

# Do I Really Have to Believe That? Theology Gone Awry

Do I Really Have to Believe in Creationism?

Genesis 1:1–2:4

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In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. I want to go on record right now and say this one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. It tells me where the earth and everything in it came from, which is to say, it tells me where I came from. It tells me of a wildly creative God, who can bring forth tremendous beauty from abject chaos. It tells me that light will always lead our way, and that darkness, too, is holy and essential and ought not be overlooked. It tells me that this world is old, and big, and forged in love. It is one of the most evocative, affirming, generative accounts you'll find anywhere. It holds the ultimate primacy of place in our bibles and in our tradition because it is the ultimate story of life. As those who follow a sovereign God, a saving Christ, and a sustaining Spirit, this is one of our most defining texts. So how is it also one of our most divisive?

To be fair, it's likely not particularly divisive within the tradition of this church or other mainline Protestants, but it is remarkably divisive in the broader scope of Christianity, which is why it is an appropriate place to begin our sermon series "Do I Really Have to Believe That?" We're beginning today with the idea of creationism. At its broadest point, a creationist is anyone who believes God is the cause, the impetus, of all life. In this regard, I am a creationist. But at its most narrow, and most vocal point, a creationist is someone who adheres to a literal interpretation of Genesis 1, disregards the science of evolution and the

study of geology and archeology and believes that God brought the earth and all the rest into being in seven distinct days. We'll call this literal creationism, and that is the creationism we're thinking about today, because that is the creationism that claims to have a monopoly on taking scripture seriously, which means that is the creationism that causes folks to wonder, "Do I really have to believe that Creation happened within a week and that science is wrong?"

The short answer is no. But a longer, more nuanced answer, may be worthy of our consideration.

Historically, literal creationism and religious fundamentalism are inextricably intertwined.<sup>1</sup> Fundamentalism really begins in reaction to Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution. Prior to that, the Bible was generally assumed to be a book of accurate history and science, and defending it was as easy as pointing to a verse to prove your point. The ideas of common descent, natural selection, and an earth billions of years old threw religion a curve ball and fundamentalism was born. Fundamentalists' greatest fear was that if Darwin was right, the Bible was wrong, so it dug its heels in on the literal truth and complete inerrancy of scripture. Their fear gave birth to a stark polarization when most of the scientific and academic world sided with Darwin. The Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, was perhaps the most public debate, further deepening the divide between modern science

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<sup>1</sup> This summary of the roots of fundamentalism is informed largely by chapter 2 of Peter Enns' book, *The Sin of Certainty*.

and biblical fundamentalism. Both sides would claim a philosophical victory from the trial, and the root of its controversy has never really gone away.

Then, not long after Darwin, archeologists in the Middle East discovered more and more about the ancient past. Among the many things learned, they found evidence of origin stories from other ancient nations, not just the Israelites that the Bible presents. It turns out that the stories of these other nations were astonishingly similar to the stories of Genesis, including creation, and the first humans, and a great flood that drowned everyone. But the real kicker was that these stories weren't just similar, they were substantially older than the Bible. Which all of a sudden made the bible seem less unique, less filled with classified information you couldn't find anywhere else, meaning potentially less important, maybe even less necessary.

Then, to make matters even worse, German biblical scholars, based upon careful analysis of the text's logical inconsistencies and differing linguistic markers, started suggesting that the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, probably weren't all written by Moses, as the text itself claims, but instead written long after Moses, which would mean these books were not eye-witness accounts, but stories told later, subject to interpretation and agenda and bias of the author (or authors). Similar to Darwin's theory of evolution, this theory of the evolution of the Pentateuch was almost universally convincing to scholars of the time, which was perceived to be a third strike against the Bible's authority. And when these ideas spread out from the academy and into European and American churches, fundamentalist Christians panicked, afraid this would be what finally caused church-goers across the land to lose their faith.

So, once again, as they had against each perceived threat, fundamentalists doubled down on a literal, inerrant reading of scripture. And the more so-called threats that have piled up over time, the more fervently they have defended their theological point of view, and continue to do so. Fundamentalism lays full claim to the Bible and insists that any step away from its system of belief is a step away from scripture.

The problem with all of this, as I see it, at least, is that this fundamentalist expression of Christianity makes faith an argument to be won rather than a way of life to be lived. This expression of Christianity has found the world so threatening, it has missed the glory and delight the world God created contains. This expression of Christianity is so desperate to understand God rightly, it's shrunk God down into something small enough for the human mind to comprehend.

Rachel Held Evans, who grew up within a fundamentalist Christian tradition herself before finding her way out as a young adult, puts it this way. She says: "The problem with fundamentalism is that it can't adapt to change. When you count each one of your beliefs as essential, change is never an option. When change is never an option, you have to hope that the world stays exactly as it is so as not to mess with your view of it. I think this is why some preachers look so frantic and angry. For fundamentalists, Christianity sits perpetually on the precipice of doom, one scientific discovery or cultural shift or difficult theological question away from extinction. They are so fearful of losing their grip on faith, they squeeze the life right out of it."<sup>2</sup>

Think with me about something. How many times in the Bible is there a moment — a story — when someone realizes, "I was wrong." Or "I have learned something new." "My mind has been changed." "There is more than one

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, page 18.

way to understand this." If you read the Bible ... there's at least as many stories dealing with a changed or challenged way understanding as there are without it.

You know, today, liturgically speaking, is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. And on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, John the Baptist is always the preacher, John, who comes out of the wilderness with a mighty short sermon before Jesus goes down into the waters. "Repent!" he says. That's the first sermon preached in three of the four gospels: "Repent!" And to repent, at its most basic and direct level, means to change, to turn around, to find another way. That is a sign of the healthy, living, and dynamic faith Jesus invites us into: the theological capacity to change, to consider new ways of being, new means of understanding, new expressions of loving.

I think I understand something of the appeal of fundamentalism, I do. The world is big, and complex, and constantly changing. I understand the desire for answers. For clarity. For certainty. For something, anything, to just hold steady. Fundamentalism knows what it is to be afraid, and it knows how to offer security. "Hold tight," fundamentalism says, "no matter how rocky the ride, hold tight, and it will all be okay."

My friend Jessica<sup>3</sup>, who is also a preacher, lives in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington DC. Every day, she and her two year old son walk a half-mile to day care, and they always pause to look at the Capitol building. Her son loves it so much that on the days she forgets, he reminds her. But this past Wednesday, as my friend and her husband watched a rally devolve into a riot, they decided to drive together to retrieve their son. As expected, as they started home in the car, he asked to go and see the Capitol.

My friend says it was difficult to explain to a young child why they couldn't go that day. She found herself saying things like, "There are people there who are very angry. They are being mean. They are breaking things. They aren't supposed to do that. So it's not safe." And her son, in the way that toddlers do, summarized succinctly. "They are bad people," he said. "No people are bad people," Jessica said. "They are just making bad choices." But once those words came out of her mouth, she found herself asking, "Is that really true? Are there no bad people?"

My friend was disconcerted by the very question. She consistently teaches her child that no one is inherently bad. She professes her faith that all people are created in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. She preaches on a regular basis, as I do, that no one is outside the redeeming power of God.

I still believe that is true. There are no bad people. There are fearful people, though. That is where I see similarities between fundamentalism and those who stormed the Capitol building this past Wednesday. I think they are both afraid, deeply afraid. "What are we supposed to do?" one angry rioter said to a reporter. "What else are we supposed to do? No one will listen to us. No one will help us."

I want to be clear here: I have no interest in excusing what happened. It is completely and utterly inexcusable. But I do have some interest in understanding it, as best I can, because understanding is a first step toward real, meaningful change.

Even if they wouldn't name it or recognize it themselves, I think fear was in every footstep that breached democracy on Wednesday. And fear plays by its own rules and sets its own boundaries and has a nasty habit of dressing up in certainty and grabbing every street corner and loud speaker it can and

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Jessica Tate, executive director of NEXT Church. I am grateful to her for sharing this story with me, and for allowing me to share it with you.

yelling at the top of its lungs so it is the only thing that we can hear. Fear also cares little for the facts — it resides in our emotions, in our guts. And it only makes matters worse when fear is poked and prodded and ultimately even provoked by the president.

It is important to name this in the conversation as well. Commentators across both sides of the aisle have said it, and David Brooks said it plainly on Friday: “The rampage reminded us that if Black people had done this the hallways would be red with their blood.”

We cannot and should not avoid this truth: we live in a country designed by and for white people, and we who are white continue to have the upper hand. What we have seen in the past several months are perhaps small glimpses of a better, more equal day. But it has always been true that a great leveling means the mighty will be lowered while the lowly are lifted up. That, by the way, is biblical — straight out of the Magnificat, in the Gospel of Luke. And people have been so afraid of the Magnificat that various countries throughout history including some as recent as the 1980s have banned the public recitation of its words, lest anyone get any wild ideas. It’s biblical, but it is also frightening, at least for folks with skin that is pale, like mine, because we have the most to lose.

But perhaps the most difficult for me to watch on Wednesday were the images of those rushing at the Capitol steps waving “Jesus Saves” flags, carrying Bibles and holding up Bible verses. As a person of faith, this pained me. There was nothing of the way of Jesus in what transpired. And again, I am not excusing it. It deserves to be denounced and renounced at every level. But I do believe that what we saw were the actions of people who are afraid. People who were told, “Hold tight. No matter what else you hear, no matter what else happens, hold tight to how things are right now, and it will all be okay.”

I do not believe there was anything of the way of Jesus in what transpired. I do, however, believe that Jesus would recognize the fear of the rioters, and I believe he would do for them what he does all throughout the Gospels, what he does for all of us — he would help them repent. He would come alongside them until even they, too, could turn around and find another way. That’s what we all need, all of us, in our own ways — the courage to find another way.

The thing about fear of every sort is that it puts blinders on us. And when we are focused on the scary stuff, we miss everything else. The biggest tragedy of a literal, fundamentalist understanding of Genesis 1 is it becomes ammunition for an argument rather than a proudly beautiful declaration of God’s providence. Our creation story is not explanation of how our atoms came to be. It is an explanation of how much God loves every atom of our being. What a shame it would be to miss this.

Because there was a time when chaos hovered before, when it covered the fullness of all that was. And it was from that chaos that God brought forth creation.

God knew we would always need help to see, so God said, “Let there be light,” and it was so.

God knew we would need a vast expanse and a settled rest, and so God said, “Let there be water, sky, and land,” and it was so.

God knew we would need growth and rejuvenation, sustenance and strength, and so God said, “Let there be plants and fruit and trees,” and it was so.

God knew we would need rhythms and routine, and so God said, “Let there be day and night, signs and seasons,” and it was so.

God knew we would need to be reminded that there is more to this life than just ourselves, and so God said, “Let there be living creatures of every kind, animals and cattle, fish

and fowl, everything that creeps and crawls," and it was so.

And then God said, "Let there be humanity."

God has spoken creation out of chaos before. From the depths of nothing long ago, God brought forth our humanity. And our faith declares, and so we trust, that God can do it again. That God can bring forth our humanity from the very depths. That God can bring forth the best in us. That God can bring forth everything God always intended for us and from us. That God can bring forth everything in us that is good and very good. God has done it

before, and God will do it again, even in the midst of our current tumult and turmoil.

Beloved, you can have a literal, fundamentalist faith. You can even have it here. But I hope for your sake that you will open yourself up to all this story has to offer and encounter the true word of life that always finds a way, life that unclenches our hands and paves wide the way to our hearts, making all of us — all of us — fully and wonderfully human, made in the image of God who will never, ever let you go.

If you can remember that, at the very center of your being, well, you won't ever have to be afraid again.