

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE
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Sunday, July 4, 2010

Title: Is the Universe an Accident – An Allegiance to God [Second in a series based on Dr. Timothy Johnson’s book *Finding God in the Questions*]

Scripture: Psalm 19

Theme: Both science and faith are ways of knowing God and God’s creative presence in this world. Thus our faithfulness emerges from both our “head and heart.”

[Preliminary comment: It behooves me to offer a brief comment that is related to the fact that today is the 234th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence from England, and thus begun the birth of this nation. If you study the founding of this country, you are immediately struck by the fact the efforts for independence by any reasonable assessment should have failed. The fact that the efforts of our founding ancestors succeeded and the fact that this country has blossomed in ways that history had never seen before, leads almost any observer to believe that the United States of America has been blessed by God. One becomes mindful of the biblical image of the Tribes of Israel being chosen by God, and it is easy to equate the same status onto the U.S. But often when one hears such language, it has the ring of claiming a privileged status over and above all of the other people of the world. From a biblical perspective, this is wrong and completely misleading. We recall the words from the Gospel according to Luke: to whom much is given, much is expected. [Luke 12:48] Yes, it is appropriate to celebrate the glory of this country and to acknowledge God’s blessings. But when we call forth the words “God bless America,” we must be willing to stand forth in special service to the people and the environment of the world – not a privileged status that avoids compassionate responsibility.

Our founding ancestors have given us a marvelous vision as reflected in the Declaration of Independence, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of

Happiness for all.” There is much that we can take great pride in, but we also do well to acknowledge that this is a vision of which we continually fall short – just as the Church continually falls short of the vision to be the Body of Christ for the world. Just because we fall short does not mean that the vision is invalid or that this country is critically flawed. All that it means is that in the midst of our strong pride for who we are, we must also have an unflinching view of the ways in which to improve – not just for Americans, but for all of God’s creation. Indeed, may God bless America so that we can continue the journey of being a blessing for others!]

This morning is the second sermon in this series based on the book of Dr. Tim Johnson *Finding God in the Questions*; last Sunday was an introduction on why questions are central to our faith journey – why not just embrace a set of answers? Obviously, great minds have thought through these questions. Why not just take their answers and be done with it? The response is twofold: a) there is no singular answer to the questions of faith – rather there is a huge range to the various religious questions. So which answer are you going to pick? And why that particular answer? b) To encase one’s faith in a set of external answers serves only to block one’s relationship with God. As was stated in the Men’s Faith & Fellowship this last Tuesday, to raise questions about our faith does not mean that our faith, of necessity, will

change. It may well stay more or less intact, but we do well always to have the courage to examine our faith – to allow it to grow and to deepen as we go through our various experiences and stages of life.

For many of us, “Is the Universe an Accident?” is not much of a question. Our immediate response is, “of course, not.” And then we want to move onto questions with which we genuinely wrestle. This however is the question with which Dr. Johnson begins his book and, as well, I am using it as the formative question for this sermon series. If we are not intentional with our understanding to this question, then it becomes far too easy for us to live a divided faith. The simple reality is that we live in a scientific world. Virtually all of the blessings that we have in our physical world, in our intellectual world, and in our emotional world have been profoundly affected by science and technology. And yet, when one begins to look closely at the scientific knowledge, it is easy to feel as if God has been pushed out. And so, it is common to have people of faith intentionally contradict science for the sole purpose of declaring their allegiance to God – even as they continue to benefit from the realm of science and technology in their personal lives.

Let me read a brief segment of Dr. Johnson’s description of the evolution of the Universe. From this description, it would be easy to ask, “Where is God?”

The universe expanded for a billion or so years before galaxies formed. It would be another 9 to 10 billion years before our solar system, including planet earth, came into existence. The first evidence of simple unicellular life on earth is dated to about 3.5 billion years ago, but the major diversifications of life into forms that we would describe as animal life did not occur until less than a billion years ago. Dinosaurs first appeared on the scene about 250 million years ago, only to be wiped out, most likely from a large asteroid invasion, about 190 million

years later. More humanlike creature appeared “only” about 3.5 million years ago; the first truly human species are dated to about one hundred thousand years ago.

You may be familiar with the celebrated time line transposing this cosmic history into a single twenty-four-hour day, giving us a more understandable frame of reference. If we are looking back at the big bang starting upon the stroke of midnight, planet earth would have formed at about the sixteen-hour point (four o’clock in the afternoon). Human life would have emerged less than one second ago. On this scale, a lifetime of one hundred years takes up only six ten-thousandths of a second. [p.29]

Hardly flattering to the human specifics when Psalm 8 declares that, “We have been made little less than God himself.” And Psalm 19 clearly declares that “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmaments proclaims his handiwork.” Whenever I perform a baptism, I declare the words from First Genesis, “In the beginning were darkness and void and God’s Spirit passed over the waters and brought forth light and life.”

And then there is the internal universe: atoms, neutrons, electrons. I remember for one of my science fair projects constructing certain configurations with Styrofoam balls and clothes hanger wire. Perhaps you did the same. Today’s understanding is completely different.

Dr. Johnson quotes from another book, Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything* [which is an excellent read – in short stints!]

The electron doesn’t fly around the nucleus like a planet around its sun, but instead takes on the more amorphous aspect of a cloud...the cloud itself is essentially just a zone of statistical probability...This atom, if you could see it, would look more like a very fuzzy

tennis ball than a hardedge metallic sphere.” [p.33]

So if indeed the notion of God is disregarded, then is it more reasonable to believe that the universe is the result of accidental or non-intentional forces without any purpose or meaning?

Dr. Johnson quotes Fred Hoyle who coined the term ‘big bang’:

The chance that higher life forms might have emerged in this way [i.e., randomness] is comparable with the chance that a tornado sweeping through a junk-yard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the material therein. [p.38]

I close with this statement of Dr. Johnson:

I accept that the human race has been shaped by millions of years of life evolving from very simple forms of life into the kind of complex organism we know today. I also believe that during this evolution, the process of natural selection has played a definitive role. But I do not think we can equate the process of natural selection with mere chance. Rather, I believe that natural selection has worked only because the underlying design of the universe has made it possible. In other words, I don’t see any discoveries of modern science, including natural selection, as a threat to the basic idea that there is some kind of intelligence at work in the unfolding of this incredible universe we inhabit...

In summary, I believe that the vastness and complexity of our inner and outer universes argue against chance as a total explanation for the universe as we know it today. Quite the contrary, the more we learn, the less likely it seems that it could have all “just happened.” And for me the most convincing argument that the universe has been “designed” is the extraordinary way it is calibrated to allow for the genesis and continuation of life itself.” [p39-41]

The invitation this morning as we face the question of Origins is to resist the “either/or” but rather to embrace the “both/and” – to resist evaluating science by the use of religious sources of authority and to resist evaluating religion by applying scientific principles. To do so, would be to try and mix and match poetry with prose, to mix and match the beauty of music and creation with the technical analysis of an engineer. God has given us a variety of gifts, a variety of ways of knowing the creation around us, of knowing ourselves and each other and, above all, a variety of ways of knowing God.

Indeed all of these paths lead to the one ultimate conclusion – our allegiance is to God who is the Source of life and meaning.