

## “Of Mages, Sages, Astrologers and Alchemists”

John 1:1-18

Desert Palm United Church of Christ

January 2, 2005 – The Ninth Day of Christmas

“The stars in the sky looked down where he lay.” We sang those words together eight evenings ago. That traditional Christmas carol grants a kind of personality to the stars- the heavenly host- almost as if they were living beings. Living stars is a metaphor for us, but, quite unintentionally, the composer of “Away in a Manger” revealed the beliefs of the ancient world about stars. Stars really were living agents of God- the “heavenly host.” Their movement in the skies was measured by every ancient society, and people tried to find parallels between their actions and events happening down here on earth, believing even in the possibility that the stars could help us to predict important events ahead of time. Such people were called “astrologers”, and those who devoted themselves to this primitive science were considered wise. Today such practitioners would be considered cranks and charlatans, kooks and manipulators of the gullible.

Because even today, whenever the power of nature is involved, human beings want the comfort of believing that some natural things are reliable and predictable. We know with certainty, for instance, that the seasons will change, that the winter solstice will reverse itself toward an equinox, and so on. We have spent billions on perfecting satellite weather prediction networks that can track and prepare us for hurricanes- scientific technology which has spared untold thousands of lives through the past few decades. And we even have simple early warning systems in some of our oceans that can alert us to the traumatic movement of tectonic plates that might trigger the massive *tsunami* waves that scoured the face of so many seacoasts last week. Technology. We have such technology. It simply wasn't in place over there. Not yet. Perhaps those coastal villages weren't high on the priority lists of nations where preventive science was deemed to be important. Perhaps all those 150,000 lives were further down on

the world's list of priorities. Perhaps someone, somewhere- perhaps some bureaucrat among the world's power players forgot that all people everywhere have become increasingly interrelated and interdependent residents of one single planetary village. So today the entire world is torn by the sounds of wailing grief in southern Asia. If these had been our own physical neighbors, suddenly physically and economically destitute, you and I would be making room in our own houses for them. As it is, we can only send what we can, relying on the surrogacy of other human hands and eyes to act in our place with the accumulated wisdom of years of emergency management. Yet we still feel impotent and incompetent, and we dread that the world's best response will not be enough to counter the continuing threats of disease, hunger and thirst.

And our friends of more limited vision, biblical insensitivity and scientific ignorance have this week cranked up their Rapture Index- the "prophetic speedometer of end-times activity." They have thus attributed the incredible death toll to a literal, intentional "act of God" instead of a simple, natural geological "self-correction." If God was anywhere this week, it was sustaining the victims of this natural disaster. God is present now in the continuing efforts of relief workers, and in the compassion of the rest of the world speeding whatever we can to those devastated places. That's where God is- where it counts.

God is also with the magi of this age who will continue to respond to such natural phenomena through scientific inquiry and through the conceptualizing of new gadgets and gizmos that will give people more of a chance the next time- no matter where they live. These magi are not magicians, but technicians. Not astrologers but astronomers. Not alchemists but chemists. These magi are the philosophical descendents of those more famous ones who were inspired to show up in Bethlehem to offer what they could in the service of a savior and to God's future.

Those ancient magi- however many there actually were- were intelligent, inquiring people who did the best they could with the world-view of the times.

Like the very writers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures who were their contemporaries, they believed in a flat-earth universe in which all heavenly bodies rotated around us- all part of God's ultimate, spontaneous creation. The primitive science of the day was built on those misconceptions, and so was the Bible. Scripture and science. God has always spoken through both mediums. Unfortunately, believing the Bible to be inflexible and scientifically faulty- many scientists have discarded the Bible's truths along with its outmoded scientific worldview. And just as sadly, many Biblical folks have never considered that scientific revelation was another valid form of divine inspiration. So they force themselves to live with a Biblical worldview of a flat earth that was created in six days a few millennia ago. Like it or not, those viewpoints are widespread.

Three weeks ago tomorrow was the funeral of Krystal Ebel- a funeral attended by scores of Desert Palm Church folks and by hundreds of students from Dobson High School, probably 400 people. About a half-hour before the service was to begin, a gentleman I didn't recognize caught my eye. He recognized me as the pastor- I must have been in uniform that day.

Reaching out a heavily-bookmarked paperback whose cover didn't seem to match anything on my own bookshelves, this gentleman said that he wanted me to read some sections of it in the service, because it might be very helpful to the family. He then quickly began to tell me about its stories of near-death experiences, about physical resuscitation, and about communications which people had received from their late spouses or children. I honestly don't remember too many details of our conversation, except for my response.

"I'm sorry. That's just not going to happen. Plans for this service are very firmly set."

"Well, I really think this would be helpful to the family, and to all these kids. Those children in that High School don't hear anything but Darwin and evolution,

somebody's got to tell them the truth." He wanted to turn the funeral into an opportunity for evangelism.

"Well, sir, you happen to be talking to someone who believes in evolution, and I happen to think it's one of God's greatest gifts to us. This is not an appropriate day to be doing this. I will be preaching about the resurrection, though." He gave me this funny, perplexed smile, and somewhat slowly walked toward the parking lot, book in hand.

What did he say? "Those children in that high school don't hear anything but Darwin and evolution. Somebody's got to tell them the truth." That echoed inside me, along with something else I remembered hearing about that particular high school down the street. I know a former student whose biology teacher hinted to her students that she believed more in the Biblical story of creation than she did in evolution, in spite of the fact that she was being paid to teach biology, not religion. I think she actually asked for a show of hands – evolution vs. Biblical creation, and she got overwhelming support for the Bible. Science by ballot. The University of Minnesota recently published a "study finding that many biology teachers simply downplay evolution or don't teach it at all because they either fear controversy or are themselves sympathetic to creationism." [Church and State, Nov 2003, p 6.]

Also rumbling around inside my head were vaguely remembered statistics from various sources that insisted that half of America believes in the literal story of creation that appears in Genesis. I wonder if they came from school systems that didn't require any science classes!

Eighth grade science classes are one of God's greatest gifts to us. So are high school chemistry, biology, and physics, plus all their college-level extensions on into the levels of postgraduate research. Science and mathematics, in fact, are two of God's greatest gifts to us, because, through them, you and I can discern incredible insights into God's awesome creativity. I hope you were paying attention in those classes.

It is probably obvious that I was, and sometimes still am, a student of the sciences. It is probably also obvious that I take the Bible so incredibly **seriously** that I **cannot** take it **literally**- not when it comes to God's revelations. If I took the Bible's science seriously I would have to believe that the earth was flat, that the great big blue universe was filled with water, and that the sun, stars, and planets twirled around **us**, because we are the center of the universe. If I believed in Biblical science I would also have to acknowledge that wildfires, storms, pestilence, earthquakes, and even **tsunamis** are specifically cooked up by God, usually as punishment. I would also have to believe that the fossils of dinosaur bones were planted here by God as a test of the faith of an innocent young geologist named Charles Darwin.

What a cruel joke for God to play! Besides that, if time is actually infinite, and if the world is only 6000 years old, why did God wait so long to begin? What was God doing before creating the universe? -Oh, God was busy preparing Hell for those who asked too many questions. In 1968, Stephen Hawking arrived at some equations that expanded on parts of Einstein's general relativity theory, and they supported the theory that time itself did have a beginning, just as matter, energy, and space itself had a beginning. Everything began in an explosive "singularity." If you were writing Genesis in light of modern science, you could say, "God created a big bang, and there was a beginning; there was light." (paraphr. Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, p. 38).

Many of us in this sanctuary probably believe that the debate between scientific and religious worldviews is a debate conducted in two languages, and it's not really important. Well, it is. For two reasons: First, 2005 has been declared by somebody to be the Worldwide year of Physics, because it's the hundredth birthday of the publication of two or three of Albert Einstein's most significant works. It is also important because the proponents of Biblical fundamentalism are still seeking to inject religion into the teaching of science in our public schools. How would you like it if your local school board pasted the

following disclaimer into the front cover of your child's biology textbook: **“Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it is still being tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence. A theory is defined as a well-tested explanation that unifies a broad range of observations.”** Things like that actually happen in American school districts. In places like Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma and Ohio, science is still being attacked, 80 years after the Scopes “monkey trial.”

Back in 1987 there was a significant debate on the latest incarnation of biblical literalism. Then was called “creation science.” The literalists lined up a collection of “scientists” who argued for a literal six-day spontaneous creation. And the witnesses for evolution? Were they astrophysicists, molecular biologists? No! It was progressive Biblical theologians who argued against Genesis- against literal interpretation. These Biblical theologians talked about metaphorical theology and they talked about God as creator and companion, in covenant relationship with the creation, stories that were told in ancient terms that ancient people could understand out there in the deserts of Canaan. Our courts- all the way to the Supreme Court- ruled that the belief that the concept of a supernatural creator being responsible for the creation of human kind is a **religious** viewpoint and cannot be taught in public schools in the context of scientific theories like evolution.

The debate didn't end in 1987. The latest challenge to good science **and** to good Biblical scholarship is called the “Intelligent Design” theory, which is mostly “creation science” in disguise.

**“Intelligent design is a Trojan Horse for bringing religious creationism back into public school science classes.” “Teaching students about religion's role in world history and culture is proper, but disguising a particular religious belief as science is not,” [Witold Walczak, C & S, op cit] The insertion of Intelligent Design into science books “is not only unconstitutional, it is bad science.”**

Intelligent Design's proponents are the folks who want that famous disclaimer inserted into your daughter's biology textbook. In 2003 they filed a lawsuit in Texas. Steven Shafersman represented the Texas scientific community:

**“[This group] keeps asking for flaws- weaknesses and criticisms- of Darwinism and Darwinian theory to be presented in the textbooks, but the books already contain this information. ... All the biology books point out that Darwin had no knowledge of modern genetics, and that he was ignorant of evolutionary mechanisms other than random mutations, natural selection, and genetic variability. Research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has corrected these defects in his original theory, and modern evolutionary theory is much stronger. [C&S Nov, 2003]**

So why is this stuff important in Tempe, Arizona on the first Sunday of 2005? - Because such textbook piracy could easily happen here in Arizona. -Because God gave us minds that could calculate and imagine, and theorize and do research, and the more of this we do the stronger becomes our appreciation for God. For me, science brings me closer to God. And even the book of Genesis, on the other hand, brings me closer to the first people who tried to put that closeness into images that their contemporaries could understand. In short, the God of Genesis is awesome, but the God of quarks, and string theory, and black holes, and expanding and contracting universes, and evolution, and modern medicine, and mathematics is even **more** awesome. It would be a sin against God to treat science as some kind of enemy. Science may be just as holy as scripture, and it points us toward the future. But it is up to committed, informed believers to tell the world that science actually points to God. Amen.

John F. Herman