

Clap Your Hands, Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E6090215
Genesis 1:1-8, 31a Psalm 8
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 15 February, 2009

The next time you are outdoors and see a daffodil blooming, clap your hands. Thank God for the gifts of creation! Join creation in singing God's praises. Psalm Forty-Seven says, "Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth."¹

The psalmist and Isaiah speak of floods and trees clapping their hands. "Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."² Everything praises God and, we should also, in all we do and say.

When I see the wonders of creation, I praise God all the more. I watch squirrels out my back window and am amazed at their ability to move about, find food, and dig holes for its storage. I watch a wren wrestle with sticks and then fly with them to weave a nest for its young. I stand at the top of Blowing Rock and look out over the vast scene with Grandfather Mountain in the distance and the John's River valley far below. I look through a microscope and see paramecia scuttle about, propelled by their cilia.

I clap my hands for God's creation. I am amazed that God has created living things with the ability to change and adapt. All of the finches in the Galapagos Islands are descended from a single ancestral species.³ Charles Darwin noticed that the finches had developed different beaks, some broad and deep, some elongated, and others short. This allowed them to adapt to various diets and atmospheric conditions. Scientists, following Darwin's reasoning, have discovered that God has created a gene for the protein BMP4 that is responsible for the variations in beaks of finches in the Galapagos and in the diets of fish in Lake Victoria, Africa, half way around the world.⁴

Thursday was the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Darwin published a theory of evolution in his book, *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859. For this, he has been maligned by clergy of various branches of the church. This was not the first time the church would, in its stodginess, obstruct the discoveries of science, nor would it be the last. If you believe in evolution, you are part of a forty percent minority in America.⁵ Polls taken over the past decade have consistently found that between forty-four and forty-seven percent of Americans believe God created humans in their present form within the last ten thousand years. I regret to say that that is the result of ignorance taught in too many churches.

It is unfortunate that Darwin has been maligned. Darwin was himself educated to be a clergyman at Cambridge in England.⁶ He was an ardent abolitionist, a position that became more earnest after he saw the way an old lady near Rio de Janeiro crushed the fingers of her female slaves with screws.⁷ He was a kind father and husband,⁸ who questioned God, as many of us would do, after his eleven year old daughter died in 1851.⁹

Darwin was not the first to think thoughts about evolution. His grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, grasped that there was something wrong with the conventional notion of a fixed species.¹⁰ Darwin's life

¹Psalm 47:1-2

²Psalm 98:8-9

³Matt Ridley, "Modern Darwins", *National Geographic* February 2009, page58

⁴Ibid.

⁵"US Scientists Defend Darwin From Attacks on Evolution," *Agence France Presse* February 13

⁶David Quammen, "Darwin's First Clues", *National Geographic* February, 2009, p. 44

⁷Olivia Judson, "The Origin of Darwin" in *The New York Times* February 12, 2009

⁸Ibid.

⁹Becky Garrison, "Happy Birthday Darwin!" in *The New York Times* February 12, 2009

¹⁰Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Darwin at 200: The Ongoing Force of His Unconventional Idea", *New York Times* February, 12, 2009

changed and humanity took a huge evolutionary leap when he signed on to be the naturalist on His Majesty's Ship *Beagle* in 1831. He had an intense curiosity and was a patient observer of God's creation. He gathered evidence and tested theories.

Darwin's theory of evolution made many people furious because it contradicted what they had been taught was a Biblical view of fixed species as outlined in Genesis Chapter One. The description of God's creation had hardened into a doctrine. As is so often the case, church leaders, those who hold the power, defended their human-made doctrine to the death. They turned a creative dynamic word into a stone-hardened law, the kind of thing that Jesus railed against.

Why do humans have to get so literalistic as to crush the very process of God's creative word? Do we believe that floods and trees actually have hands with which to clap? No! That is a metaphor. It's not literally true. Genesis 1:6 quotes God as saying, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." Did God create a dome? Did God literally separate waters above and waters below so that humans could live in the void between? No.

The early Hebrews were observers also. They knew water came down from the skies. They thought there must be a huge reservoir up there. They knew that if they dug deep enough, they'd find water underground. There must be a reservoir down there. It must be the same reservoir. Did God create a "dome"? A "firmament"? The Hebrew word that we translate "dome" meant a hammered metal plate. Did God literally create a hammered metal plate? No. Rain is produced by condensation. We know that now. The early Hebrews didn't know that. Humans evolve.

To fix God at literally creating every living thing at the very outset means that God had to create a mastodon with a certain life expectancy and then kill off the whole species or, God had to create mastodon skeletons and plant them for humans to find later on. Would God be that inefficient? I don't think so.

Of course we humans evolve. Otherwise, we would still be desiring to kill the Hittites and Peruzites, and the North Koreans and the Taliban as if that were what God really wanted. But that's not what God really wants. We know that now, because we have grown. We have evolved. Jesus has shown us what God really wants.

There are two ways to go here. We can believe that God created everything fixed at the outset and nothing has changed, or that God has created a dynamic, growing, and evolving universe with DNA and genes, and quarks and education. Here is the real problem for the literalists. They believe that God created everything fixed at the outset. It was perfect. It was an Eden. The church, since its early days, has taught the doctrine of the Fall of Man. Jesus did not teach that. His early followers did. Their teachings said that humans messed up creation and had to be punished. Then, they could be redeemed.

In the fourth century, Augustine got the church believing in substitutionary atonement. Jesus absorbed on the cross the punishment that we deserved. This makes Jesus the victim of a God who is not able to forgive the wayward human race unless provided with a human sacrifice and a blood offering. It is a gory and bankrupt theology, yet hymns and liturgies continually reenforce it.

The problem for the literalists is that all of those doctrines fall like a house of cards if God did not create everything fixed at the outset. Charles Darwin dealt this mentality a death blow by redefining our origins. He showed that everything wasn't perfect at the creation, but that it is dynamic and evolving.

Humans have not yet evolved into full humanity. Jesus is my savior, not because he died for my sins, but because he shows me what full humanity is like. He has demonstrated what it means to be created in the image of God. None of us has fallen from perfection since we never had it. All of us are rather evolving into something we have never been. God is still speaking. God's creation continues today. Humans can get better. We can more perfectly reflect God's nature of loving compassion. That gives us hope.

Be curious and be grateful. Use the brains God gave you to wonder and discover. Clap your hands in praise of God's amazing and continuing creation.