing missing. There is no one to talk to, no one to argue with, no one to care for, no one to love. And like a great big Mama, God knelt down in the mud and fashioned a living soul. And God nodded and thought that's my best work to date. "And God saw that it was good".

And one other thing to remember is that in this picture lies the heart of a deep faith - the faith that I am loved, and cherished, and was greatly missed when I wasn't there. That is his faith - and I hope it can be yours too.

One of the first hymns I ever learned to play started with these words: "God who made the earth/ the air, the sky, the sea/Who gave the light its birth/Careth for me". I can't prove it. I can only tell you that it is the bedrock faith of this Book. If it was might which created the mountains and energy which created the galaxies, it was tenderness which fashioned and created me "when fishes flew and forests walked and figs grew upon thorn".

Let me finish by saying this. This book tells us that we live in a universe "humbling in scale and dazzling in beauty". I thank the astrophysicist for opening my eyes to see that. But when I stop gazing at the heavens and look down again at the earth I know life can sometimes be very hard. I am such a little soul in such a vast universe. Sooner or later someone breaks our heart. Sooner or later a family goes to a great marathon and returns forever shattered. Sooner or later life falls apart and this frame begins to falter. Sooner or later someone greatly loved leaves too soon and the deep gap is just never filled - by anyone. Sooner or later we wake up with 5 little children to care for - singlehandedly. But this Book tells us that there is "a love which will not let us go" - that this "tattered outlaw of the earth" is precious beyond all thinking, a creature of the earth made of the very same ingredients as the stars - but also a child of heaven. A child of heaven. Don't you think that is very, very good news on a spring morning? If you do - if it fills your heart once again with hope and trust as you start a new week - let me hear your *robust, from the bottom of the heart, full-throated, strong "Amen"*.