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**Exodus 20:11, ESV.**

*<sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

**The Unnecessary Contortions of the Literalist Believer.**

Exodus 20:11 references the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis for a specific reason. Here is the context. The Israelites have made their way to Mount Sinai after wandering in the desert, what the Bible calls the “wilderness”, for a few months. Moses, acting as a prophet, has come down from the mountain to speak for God. Moses begins his very long speech where God lays out the laws that the Israelites must follow. The first thing that Moses tells them are the ten great commandments. Then he moves into what we call the Book of the Covenant, all the extra moral, ethical and ritualistic laws that they must obey. This goes through Chapter 23 of Exodus. Early in Chapter 20, we see that one of the ten commandments is that they must honor the Sabbath. To emphasize the importance of keeping the Sabbath, God equates it to the creation of the world. The Sabbath is as fundamental to their world as the creation of the world itself:

*<sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

This is a very powerful statement. It clearly says that honoring the Sabbath, something we Christians do on Sundays by coming to church, is a result of God having created the world in six days. This gives us an idea of why so many Christians today are so concerned with taking the Bible literally. It would seem that if the universe was not created in six days, then we don't have to come to church. In general, the creation story is a cornerstone of the Jewish and Christian faiths. That is why our Bible begins with it, and why Genesis is referenced about 100 times in the New Testament. Everything depends on it. But yet, of all the Old Testament stories, to us as modern people, the creation story is perhaps the hardest to take literally. It has to do with what modern science has taught us.

Right now, our current estimate of the age of the universe is about 14 billion years. That number is so big that we can't truly grasp it. But even if we only look at the Earth, paleontologists tell us that the fossilized dinosaur bones we have dug up date to 250 to 50 million years ago, approximately. All of us have enough sense of how rivers and canyons are formed – and how long this takes - to accept the estimate that the Grand Canyon was formed incrementally from 70 million years ago to 5 million years ago. You're going to have a hard time as a

geology, paleontology, physics, or biology major in college if you insist that the universe came into existence in six days. We know that the true creation story is very complex. It is believed that there was a “Big Bang” about 14 billion years ago, and that the universe is still expanding. Further, the surface of the earth and the life upon it have been evolving for about 5 billion years. Life on Earth is still in the active process of evolving. In truth, there was no single, focused “creation”, and the process of creation certainly didn’t run itself out in six days.

But there are Christians, many of them, who do cling to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and to challenge this is to challenge their faith. Here are a just a couple of the contorted arguments that biblical literalists use to counter the scientific knowledge that argues against the six-day creation story. One is that we have no business thinking that we can grasp the passage of time or even the notion of time. God is the owner of time. Only God can perceive the true passage of time. Another argument is that God can change anything at any time. Our techniques of using carbon-14 to date ancient artifacts are based on the assumption that the Earth is controlled by the same set of conditions as existed millions of years ago. Maybe God has changed the way nature works, making us think that the remnants of ancient life we find are millions of years old, when in fact, they are only a few thousand years old. Another argument, perhaps

the most intriguing one, is based on passages from Matthew and Mark. Here is Mark, 4:10-12. Verse 12, the last one, references Isaiah 6:9-10, giving the passage the extra weight of the Old Testament and the great Prophet Isaiah.

*<sup>10</sup> And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, <sup>12</sup> so that*

*" 'they may indeed see but not perceive,  
and may indeed hear but not understand,  
lest they should turn and be forgiven.' "*

This is interpreted as meaning that Jesus taught in parables so that only believers would understand his teachings, and enemies of the faith would simply be confused or not comprehend what was truly being said. This is in turn used to argue that anyone who questions Scripture isn't a true believer and is therefore not able to fully understand and accept the literal truth of the Bible.

Let's step aside for a moment. I'm not simply trying to argue that much of the Bible should not be taken literally. This is of course, true, especially when it comes to the Creation Story of the Bible, which by the way, looks very much like creation stories that were penned by polytheistic societies that existed well before Genesis was written. It's also true for the story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is in truth about us learning to lean on God to learn about right and wrong. It's also true for the Great Flood

story, which is about God taking a stand against evil and yet being merciful with humanity, and with the many of the visions of the Prophets, like Ezekiel's story of a valley of dry bones developing flesh and coming alive again, which is about God's willingness to renew us after we have come back to him. We know, of course, that there is a lot of poetical, allegorical, metaphorical, and in general, symbolic language in the Bible. My point is something different. Faith is not magic. Viewing the Bible as a book of literal facts trivializes the depth of the Bible and the value of faith. If our faith becomes all about believing things that our common sense tells us is not true, our faith becomes hollow and unreal, like we're playing some sort of fantasy video game. Faith is about believing God's promises, putting our trust in God, developing a relationship with God, and very importantly, living a life where we act on the moral truths taught in the Bible.

What made me think of giving this message was that recently I realized that many people have told me over the years that they were turned off to Christianity when they realized that much of what they were taught as facts in the Bible were in truth myths. That's a common word you hear when people criticize our faith: myths. There are many people who cannot permanently hold onto a child's level of sophistication when it comes to studying the Bible. We need to teach a deeper understanding of the Bible if we want people to be able to grow with their faith, if

we want to fend off rebellion from young believers. It's not one or two people who have told me that they were taught that myths were history. I mean dozens.

Here's one example. I was doing a funeral once, for a middle-aged man who had died in a car versus bike collision. He had been wearing a helmet, but when the car struck him, he was vaulted over his handlebars, apparently landed on his head or hit the vehicle with his head, and broke his neck. In truth, he died instantly, but he was given aggressive chest compressions by a bystander, then he was given compressions again at the emergency room where he was taken, and they got his heartbeat back. He stayed alive, at least in a scientific sense, on a ventilator for a few days. This is often done to give the family time to gather and to make the affirmative decision to withdraw support and let the person pass away. It was after the funeral, after various family members had spoken on the dead man's deep faith, that his daughter approached me. She introduced herself then asked me if I really believed all the stuff in the Bible. I said yes. She pulled out a Bible, which turned out to be her late father's, and read from Matthew 17:

*<sup>14</sup> And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, <sup>15</sup> said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to*

*Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>20</sup> He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."*

She asked me if my faith could heal someone who suffered from grand mal seizures. I said no. Could my faith chase demons away, and for that matter, did I believe in demons causing seizures? I said no and no. Well, then, she asked, what did I think of the statement that is attributed to Jesus where he says:

*"For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."*

Could my faith move mountains? What could I do with my faith that would in any reasonable sense warrant this statement? She said that her father had survived a major infection and extensive gut surgery. He was always very active, and during his recuperation, which took months, he had been very frustrated at not being able to stay in shape. He was ecstatic when he was finally able to get back out on his bike and ride again. And what happened? He got killed. He was a real believer, she told me - and raised her in the church. But did his faith even keep him alive? No. What good did it do him to believe in God so much, to spend so much time reading the Bible and going to church? I asked her to tell me about her father. What was he like? What was so beautiful about having him as a dad?

She proceeded to tell me about how kind and empathetic he was. When she was in elementary school, the teenage boy next door got arrested for starting a dumpster fire. Her father spoke to the cops, telling them about how tough it was for this boy at home, how his father was abusive to both him and his mother. Her dad was instrumental in getting charges dropped. She said that her father was driving to work one day, and a young couple ran a stop sign and slammed into his car. It turned out the woman was in labor. Their car would no longer drive, but his was drivable, so he put them in his car and took them to the hospital. She told me another half dozen stories like this. I said your father was a clearly a big believer in Jesus' two great commandments. He not only loved God: he loved his neighbor as himself. I said, don't you realize that your father moved mountains during his life? I said that just as Jesus stated, nothing was impossible for her father. Nothing, at least, within reason that was under his control. I said that people in our culture don't do good things they have the power to do. We tend to be selfish, to focus on ourselves, and certainly not be concerned with people we don't know very well. It's impossible for us to break out of that and truly live the way Christ taught. But with faith, we can indeed move mountains.

I'm not going to claim that I made a lot of ground with this young woman. But I do firmly believe that this is what we should be focusing on: the Bible is a



vast, colorful, multi-faceted, and very complex book that tells us about the things we'll be able to do on this planet, with the skills God gave us. A word that we often use in Christianity is "righteous". In his letter to the faithful in Rome, Paul wrote this, in Chapter 1:

*<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

Paul is saying, using ironic language, that he is overjoyed to live by the Gospel because it has saved him. He says that the righteous shall live by faith. The word righteous is the Greek word "*dikaios*". It means righteous, but also correct, just, upright, or innocent. That's what we are when our lives are truly driven by our faith. We are, at least as much as we can be as imperfect beings, innocent. Isn't that we want? Remember that Jesus said this in Matthew 18:

*"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

Children are the only ones who are fully innocent. Our goal as adults is to be as incorruptible as possible. When we go out of our way to help someone for no personal gain for ourselves, when we won't earn any points at work, or earn any money, we are in a sense, acting with the innocence of children. We're just

instinctively doing the right thing. This is why we need to be careful about teaching the Bible as a literal document. At some point, the fragile crystal surrounding literal faith is broken. The emergence of science was indeed a threat to faith, but only to shallow, literal faith. We need to read the Bible as a document that was never meant to be a blow by blow, totally literal book. That's not what the authors were trying to do. Our age of literal belief began in the 1800s, almost two millennia after Jesus walked the Earth. Ironically, it was in large part a response to the rise of science and reason. Theologians and clergy saw this as a threat, and so they dug in their heels and quit acknowledging that much of the Bible is symbolic. We shot ourselves in the foot when we did this. We should have simply embraced the modern world and argued that the Bible was never meant as some sort of scientific or historically accurate book.

That's why I want to do a Bible studies series with the folks in this congregation. We need to shake off the unnecessary contortions of the literalist believer who tries to argue that the world was made in six days because his faith depends on it. We know that the creation story isn't a history of how God created the universe in six days: it's a lesson about God's creativity, power, and desire to give us a home. I want us to look at the Bible thoughtfully, but to of course keep in mind that the reason we read it is so that we can move mountains.