

## THE ARTISTRY OF GOD

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 24, 2018  
based on Psalm 19:1–4; Psalm 104:1–4, 14–24**

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe,” during which we are considering the many reasons we have for belief in God. Through the centuries, as people have reflected about the grounds for belief in God, their reflections have coalesced into a series of so-called “proofs for God,” which, we have noted in this series, are not so much proofs as they are pointers to God. They involve observing evidence in the world which points us to God. This morning we are continuing our journey through those proofs. {prayer}

William Paley, in the eighteenth century, famously imagined walking across an English heath and stumbling upon a watch lying on the ground. From where did the watch come? It would be no answer at all to suggest that the watch had just always been there, or that it assembled itself by chance. From the elaborate complexity of the watch, with all the minute pieces working in conjunction for the purpose of tracking time, it is obvious that there must have been a Watchmaker.<sup>1</sup>

Paley’s basic line of reasoning is now called the *teleological argument* for the existence of God—from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end or goal or purpose. The argument points out what a masterful construction the universe is and concludes that it must have been designed on purpose.

The teleological argument is similar to the cosmological argument that we considered last week, which also starts by looking at the universe and reasons to the necessary existence of God. The difference between the two is that the cosmological approach argues from *cause or contingency*—that the only way to account for this amazing universe is to recognize that it must go back to an intelligent First Cause, namely God. The teleological approach, on the other hand, argues from *design or artistry*—that the incredible order, complexity, majesty, and beauty of the universe must be the result of a Master Designer.

In the Bible, the cosmological argument is reflected in the opening of Genesis, which we considered last week, and which declares that God is the source of all that is. The teleological argument is reflected especially in the creation psalms, two of which we heard this morning. Psalm 19 exults, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims God’s handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1) The original Hebrew word here for “heavens”—הַשָּׁמַיִם *hashamayim*—refers to the sun and moon and stars. The Psalmist beholds the wonder of the cosmos, and recognizes that it is the “handiwork” of God. The longest creation psalm, Psalm 104, turns further attention towards smaller things on earth. It speaks of one sort of plant or animal after another and notes how marvelous each one is, how they all fit within a magnificent world, and it finally proclaims, “O Lord, how manifold

are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all.” (Psalm 104:14) These psalms observe the marvelous structure of the world and the amazing diversity and beauty of its creatures and see that it is all the artistry of God.

Today, of course, some people want to argue that the theory of evolution contradicts belief in God as Creator. But in fact, there is no inherent conflict between the idea of evolution and the idea of God as Designer. The problem is that people often have too small an idea of what is meant by *design*.

When people have thought of God as designer or creator, they often have had in mind a very simple image of the craftsman—like the ancient potter, who designs and builds each pot. If there are to be different sorts of pots, the potter must design and specifically make each one. But if God is God—if God is, as we discussed a couple weeks ago, “that greater than which nothing can be conceived”—then this idea of God as designer is far too small. Which is greater: a God who, like the potter, must directly crank out every thing that is, or a God who creates structures—substances and natural laws and energy fields and principles of genetics—which themselves produce an endless array of new things? A God who is truly God will surely go far beyond the limited abilities of the human craftsman. A God who is the ultimate Creator would surely be One who *creates creativity*—who designs a universe in which systems of creativity are actually built into the very fabric of things, so that the universe endlessly spawns new works. If God creates creativity, then the mechanisms of evolution are precisely what one should expect; because evolution describes a biological framework that is designed to endlessly and expansively produce new adaptations and life forms.

*Is God a Creator who actually creates creativity, so that there are mechanisms of creativity built into the fabric of the universe?* From the Biblical story it is obvious that this is so, since the pinnacle of God’s creative activity to create human beings, who themselves go on to create all sorts of things. A full view of God as Creator will recognize that God has not simply created static things, but rather God has created engines of creativity—quantum mechanics in the realm of physics and the mechanisms of evolution in the realm of biology and human beings at the summit of it all—so that the elements of the universe are not just *created* but themselves become a part of a *creative process*.

With this understanding of design, the idea of evolution is not only compatible with the idea of God as Designer, but it is the necessary corollary of it; for what finally must be the approach of a God who is truly an Intelligent Designer? Is the Intelligent Designer a God who creates by individually designing every feature of every creature that ever existed, and who constantly tweaks each species as the environment changes, so that God is cranking out endless designs through the ages, like an architect’s office that is furiously revising and sending out blueprints? Or is the Intelligent Designer a God who creates life in such a fashion that it has creativity built into it, so that life forms will automatically develop into new forms, so that once started there will be an endless and fantastic

explosion of new life forms that will constantly adjust to the surroundings? Surely the latter is the intelligent design—a world that has a fundamental mechanism of creativity built into it, a mechanism that human beings have discovered and now call evolution.

When the Bible speaks of God as creator, it declares *that* God creates, and never gets into detail as to *how* God creates. This creation is described in grand poetry, in Genesis 1 and in the creation psalms. Nevertheless, there are interesting parallels between the poetic picture in the first chapter of Genesis and the basic scientific outline of the evolutionary process on planet earth. The “six days of creation” in Genesis—a poetic statement never meant to be taken literally!—portray a process of progressive development over time, from the physical earth through more and more complex life forms and finally to the appearance of humanity. Moreover, it is clear that the creative power of God works through the stuff of the earth. Genesis 1:20 declares, “And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.’” Genesis 1:24 continues, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind.” Finally, in the creation of humanity, it is said, “God formed humankind from the dust of the ground.” (Genesis 2:7) There is an understanding that God creates, not by means of an instantaneous zap from heaven, but through a progressive process that utilizes the materials and developing structures in the natural world.

Thus it makes sense to recognize God as Designer, and the science of evolution as the description of how the design unfolds in the development of life forms. Of course, there are those who want to argue that God can be left out of this picture and that everything can be explained purely as the result of mechanistic forces operating by chance. It is true that chance is an *operating principle* in the process of evolution, as the chance combination and mutation of genes will produce endless new possibilities for life. But chance does not suffice as an *explanatory principle* for the world. Last week we noted that chance simply cannot account for the extraordinary arrangements of the natural laws which have shaped the physical universe. Likewise chance alone cannot account for the extraordinary nature of the abundant living world on planet earth.

Many people have observed that the biological world is so complex, so intricate, so marvelous, so interconnected and interdependent that it simply cannot be explained as being the result of pure chance. Fred Hoyle, a prominent physicist, once stated flatly, “As biochemists discover more and more about the awesome complexity of life, it is apparent that the chances of it originating by accident are so minute that they can be completely ruled out. Life cannot have arisen by chance.”<sup>ii</sup> He went on to compare “the chance of obtaining even a single functioning protein by chance combination of amino acids to a star system full of blind men solving Rubik’s Cube simultaneously.”<sup>iii</sup> But there is not only a serious problem in trying to explain the physical structures of the universe as being the result of pure chance. There is an even bigger problem that is revealed by the teleological argument as it shines light on the *artistry* of the world.

When human beings behold the world, it is very interesting that their primary response is that of *wonder*. This is the core sentiment in Psalm 104—the Psalmist is struck by the magnificence of the natural world. But why is this so—that when people look at nature, they marvel at its beauty? If human beings are simply the result of cold, mechanistic processes of chance and survival, why would they even have a concept of beauty, and why would they feel a sense of joy and awe in looking at the surrounding world?

Why do people flock to national parks such as Arches or Bryce in order to look at hunks of rock? Why would they see a rock arch or pillar as something wonderful and amazing and inspiring? If this is just a material universe, and human beings are merely the result of mechanistic forces of chance and survival, then they should have no interest in pieces of rock, unless perhaps they could be used to build some shelter. Certainly there would be no reason to experience a rock formation or a canyon as *beautiful*.

Why do people go to great effort to engage in snorkeling or scuba diving, in order to look at coral and pretty fish? If human beings are just material creatures who developed out of a dog eat dog struggle for survival, they should have no interest in looking at fish. They should just want to eat them.

What moves people to pause in a wintery landscape and gaze with wonder at the expanse of snow and trees? Again, if there nothing spiritual about human beings, if they are only the physical result of chemical processes, then they ought to be concerned for nothing more than getting out of the cold. Why do people gaze enraptured at sunsets and waves crashing on a beach? If this is a purely material universe, none of this makes any sense.

The fundamental human experience of the natural world is that it is a marvelous expanse of spiritually moving artistry. It only makes sense when one recognizes that there is an Artist behind it all, who has given us the ability to appreciate the art. Thus human beings throughout the ages, as they have gazed upon the earth, have sensed that they were gazing at the brushstrokes of God.

In recent years, of course, human beings have come to understand more and more about how those brushstrokes happened. Scientists understand how a rock arch is formed by the action of wind, blowing sand, and rain, how different species of fish have developed, how weather patterns create and drop snow, and how waves take shape and sunsets form. But the fact that one understands how an artist created an artwork—how the paints were mixed and how the brushstrokes were applied—does nothing to diminish one's appreciation for the artist. In fact, you may appreciate the artist all the more when you understand the complexity of the processes used. Likewise, the fact that human beings now can understand forces in geology and biology and astronomy need not diminish appreciation for the divine artist who used those processes to shape the universe. Indeed many scientists today have a greater appreciation for God precisely because they understand the extraordinary processes that underlie all that they see.

In the end, the *artistic design* of the natural world—not only its intricate complexity but even more its beauty—points to the reality of the Designer. Such artistry has no explanation, unless there is an Artist, who has instilled in human beings the capacity to gaze upon it all with joy and awe. So as we look at the world around us, we are moved to join with the Psalmist not only in recognizing that there is a God behind everything, but in lifting our spirits to God in wonder and praise. St. Bonaventure summed it up well in these words: “Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb; whoever does not discover the First Principle from such clear signs is a fool. Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all of creation you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor your God.”<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> William Paley, Natural Religion, 1802.

<sup>ii</sup> Fred Hoyle The Intelligent Universe (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Bonaventure, The Soul’s Journey into God, trans. by Ewert Cousins (Paulist Press: 1978), pp. 15, 67–68.