



From the Pulpit: June 23, 2024

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time—A Minute for By the Hand

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Genesis 1:20–25

God After... V: God after Darwin

Georgetown Professor John F. Haught has recently written two books called *God After Darwin* and *God After Einstein*. That sounded like a sermon series to Katie, Christine, and me. We're looking at the impact of all these revolutionary thinkers upon Christianity image of God, of course Heisenberg, Einstein, and today Darwin.

His father and his grandfather were both prominent physicians. In fact his grandfather Erasmus was so progressive and out there that he inspired Mary Shelley to come up with Dr. Frankenstein.

“And so he starts coming up with this odd theory called ‘natural selection.’”

Charles matriculated at the University of Edinburgh medical school just so that he would have some kind of answer when people asked him what he did for a living, but he was so horrified by the screams and agony of surgery before anesthesia that he dropped out of medical school and tried seminary instead.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Which was just fine with him. He thought he'd just get a small, quiet parish in the countryside and work

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind and the cattle of every kind and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

one day a week and collect beetles the rest of the time.

With no job but tons of prolific curiosity, he set sail for South America on the HMS Beagle, a 90-foot sloop which was sometimes affectionately referred to as a Floating Coffin. During the four years, nine months, and five days he was island-hopping in the Galapagos, he sent home 1,529 species preserved in bottles. This was 150 years before Fed Ex and Styrofoam peanuts. I have no idea how that was done in 1831.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Charles Darwin was a trust-fund baby. He never had to work a day in his life. The first pound he ever earned on his own was probably at the age of 50 when *Origin of Species* sold out on the first day of publication.

Charles was 27 years old when he got home to England after the Beagle, so he thought he'd better get married. He didn't know anybody, and he wasn't in love; he had no romantic prospects; but he had this fetching first cousin named Emma, so he proposed.

She was shocked; she had no idea he had any romantic interest in her, and she didn't feel anything for him; she just thought of him as this pleasant relative.

Nonetheless, she said yes, and Charles and Emma were blissfully married for 43 years and had 10 children together. And Charles Darwin became a trust-fund baby twice over, because Emma was a Wedgwood; her grandfather Josiah had done **ok** for himself by tinkering around with pottery.

While island-hopping in the Galapagos, he noticed that the finches on each island had beaks of different shape and size, longer or broader, depending on the type of indigenous seeds available to them on their respective islands. The tortoises had shells of different shape and configuration; their necks were longer or shorter, and Charlie surmised that this was so because of the type of foliage and calories available to them in their respective environments.

And so he starts coming up with this odd theory called "natural selection." It may be the hugest and most cataclysmic scientific idea of all time, but it is ridiculously simple. Charlie surmised that all forms of life on earth descended from a common ancestor, and the stunning variety of living things as we know them results from five simple facts that are represented by the mnemonic acronym VISTA.

The 'V' and the 'I' are Variation and Inheritance. That is to say all offspring inherit their characteristics from their parents. They will have similar shape, color, size and ability. But there is also Variation in these characteristics; they will not be identical to their parents nor to each other. You know this if you have more than one child.

The 'S' in VISTA stands for Selection. That is to say, the environment selects or chooses the characteristics that are most advantageous for that particular ecological niche. If you are a finch on an island with big seeds, over generations your beak will become broader; and if you are a finch on an island with seeds difficult to get at, your beak will become narrower and longer.

"Darwin didn't know about genes and DNA, but he got it right, nonetheless. Survival of the fittest."

A few years ago, the American Museum of Natural History in New York had an exhibit on Darwin and natural selection, and the first thing you saw when you walked into the exhibit was a large poster of a giraffe and an anteater with the caption, "Why the long face?" Is that brilliant or what? Ask a giraffe "Why the long face?" and he will say, "Because it lets me eat the leaves in taller trees." A proto-giraffe with a longer neck was able to consume more calories, and thus was likelier to pass her DNA on to the next generation. Darwin didn't know about genes and DNA, but he got it right, nonetheless. Survival of the fittest.

So, VISTA: Variation, Inheritance, and Selection. The 'T' in VISTA is my favorite: 'T' is for 'Time.' Natural selection takes vast eons of time to work: generation after generation after generation, variation after variation after variation. Natural selection needs lots of time to evolve this monumental, multifarious menagerie of marigolds, magnolias, maples, mice, monkeys, manatees, moose, mallards, and Methodists.

It takes 3.7 billion years to get from the first living things on earth—single-celled microbes—to Mozart's *Second Clarinet Concerto* and Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run*. It takes lots of Time—3.7 billion years—to get to genius. Tallulah Bankhead said, "There have only been two genuine geniuses in human history: William Shakespeare and...Willie Mays." You can tell Tallulah was a Giants fan.

So VISTA: Variation, Inheritance, Selection, Time, and the 'A' is for Adaptation. Down the generations, the eagle's talons become sharper, the lion's teeth become fiercer, the gazelle's legs become swifter, a fish walks up on land and its fins become feet and it gills lungs. Voilà! Natural Selection.

It's so incredibly simple. The British biologist T.H. Huxley was such an eloquent and fierce defender of Darwin's idea that he became known as "Darwin's bulldog." Of the idea of natural selection, Dr. Huxley once said, "How extremely stupid of me not to have thought of that."

So what does the 30-year Charlie Darwin do with his simple but explosive idea? Exactly Nothing. He sits on it silently for 20 years. For 20 years, with this idea in his head, he is walking around with a live grenade in his pocket. To change the metaphor, Darwin has a hungry, restless tiger cooped up in his carriage house.

Making this idea public, he says, would be like committing murder. Why? Because with this idea, Darwin has just fired God. When it comes to life, God has nothing to do. Nature takes care of everything.

Darwin stays silent because he adores Emma. She is a devout Anglican. She teaches Sunday School, she feeds the poor, she's in the Women's Association. She knits lap robes. She begs Charlie not to publish this idea, because she is afraid that if he does, she and he will spend eternity in different places.

At the age of 50, he finally publishes his dangerous idea in *Origin of Species* only because another naturalist has independently come up with the same idea and is about to scoop him, and he doesn't want that to happen, so he goes ahead, and Christianity has never been the same.

The Christian Church has never been able fully to metabolize natural selection. Of all the revolutionary thinkers we're dealing with in this series, Darwin

is by far the hardest one for the Church to wrap its head around. We can eventually handle the heliocentric universe of Copernicus and Einstein's Relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, but natural selection has been more difficult. Do you know that more Americans believe in the Virgin Birth than in natural selection?

The famous atheist Richard Dawkins says, "No competent deity would ever have produced living beings the way Darwin shows life to have come about." Dr. Dawkins says, "The universe we see is precisely the one we would expect to find if behind it all there is nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."

But how does Richard Dawkins know how God might fashion her masterpiece? Maybe she works more slowly than the Book of Genesis seems to imply. Natural selection is how God gets things done. Maybe it takes her 3.7 billion years to get from bacteria to William Shakespeare, Willie Mays, Wolfgang Mozart, and Bruce Springsteen.

The path of life is riddled with twists and turns, meanderings and dead-ends; literally dead-ends; just look at the heaps of cicada carcasses piled up at the foot of the tree in your backyard. Death is what drives the engine of natural selection. Every species of living being produces more offspring than the environment can support; most eggs never hatch; most fetuses never breathe; most young never reproduce. There is a lot of death. But here we are. Here we are.

As the great savant himself put it,

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.¹

¹Charles Darwin, final words of *On the Origin of Species*, originally published 1859.

“Natural
selection is
how God gets
things done.”

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Lord of Lords,
King of Kings,
Mighty God,
Maker of heaven and earth;
Of all things visible and invisible.
Creator,
Spirit,
Incarnation,
Shining in splendor,
Radiant
In Resurrection hope,
We praise you.

We receive your
summer cloudburst and hard rain,
this holy tonic, a blessing.

We see the grandeur of flesh,
life transformed from glory into glory,
and we sense that we are
exuberantly alive, here amidst your creation,
the very dwelling place of God.

Even when your spirit seems to go in and out of focus, when our
sight and awareness fades and fails,
the “birds singing in the bushes”¹
create a “storm of beauty”² this side of heaven.

The “entangled bank”³,
vibrant and viable,
some long thread of holy melody
that you set forth and tend and
mend and mentor all the long days.

Though, in one sense,
“we are but a blue marble
floating in a Black Sea of space”⁴ the marvels and miracles
of one grain of sand,
one fingerprint,
one unfurling frond,
one blue-black bird,
each feels more primordially
impossible than the next, a kind of
humility, gratitude and compassion
spilling forth every time we stop
to pay attention to the glory you
stretch out before us.

Give us eyes to see,
ears to hear,
wonder to hold.

Give us minutes, hours, days to praise you.

Let us sing your love.
Let us know that we are exuberantly
alive, yours, beloved.

We pray for those who feel
the rhythm of their days in a new way:
for new parents, aglow and worn
from new life fragile and beguiling.

For those on the other end of life, finding
medical ailments piling up, parched,
looking for blessing as the number
of days become just a handful.

For all in-between, for the summer solstice,
for rain after drought, for the mud and
mess and worry. For the labor
that feels incessant.

For the time that slips through our hands.
For the holy blessing of the ordinary.
Let us hold it, this “storm of beauty”².
Be with those who suffer. With those
who hold something hard.

For those whose grief is heavy.
For the ache of longing.
For the seasons not knowing what will come next.

Give us mutual charge over one another,
so that no one has to carry anxiety and trouble alone.

Give us one another, O God of glory.
And shelter us in the prayer Jesus teaches us:
Our Father.... Amen.

[1] Charles Darwin

[2] John Muir

[3] Charles Darwin

[4] Elizabeth Johnson

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