

## **“In the Beginning”**

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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*“In the beginning...”*

With these three words, the Judeo-Christian story of the universe unfolds.

In this story, the universe begins with an act of creation by God.

The story continues to describe the separation

of light from darkness, sky from earth,

dry land from water, and sun from stars.

Fish and birds, plants and animals, and, finally, humans, are created.

And all of it God proclaims as *good*.

But, in 7 days? And how many thousands of years ago? What about the fossils? The dinosaurs? And with these and many, many more questions, the Biblical story of Creation collided with modern science. Arguments, even court cases, have ensued ever since.

As a congregation rooted in the liberal religious tradition, we embrace the use of reason as well as modern science. In such a framework, we do not rely on ancient texts for our knowledge of the origins of the universe. We look to science, to physics and biology, chemistry and astronomy. We look to theories of the Big Bang and of evolution. We laud Charles Darwin, Galileo, and Newton rather than Adam, Abraham, or Moses.

And yet, I think we still find ourselves asking questions about what the origins of the universe tell us about who we are, what we are here for, and where we might be headed.

Origin stories are prevalent throughout cultures and religions. In our Time for All Ages, Kate Holland shared one from a West African tradition. Indeed, one of the great questions that religion has sought to answer is *where do we come from?*

Religion is not the only genre fascinated by origin stories. Origin stories permeate culture. For example, many of us know that Superman came from the planet Krypton or that Spiderman’s powers came from a spider bite. The mythic story of a superhero includes an extraordinary origin to explain the source of his or her powers. Isn’t the same thing true of Jesus—a revolutionary leader whose origin story described an extraordinary birth and an ancestral lineage tying him not only to great kings, but to God himself.

Again and again origin stories are used as foundations to explain, predict, or justify later actions, capabilities, or character traits. Why is Superman so strong? Because he comes

from another planet. Why can Spiderman climb walls and defy gravity? Because he was bit by a special spider. In such stories, origins can function as a deterministic seed from which the story unfolds.

Origin stories are incredibly powerful. Often, people look to origin stories as a key to explain the present or to guide future action. I was reminded of this dynamic this week as I followed the story of the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. In addition to more liberal news sources, I also regularly read news from various conservative sites to have a sense of perspective of wider point of views. It was this practice that led me to the blog, “The Conservative Treehouse.” In an [extended article](#), the blogger, Sundance, lays out his understanding of the “full story” behind the protest.

What I find so interesting in Sundance’s account is where he begins the “full story”. As some may know, the militia in Oregon are protesting the federal sentencing of two ranchers, the Hammonds, for arson on federal lands. While the story Sundance tells includes the recent court cases, he begins his story in the 1870’s when the land was settled by multiple ranchers. According to Sundance, these ranchers then created a “state of the art irrigation system” for the arid meadows upon which their cattle grazed. Attracted to these irrigated meadows, birds *began* stopping in the area on their migrations north.

Now this was the era of ladies with hats decorated by large, large feathers. Feathers like those found on the egrets who would stop in Oregon. Bird after bird would be killed for their feathers—decimating the migratory population by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an effort to help the flocks rebuild, in 1908 Theodore Roosevelt set aside the land surrounding Malheur Lake as a reservation for the birds and wildlife. The 20<sup>th</sup> century becomes a long story in which more land and water rights are transferred to the wildlife refuge while ranchers lost grazing and water rights. Most ranchers in the area sold their land to the Refuge. Except for the Hammonds. They stayed. They want to stay. For them, the land belongs to ranchers, not to the birds or the federal government.

Can you hear how the origin story makes a difference? In Sundance’s account, the birds originated from the actions of the ranchers. The ranchers are the original settlers (which, of course, entirely belies the American Indians who preceded the European settlers.) If the birds arrived after—or even because of—the ranchers, does this give the ranchers and their use of the land primary ownership and control? Are origins the authority? Is it, as we often learned as children, a matter of “first dibs.”

Let me give another example. Some years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel. I have to admit that I’m a big fan of National Parks here in the U.S. So when I was in

Jerusalem, I eagerly signed up for a tour of the City of David National Park. In many ways, the tour felt remarkably similar to those I've been on here. We were a group of eager tourists with cameras in hands, ready to learn and listen to our calm, confident young guide. Pointing to the ruins of walls, she painted a verbal picture of the palace the excavations were unearthing.

As we walked by a thin wall separating the excavations and a residential area, she explained with a sigh that it was a Palestinian area and, although the palace extended into the neighborhood, excavations were not allowed. Then, as the tour neared its end, we gathered in a small circle to hear her final words. To my surprise, she pulled out a small book and began to read from the Hebrew Scriptures. With eyes full of pride, she explained to us how the land of Israel had been given to the Jews millennia before and what joy it was to be standing here today in the ancient royal palace.

Origin stories matter. Who came first? The birds or the ranchers? The Palestinians or the Jews? Again and again stories lead back to origins to build a case for primacy in order to shape current politics. Very often, origins hold a kind of authority. The original is the authentic version, the correct and pure articulation.

This idea of a pure origin is certainly present in the Judeo-Christian origin story of the Garden of Eden. According to this story, all was good. . . until the young humans began to choose for themselves what was right and wrong rather than listen to God's commands. This human choice becomes the origin of a broken relationship with God. Expelled from Eden, the mythic garden lives on in the Judeo-Christian story as the original paradise from which people are always falling short, to which people are always seeking to return.

Such origin stories have power. They shape our understanding of what matters most by linking together what came first in *time* with what come first in *value*. In this sense, the beginning matters most . . . it sets that standard for all that comes after.

But does it have to be so? Must the origin of something forever determine its nature? Or, can origins be transcended? Can we evolve, change, adapt?

Indeed, don't we also love stories where a person exceeds expectations or defies destiny? Such as an orphan like Annie who seems destined to poverty and loneliness, but then finds herself adopted into a family of great wealth. Sometimes we need to escape the tyranny of origins in order to hope for something different, something better. But does moving beyond our origins mean we must sever our connections to the past? If we decide to go a different

direction than how we were raised, do we have to disavow where we came from? *Can we ever cut ourselves off from our roots, our beginnings?*

All of these questions lead us to the central question of origins: how does knowing where we come from shape who we are today?

About ten years ago, a group of scholars and scientists sat down to discuss writing a new origin story for the universe. Working together, a scientist, evolutionary philosopher, and religious studies scholar, developed a book and documentary describing the [\*Journey of the Universe\*](#). Their aim was “to use the art of storytelling to capture the grandeur and drama of this epic of the universe - from the Big Bang, to where we are today in a moment of great transition.” The story they tell is mind-boggling grand in its vastness. Within such cosmic dimensions, size and time as we experience them as humans in our lifetimes emerges as infinitesimally small.

If you’ve ever stood in a remote area beneath a sky full of stars, perhaps you’ve felt a sense of how truly small we really are in this universe. Or perhaps you’ve simply been in a large crowd of people or taken a long flight over thousands of miles and found yourself recalibrating your sense of how big our earth is and just how many people live here! Faced with such daunting numbers of size and time, we may wonder where we fit in such a universe. What difference might our one life make within such an infinite expanse?

In the story told in *The Journey of the Universe*, there has also been interactive change. The cosmos is not now, nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be “done.” Ever since what the authors describe as the *flaring forth* of energy at the beginning of the cosmos, there have been ongoing processes of interacting streams of energy and then organisms. As humans, we are so very, very, very much the newcomers to the scene.

Yet, in placing human life within the context of the larger story, they ascribe a unique role to our lives by suggesting that we are the Universe becoming conscious of itself. As humans, we can reflect upon the *wonder* of life. We can be amazed and heartbroken and simply awestruck by the universe, by the sheer improbability of life, by our place within the vastness. And yet, aware as we are of our relative insignificance in such an old and vast universe, Swimme and Tucker suggest that “we are, even so, beings in whom the universe shivers in wonder at itself.”

As reflective beings, we are able to *wonder* at the story of the universe. As children of the stars, we *are* the story of the universe. We are a part of the still-unfolding process of life moving through processes of attraction and repulsion, creation and death.

What I find most compelling about *Journey of the Universe* as a story for spiritual insight is that our origins lie in an ongoing process of change. As the authors write,

“When we today remember that the energy of our lives comes from the original flaring forth of the universe, and that the atoms of our bodies come from the explosion of ancient stars, and that the patterns of our lives come from many ancestors over billions of years, we begin to appreciate the intricate manner in which life remembers the past and brings it into fresh form today. Life adapts. Life remembers. Life learns.” (60-61)

In this telling, we are both forever linked to our beginnings *and* we are always adapting and learning. Who we are *today* is tied to our origins, but the story of our origins is one of an expanding, growing, learning, adapting, changing universe. If we look to this origin story for who we are, then we learn at least two things. We learn that we are very much a part of an interconnected web of all existence extended back through incomprehensible time to the initial flaring forth of the universe. And, we learn that the only model of life at the beginning is one of learning and adapting.

In this story of the universe, our origins do not give us a definitive model for how we are to live our lives today. And yet, like the process of creation described in so many ancient origin stories, the goal is the arrival and flourishing of life. According to modern scientific theory, our origins do lie in this impulse to life, to creativity, to remembering, to adapting, and to learning so that life in multiple forms might continue to flourish.

May we embrace this story—the story of the universe, the story of each of us—with wonder! May we remember where we have come from, what we have learned, *and* may we trust in our ability to continue to adapt, to learn, and to help life flourish in our own lives, in the lives of our children, and in the impact we have upon the world around us.

So may it be. Amen.