

Sermon: Origin Story  
Text: Genesis 1 (selected verses)  
Date: September 10, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
Launch of CE year  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*In the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth.*

### Genesis 1:1

Remember Hurricane Harvey? It seems like such a long time ago now, when the first Category Four hurricane of the season slammed into Texas and left Houston and many other towns and cities in SE TX buried under a six-foot deep blanket of flood water.

If you can remember that far back -- it feels like months ago now, but in reality, Harvey made landfall just over two weeks ago -- then you may also remember that Joel Osteen, pastor of Houston's famous Lakewood Church, took a pretty hard pounding in the days after the hurricane hit.

I'm not a fan of the kind of large-scale public shamings that Mr. Osteen experienced, but it's also true that it was largely one of his own making. His biggest problem was refusing to open his huge mega-church as an emergency shelter for the victims, or as a command post for the relief efforts.

This was surprising to most neutral observers because of the sheer size of the Lakewood Church. It boasts 45,000 members and meets in the former home the Houston Rockets of the NBA. All those people, and all that space, could have made a difference to people trapped in their homes and on their roofs.

But even before that story broke open, Mr. Osteen drew unwelcome attention to himself. Just as a historically powerful hurricane was about to slam into America's fourth largest city, he sent out the following message to his 6.3 million followers on Twitter: *God's got this.*

The trouble with a statement like that is that you don't have to be either a meteorologist or a theologian to prove that it is not true.

You simply have to get out of bed in your upstairs bedroom, walk down stairs and keep walking until you're standing in five or six feet of floodwater in the middle of your living room, with no way to escape and nowhere near enough food and water to wait out the crisis.

To the tens of thousands of Houstonians who found themselves in that precise situation it was obvious that God didn't have Hurricane Harvey under control. Quite the opposite, Harvey had them solidly in its grip.

Osteen's comment wasn't just tone-deaf, it was absurd. Worse still, statements like that, from famous public faith-leaders like him, can serve to cast Christianity into a dubious light.

Which is why those of us who do identify as people of faith, Christian faith in particular, are taking a bit of a pounding ourselves these days.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Most of you know that I have an abiding interest in the nexus between faith and science.

I have mentioned before that Stephen J. Gould, the great Harvard paleontologist and evolutionary biologist, once claimed that science and religion are two different ways of being curious. I believe this to be true.

Which is why I love exploring the points of connection between science and faith - and believe it or not, there are some.

I'm fascinated by the different stories these two great streams of human thought tell about the origins of the universe, and the origins of humanity, from their different perspectives.

So I'm always on the lookout for books and articles that address this topic.

Knowing that I was going to preach on the Creation Story today, I grew very excited a few weeks ago when I spotted a book at Barnes and Noble called *The Greatest Story Ever Told -- So Far*.

It's by Lawrence Krauss, a theoretical physicist at Arizona State University. Obviously the title of the book is a riff on the famous title of George Steven's classic movie, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, about the life of Jesus.

But Krauss's book was not religious. It was instead his account, written from a scientific perspective, of the origin of the universe and of the nature of reality at the most fundamental level.

All of that is in itself fascinating material -- even if most of the content is above both my paygrade and my IQ level.

Still, I grew even more excited to read the book when I opened the index and saw that it was organized into three main sections: Genesis, Exodus, Revelation.

I also noticed that the chapters each had an individual superscript taken from scripture itself: *Let there be light, and there was light*, it said above chapter 2. *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*, above chapter 13.

It was a bit of eureka moment for me. I thought Prof. Krauss's work might be the absolute apogee of my ongoing effort to integrate the two great stories of creation: the scientific and empirical, on the one hand, and the biblical and theological on the other.

But then I started to read the book and quickly realized that Krauss had pulled a bit of a bait and switch.

At least that's what it felt like to me. He had expropriated this religious language not to celebrate the connections between faith and science but to highlight what he felt was the inherent absurdity, and profound inferiority, of the religious world view.

Like a growing number of hard core secular thinkers, Prof. Krauss believes religion to be the last refuge for the superstitious and the dim-witted.

The sad truth is, he's got some reason to believe this.

What he sees when he looks out at the religious landscape in America is a church largely comprised not just of Evangelicals, and certainly not of, say, Mainline Presbyterians or Methodists, but of fundamentalists.

That is, he sees believers who fight against science. He sees and hears TV and radio preachers who deny science, or view it with suspicion, as though discovering the laws of thermodynamics, or a cure for cancer, or the physics of a hurricane, is part of a liberal conspiracy to undermine American values.

And so you can't blame Lawrence Krauss for being dismissive of the faith, as he sees it.

Pitting Genesis as a scientific account of the world against the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton or Galileo or Charles Darwin or Albert Einstein, as some Christians do, is like pitting a pea shooter against an intercontinental ballistic missile. It makes them look small and ridiculous.

What Lawrence Krauss does not see is us, or other Christians like us. What he fails to recognize is that there are churches all across this country whose pews are filled with people who love and treasure the book of Genesis, but who also celebrate the wonders and achievements of science. Who are grateful for its life-changing innovations. Who thank God for its brilliant discoveries.

With a device I'm currently holding in my pocket, I can call up and track the progress of a hurricane. Science made that possible. And I can track it because of satellite imagery. Science made that possible.

I know at least five people who have recovered from serious cancer. It's likely that ten, or even or five years ago, some of these people would no longer be with us, despite our fervent prayers. Today they're living full, rich, robust lives. Science made that possible.

We happily admit and celebrate all of that. So it's really not at all fair to lump all Christian people together in the way Krauss does.

But this trend is so common nowadays that I've grown used to it. I don't like it but finding a way to speak to it, and deal with it, is just part of being a credible faith community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And it's especially important for us to do this, as a church that sits on a college campus.

But the big surprise of the summer for me was that this trend appears to have expanded. It's no longer just secular thinkers who are asking challenging questions about our faith.

George Yancy is a professor of ethics at Emory University. You may remember his name from a sermon preached earlier this summer. As I noted then, he had just written a column in the NY Times that began with this attention-getting opening line:

Is your God dead? [Not] the God of the philosophers or the scholars, but . . . the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob” (NY Times, June 19, 2017).

What made the question so striking is that Yancy describes himself as a Christian. . . . “a failed and broken Christian,” as he put it, “but a Christian nevertheless.”

His was not a traditional scientific argument, based on the cosmic evidence. Instead he pointed to the human side: as he put it, to a lack of “religious and theological outrage against national and global poverty, white racism and supremacism, sexism, classism, homophobia, bullying, building walls, “alternative facts,” visa/immigration bans and xenophobia”. . .

His point was that all these tendencies that run counter to the core biblical values of hospitality and neighborly love, a love that welcomes the stranger because we were all once strangers at some point in our lives. And so he wondered if that God is no longer a factor in American life.

It was a hard article to read but I’m grateful to Prof. Yancy for raising this question. It caused me to think about what it means to practice my faith, and our faith together, in times like these, and how important it is that we bear witness to this faith, a faith that does believe in and practice these values, to the wider community.

But we also have him to thank for what we’re about to do over the next three Sundays. Having finished up our summer sermon series last week, I want to introduce a new series this week for the coming fall season.

I want to revisit the question of who, exactly, is this God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And that story, begins with the text we read earlier, chapter one of Genesis. Yes, this is the Bible’s own origin story: the origin of the cosmos, and the origin of humanity. But I realized this week that it’s also more than that. It’s also the origin story for us, as people of faith.

Hear these words again: *Then God said, let there be light, and there was light. And God said, let us make humankind in our image, so God created human kind in God's own image.*

Clearly that is not a scientific explanation of how the cosmos or humanity came to be. It's a statement of faith. Genesis didn't give birth to the universe. But it did give birth to us. And, yes, science has its own version of this story, but ultimately, we believe that God is behind it all, the creator of everything that is.

In in the absence of definitive proof, that does takes faith. It takes the ability, and the willingness, to look beyond empirical evidence and see a deeper truth.

And contrary to people like Lawrence Krauss, my contention is that this faith, deep biblical faith, is more important today than it has ever been.

At this very moment, a huge percentage of the American west is on fire. Mexico was just shaken by the most powerful earthquake to hit the country in decades. Much of Texas is still buried under a blanket of mud, left behind by the receding flood waters.

And now, Irma. All of these things together--fires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes--prompted even the venerable and highly secular New York Times to run a story just this week that said you could be forgiven for harboring fears of the apocalypse (*Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Natures Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven*, NYT, September 8, 2017).

The world itself is taking a pounding. Mind you, it's not the first time this has happened. In the text Allee read earlier, Paul writes in Romans about how the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.

That was 2000 years ago. Creation was groaning then. It's groaning now. The world is not ending so much as it is crying out for people who will love it and care for it and fight for it.

People who will love it and heal it and mend it. This, after all, was the purpose given to humanity at the very beginning of our story, a command to love and care for the world in the way God loves and cares for it.

And now, in light of overwhelming floods and fires and earthquakes, it takes faith to believe that we can make a difference.

I believe the world is desperate for people who can look out at the way things are right now and see beyond them, who see creation the way God intends for it to be.

I believe the world is desperate for people who are raised on stories that tell them, whether you're Lazarus or Jesus, whether you're Houston or Miami or Mexico City, whether you're buried in a tomb, or buried under rubble, ash or mud, it is possible to rise from the dead, and to be born again to new life and new hope.

So starting again today, with the launch of our Christian education year, we will continue to teach these stories. And we make no apology for that. Not to Lawrence Krauss, and not to anyone.

Because we are not fundamentalists, and we don't teach these stories as science. We take them more seriously than that. Instead we will teach their deeper truth, a truth that looks out at a wounded and hurting world and says, *Rise and be healed!*

And then extends a loving and helping hand to make that rising possible.