



Roanoke, Virginia
Confirmation Sunday, Epiphany Sunday
January 7, 2024

“Under the Apple Tree”

Genesis 2:15-17, Romans 12:1-2

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25 Confirmation Sundays! That is how many there have been since I came to pastor here. I look at photographs of past classes found outside the Fellowship Hall and

- I see faces of young people who now have confirmation-age children who have older siblings in college.
- I see young people who later became Sunday School teachers, elders, and ordained ministers.
- I see committed church supporters who are helping their congregations provide the same education and nurture which they received.

Not all who went through Confirmation can be found in those photos. Over the last quarter of a century, a few decided they were not ready to join the church as adult members. In almost every instance, their hesitancy had to do with their having a hard time reconciling what they were learning in science classes and what they understood the Bible to say.

Almost always, the book of Genesis was mentioned when they explained why. They learned in class that the universe is over 13 billion years old, and the earth is four and a half billion years old. So why should they believe this story where the earth is flat, was created in six days, and has water below and above? The bigger question was this: [“Can one believe what both science and the Bible have to say?”](#)

That is an important question in our modern age and is what I want to talk about after reading our passages. I will switch Testaments and start with the two verses from Romans:



Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Now let's go to our passage from the creation stories in Genesis, the stories that have inspired debate between those who want to defend science and those who want to defend the Bible.

The verses come after we are told how God created the world in six days by separating waters so space can be made for land where plants can grow and animals roam. Two human beings are created and given a home in a garden. Listen:

15The Lord God took [Adam] and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

I think you've noticed that we have a lot of ground to cover this morning. I am glad the Bible's story of creation is familiar to most of us because I can't tell it all.

The story tells us that in the middle of the Garden of Eden there is this fruit tree. The text doesn't say what kind, but popular imagination has it as *an apple tree*, and that is what I need it to be for my sermon. So, today, it is an apple tree.

And underneath the apple tree stand Adam and Eve. They *should not* be here.

- First, there is a *snake*.
- Second, there is a *talking* snake.
- Third, *God* told them to stay away.

I would be out of there: I wasn't born yesterday. But Adam and Eve were born yesterday so there they are.

"**Eat the apple,**" says the serpent. "**No,**" they respond. "**God told us not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil lest we die.**" That is kind of a formal response to a talking snake. The formality perhaps reflects their insincerity because it doesn't take much convincing for them to take and eat. You see, they *really* want to eat that apple. They want to eat the apple, not because it looks tasty but because they want a lasting epiphany. They want knowledge... and by knowledge, I mean *certitude*. They want to be certain about

- what is good and evil,
- what is right and wrong,
- what is acceptable and what is forbidden?

Hey, maybe they even want God's authority to decide what is right and wrong. They take and eat because they want what only God can have: *certainty*.

It's wrong what they do. They do what later people of faith and people of science keep doing; they think *they can know what can't be known*. Not till death anyway. You see, what Adam and



Eve heard as a threat (“lest you die”) might have been just God telling the truth. “*You want certainty? At death, you’ll have it.*”

We are going to say “**Goodbye**” to Adam and Eve now as they are escorted out of the garden and the locks are changed. Let’s visit another moment under an apple tree. But before we do, I want to set the stage.

The moment I am going to show you is one of the first moments of the modern era—a moment that helped jumpstart the age of science. But, we need to understand something. The science of studying the natural world, where conclusions are drawn based on the best evidence of what we see, experience and test, has always been with us. There has never been an age without science. The best science of the biblical day drew logical conclusions based on the best evidence available:

No one was awed by what inspires awe today:

- distances of light years,
- our galaxy of billions of stars being just one of billions of galaxies in the vast expanse of space.

There were no instruments to provide evidence of such things. They were awed by what they *could* see and understand:

- a flat earth that stretched beyond travel,
- a dome above that kept the water of chaos from falling down on them,
- and a sun, moon and stars that moved across the sky.

They *weren’t completely wrong*.

- You can stand on flat ground and plumb a house.
- There is some kind of force that keeps the moon from falling to earth or drifting away.
- Something is constantly moving in the sky, and some physicists are not telling us that the universe is ever expanding.

They did not get it all right in their day, and we do not get it all right in our day either. We have to keep revising what we assume to be true as we continue to explore the mystery that is reality.

The Bible was written with what was then assumed to be true in mind.

Now I want to go to a moment under another apple tree when some Bible-Day assumptions began to be challenged in a major way.

One late summer evening in 1666, Sir Isaac Newton sat under an apple tree at Woolsthorpe Manor, his birthplace and family home. The sky was beautiful, dominated by the moon. Maybe Newton saw an apple fall (*he* later says so), maybe one hit him on the head (*others* later say so). Whatever happened, Newton had an epiphany. He knew about gravity, but it occurred to him that maybe gravity was the force that held the moon in its orbit. The epiphany of the moment led to years of developing his system of universal gravitation.



Something even greater was imagined than gravity's hold on the moon. For all of human history, most believed that the moon was placed, and kept in place, by the hand of God. Newton was envisioning an explanation without God. The later scientific revolution became a project to do the same.

It is **not** that scientists do not believe in God. Many did. (Many do.) In fact, many scientists went to church on Sunday to praise God for the incredible order and wonder of the universe that explored when they went to work on Monday. Most early leaders of the scientific revolution were believing Jews, Christians and Muslims; many of whom worked in faith-based colleges and universities that were established because of a religious devotion to train the mind so as to pursue truth.

But, the sin of Adam and Eve keeps getting repeated. People of faith and people of science are tempted to grasp for certitude. It is the desire for certitude that led

some people of science
to attack faith
and some people of faith
to attack science.

Some people of faith were threatened by having a world explained without God, and they set out to prove that everything in the Bible is literally true. Some people of science set out to prove that there is no God and the Bible is old-world superstition.

And *poor Genesis*.

- Soldiers of science set out to debunk the notions that the world is flat and was created in six days.
- Soldiers of faith thought they were defending God by defending the claim that it took six literal days.

Both were grasping for certitudes;

- one side thinking that they were proving there is no God
- and the other side thinking they were proving that there is.

Both were trying to *explain away mystery*.

Not everyone got caught up in this Either/Or game. There were those who tried to make room for both Science and Religion. Let science explain what can be explained and let religion *fill in the gaps*. Along the way, some began to call God, the "God of the Gaps." But as more and more got explained, the gaps seemed to narrow, and God seemed to shrink.

I understand that way of thinking, but I don't think that is the right way to look at it even if you want to embrace both science and religion. To explain, I have one more apple tree for you to visit.

Karl Barth was a pastor of a church¹ before he became a university professor and a famous

¹ In Safewil.



theologian. He lived within the tension of science and religion. Pastors in the modern era who do not want a fight with science—progressive pastors if you will—have a tendency to focus less on making a public witness to God and more on being relevant and helpful. The way to find common ground with people of science was to leave God in the gaps and join together in a common cause. Social action became the focus of progressive pastors in Germany. That was Barth early in his ministry.

Though Barth never stopped being involved in what he saw as good social causes—Christians have to be involved because we want to be agents of positive change, we want to be about the work of justice and reconciliation—

Barth's primary focus shifted radically back to witnessing that God is God. And this shift *began under an apple tree* where he had his own epiphany.

I know this sounds like a plot twist in a bad script, that magical things seem to keep happening under apple trees, but sometimes what actually happens in life *is cheesy*. The year was 1917. Barth was working on a commentary on the book of Romans. He sat under an apple tree trying to think through a Romans-inspired argument that God is actually at work in the world.

He embraced science, but he knew that science always would be a means of exploring but never solving the mystery of reality. So, how can he defend God, or at least make space for God, for those who want scientific proof?

Then he has his epiphany. God is beyond defending. God cannot be proven or disproven. Faith is not to know God, it is to be *known by God*.

When I try to explain this, I always talk about the experience of being loved. I will never have those who love me completely figured out. But I do know I'm loved, and that love claims me and shapes me. Faith is being known, loved and claimed by the mystery that is God. As Romans says, we are transformed by the will of God.

So, do you know what Barth did? He quit defending God and quit defending the Bible. He was not resistant to, or threatened by, scientific theories, discoveries or explanations. He rejected the idea that when it comes to science and religion, it has to be Either/Or. For him, it was Both/And because both are means of exploring mystery. But Barth was going to witness to

- the God from whom creation comes,
- the God he came to know in the Jesus of the Bible,
- the God who calls for reconciliation in the world—
for the healing of wrongs, for the confessing of sins, for the showing acts of compassion—
even though that is not why physicists study.

“God is God” was his transcendent truth, and that is what he preached and taught. Whether God is God makes sense to others was not something he could control... or had the right to control. That's where people of faith and people of science go wrong. They try to control others through their truth. We don't find faith. Faith finds us. Faith is not proof. *Faith is Epiphany!*



In a few minutes, confirmands will be asked to affirm their faith by answering some questions. I'll go ahead and affirm something of what I believe.

I'm an old philosophy major who appreciates science. But science is not my god. Like Karl Barth, I worry about how science can be used. He saw millions slaughtered by the best of what technology could offer. I accept science but my faith is in God.

Though God is a mystery beyond proof, I believe in God because I have had my own epiphanies of being known, loved and claimed by God. Intellectually, I can't prove it, I even doubt it sometimes. But my being loved and claimed by God defines me. I can't prove it, but I'm trying to live it. That is my witness.

Call to the Lord's Table

God said of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do not take and eat. If your faith is demanding certitude, you won't get it. But Jesus, on the very night he was betrayed, told his disciples how he would be betrayed but went on to talk to them about God's love. He told them, "I want you to take that love with you and love others that say." Then he said: "Take, eat, this is my body. This is who I am. Do this to remember what really matters when we know God's love."

