

*Corresponding with Darwin (Ps. 104.24-30)*  
Jeremy Rutledge, Circular Congregational Church  
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I'd like you to imagine something with me for a moment. Feel free to make yourself comfortable. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes if you like. And imagine the scene that I am about to describe. Imagine that you are getting off a train in the English countryside. You step from the car onto the platform and look at the small station, consisting only of a tea room and a large painted sign. "Great Malvern" it reads, though it doesn't look like much. Spying the exit gate, you walk through the turnstile and out into a small commuter car park. Not knowing exactly where to go, you look around. There is only one road; at the edge of it, a sign with an arrow points to the "Town Centre." You follow the arrow and begin to walk the lane as its plane inverts into a steady climb. It is a lovely day in the West Midlands, and as you walk you listen to the song of goldcrests, warblers, and linnets in the branches above you. You notice ground ivy and yellow corydalis climbing up the stone walls beside the road. Dappled sunlight splashes the asphalt and a slight breeze brushes against your skin.

You continue walking and the town comes into view. More old stone buildings and tea shops appear, along with assorted weekend shoppers and families out for a walk. You don't stop to look in the windows or find a souvenir, however. Because you're on the way to someplace. In fact, you can see it from here as it's impossible to miss. The spires of the Malvern priory church jut skyward over the features of the small village. The oldest part of this church was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, and, though many additions have been made to the structure, none of them have been

recent. The stone has long since turned the color of an earthen rust and sits nicely against the backdrop of the Malvern Hills. The hills rise abruptly just past the churchyard; a thousand feet or more of pre-Cambrian rock, rounded by the ages and covered in green and yellow grasses now crisscrossed with hiking paths. You stop at the edge of the churchyard. Behind you lay the fields of Worcestershire; in front of you the great hills. You turn back toward the church building itself and notice that amidst all of this beauty – the birdsong, greenery, sunlight, and soft breeze – there is an old graveyard here. Stone markers lean and some have fallen to decorate the earth with carved reminders of our mortality. You stand for a moment longer, contemplating the fecundity of life around you and the certainty of death in front of you and hold the two thoughts in tension.

I have invited us to this Malvern churchyard for a reason. The reason is particular to this Sunday, which we call Evolution Sunday, because the place we are imaginatively standing is one of the most important places in the story of Charles Darwin. To be sure, as we gather for Evolution Sunday, we do not come to think only of a single person. The broad intent of this day is to celebrate the rich dialogue between religion and science and claim them as partners in the existential search for truth and meaning. As we do so, we should be pleased to note that this weekend we are joined by nearly 600 congregations in 13 countries who gather to affirm both religion and science.<sup>1</sup> We say this morning that as religious people we learn from the sacred stories of our tradition and we apply the lessons of faith in terms of spiritual practice and ethical living. Yet we also say that we are deeply grateful for

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/rel\\_evolution\\_weekend\\_2013.html](http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/rel_evolution_weekend_2013.html).

the truths that science has brought to bear on the knowledge of who we are, including the profound truth that we are kin to all life on Earth, descended from a common ancestor through the unfolding of an evolutionary process that connects us farther up and deeper down than any of us can imagine. Science has added to our religious vocabularies new expressions of reverence, wonder, and awe that constitute a 21<sup>st</sup> Century language of praise. But as we affirm the relationship between religion and science in the broadest sense, we might return once again to that narrower story in the person of Charles Darwin. For there was an event in his life that cuts to the quick of our search. It was an event that shook him to the core, something that seems to have catalyzed his understanding of the world as a place of both ineffable beauty and unspeakable suffering. It happened in Malvern. If you walk around the churchyard, you can find it marked in stone.

Somewhere among the crooked grave markers, lies the name of Charles Darwin's beloved daughter, Annie. Annie died in 1851 at the age of ten, most likely of tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup> After Annie fell ill, Charles took her to a special doctor in Malvern. There Darwin tended his daughter during her last days, documenting every slight change in her condition in the custom of a practiced naturalist.<sup>3</sup> He wrote frequently to his wife, Emma, during that time. Emma was home eight months pregnant with another child. The letters Darwin sent her, delivered by overnight post, contained not only the pertinent medical information, but also an increasing

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<sup>2</sup> David Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 113-117.

<sup>3</sup> George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 161-162.

emphasis on the deep, personal anguish he felt as he watched his daughter's illness progress and was powerless to stop it. According to his biographers, Darwin would faithfully attend to Annie hour after hour, excusing himself afterwards to pen a letter home. As he wrote, he stopped frequently to weep.

I offer the image of Charles Darwin weeping because it shows the very human side of the iconic scientist. In many ways, he struggled as we all do to make sense of his experience. And this man, who wrote as beautifully as anyone about the extraordinary diversity and complexity of life, also felt the shadow of great suffering as it fell on his shoulders; the earnest indifference of natural law as it affects every mortal one of us. He struggled to make sense of how the world could be so beautiful and terrible at the same time, but in many ways he could not make sense of it. And while Darwin has been portrayed by his detractors as a Godless atheist and his admirers as a champion of clear-headed science, I don't read him as either of those things. Darwin was rather a man who moved through various theological and philosophical stages like so many of us have done, like so many of us are doing. We might do well to remember that as a young man he set out on the H. M. S. Beagle with the intention of returning home to become an Anglican cleric. His developing naturalism actually grew out of a romantic sensibility. In fact, there are places in his early writing where you think for a moment you're reading Wordsworth or Coleridge. Darwin emerged as a scientist only after discovering his love of the world through a knack for keen observation and disciplined and methodical study. (Just think: here is a man who spent the better part of eight years quietly dissecting barnacles at his desk!) Somewhere along the way, Darwin laid down his early

concept of God as a deity that intervened in natural processes through the exercise of supernatural powers. Well, this didn't really just happen somewhere along the way; it happened in Malvern as he sat beside Annie's bed.

When Darwin finally wrote to his wife of their daughter's death, he invoked the name of God three times.<sup>4</sup> "God bless her," he scratched onto a page, his vision no doubt blurred by tears. This language would have been a comfort to Emma Darwin, who was an orthodox Christian, but it is not clear what the words might have meant to Charles; it is perhaps more clear what they didn't mean. What Charles let go of there at Malvern was the concept of a god that could have intervened in the natural process in order to save his daughter but chose not to do so. Such a god, by Darwin's reckoning, could only be a cruel or a careless god. What Darwin rejected so vehemently afterwards, was any attempt to be consoled by those who would assure him that his daughter's suffering and death was a part of some divine purpose; that it was all somehow for the best. No, Darwin would not accept such ideas as these. In place of an omnipotent deity that could have saved his daughter and didn't, Darwin put the only thing that was true to his own experience: the genuine ambiguity that life is both incredibly beautiful and immensely painful. Darwin decided that he would rather live with this natural ambiguity than the much darker certainty of a supernatural agent that might be indifferent to a dying child and her parents. Such a god was too grim for Darwin, and at this point I place myself right alongside him. I do not believe in a god that could have helped his daughter and didn't. Progressive theologians do not believe in such a god. You need

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<sup>4</sup> Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin*, 116.

not believe in such a god. And you don't have to be a scientist or a philosopher to reach the conclusion; just a sufferer, just a member of the species.

Now to say that we do not believe in a god that could supernaturally intervene to save the innocent yet chooses not to do so is not to say that we do not believe in any God at all or that there aren't deep and resounding sources of truth and meaning for us. Indeed, theologians have struggled for centuries with ways of understanding the divine in the context of our ambiguous experience. A part of our work as a progressive church is to be constructive and to search for what we can say in good faith. But the first step may be naming that some ideas are simply too cruel to believe, and we need not try and make sense where there is no sense. For one of the deepest practices of both religion and science is to say that there are many things we do not understand there is much that we do not know. Darwin himself might have been more comfortable on this terrain. As he wrote, he never thought of himself as a proper atheist and argued strongly against the use of that term saying that it implied a certainty that he did not possess. What he was certain of was the both/and of lived experience. He wanted to name both the beauty and the pain without glossing over either one or attempting to casually explain them away.

Philosopher Chet Raymo writes of him:

Darwin unveiled as much of nature's hidden mystery as any person before or after. And having seen as deeply as anyone into the secrets that nature is wont to hide, he knew that ultimate knowledge exceeded his grasp. There was no gnosis, no revelation, no church or holy book, that could take him to a place where Annie's death might be ameliorated. But even in his grievous bereavement, he continued to see "the face of nature bright with gladness."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chet Raymo, *When God is Gone, Everything is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2008), 34-35.

As a minister, it seems to me that humans have always struggled with the truth that our experience is both/and. On a weekly basis, I sit with people whose questions correspond to Darwin's; we search for pathways ahead and ways to live meaningfully and well in the face of real ambiguity. For our world is both beautiful and terrible, our lives are both bitter and sweet, our stories are both enchanting and also occasionally disillusioning at the same time. This is a world where flowers bloom brightly in one season and die in the next, their elements returning to the Earth just as ours will one day. Yet it is all of a piece. The psalmist knew as much. We heard it in this morning's reading made of ancient Hebrew wisdom expressing the search in pre-scientific poetry. "How many are the things you have made," the psalmist sings, "the earth is full...the sea, vast and wide...its creatures beyond number."<sup>6</sup> Yet when their breath is taken away, "they perish and turn again into dust" before life on the whole is renewed once again.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the lines envision a supernatural deity of the sort Darwin left behind. But perhaps what the Hebrew poet shares with the English naturalist is the sense of balance; the idea that our lives and deaths are simply two sides of the same story, a story that is about much more than ourselves alone. Not everything about this story will be easy for us and not all of its sufferings need to be smoothed. On some level, I think, there is no consolation to be offered at the grave of Annie Darwin. But what is also true is that in spite of the tears that will not easily wipe away, the world we have remains a place that inspires our deepest feelings of reverence, wonder, and awe. Perhaps the common

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<sup>6</sup> Ps. 104.24-25, TANAKH translation.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 104.29.

ground we find is that of a growing understanding, wrought of science and religion, that what is sacred is life itself and our shared work of protecting and preserving it.

I invite us to close by imagining again that churchyard in Malvern. See yourself standing at the foot of the hill looking out over the stones. The sun has fallen low in the sky and night is fast approaching. There is a bite in the air. You take a final look at the graveyard before taking a deep breath and setting out for the train station. You follow the winding road past the shops and down the hill. You consider, as you walk, how all of our stories correspond. For who among us hasn't been bowled over by the beauty and wonder of our natural home? Who among us has not wept for someone we love and could not save? Who among us has not asked what kind of world this is – beautiful or terrible or both – and what our place is in it? Who among us has not held these questions close and followed the uncertain way they open? For it is the questions, I think, where religion and science are really met. And it is from this meeting that we begin to walk down the lanes of our lives and make our first utterances of an answer.

May we answer this day by learning all we can about our natural world and working to protect and preserve it. May we answer this day by remembering those who suffer and reaching out to them in compassion. May we answer this day by saying that what we hold sacred is life itself.

In gratitude for our fellow searcher Charles Darwin. Amen.