

Sermon: I Can't Imagine
Text: Luke 9:28—36
Date: March 3, 2019
Context: Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

Luke 9:28

Last summer, at the end of my time in Dunkeld, after I was done with the pulpit exchange, I hopped a British Airways commuter flight and flew down to England for a couple of days of visiting some old haunts there.

After I arrived at Heathrow, I jumped on the bus -- or the coach, if you prefer -- that links Heathrow to Oxford.

The best thing about that ride is that, when the bus arrives in Oxford, it drives straight down High Street--one of my favorite streets in the world. Among other things, this means it passes right by the univeristy church, St. Mary the Virgin.

Most every time I pass that splendid building I think of the time C. S. Lewis preached there. I wonder what that was like. And wish I could have been there.

Mr. Lewis preached arguably his most famous sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, on June 8, 1942. He preached it largely in response to the materialism that had begun to dominate European thought and culture in the middle of the last century.

And by materialism, I don't mean that in the way we use the word here at home, to describe Americans insatiable lust for new consumer goods.

I mean it in the philosophical sense – the belief that the world we can see, feel and touch is the only world there is. And the corollary assumption that a belief in anything beyond this world is silly and sentimental.

It is fitting that Mr. Lewis preached the sermon in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin.

For the very name embodies the point of view Lewis espoused in his sermon; namely that, by definition, people of faith belief in possibilities beyond those which science can explain.

The dialogue, the conversation, the argument between science and faith began long before Mr. Lewis preached his sermon, of course. It has waxed and waned for centuries. It And as we've noted from this pulpit before, it continues in our day.

In fairness, it must be noted that the conversation did not really begin until science wrested itself from the confining grasp of faith; the heavy-handed grip that essentially grabbed Galileo by the throat and forced him into a kind of reverse confession of faith—the church insisting not that he affirm things he cannot see, but that he deny things he could plainly see and measure with his telescope.

Even today there are branches of the Christian faith that are prone to stubborn resistance to the claims of science So it is no surprise that science has begun to fight back.

A spate of books has appeared in the last decade whose primary purpose seems to be to discredit not just Christianity but religious practice and belief of all kinds.

Here is a small sampling of some of the titles that have graced the shelves at Barnes and Nobel in recent years:

The Atheist Manifesto; The God Delusion; God, the Failed Hypothesis; The God Gene, The End of Faith, and Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.

In the latter book, *Breaking the Spell*, the author, Daniel Dennett, makes the startling claim that, as he puts it, “I expect to live to see the evaporation of the powerful mystique of religion . . . in about 25 years almost all religions will have evolved into very different phenomena, so much so that in most quarters religion will not longer command the awe it does today.”¹

And right there Mr. Dennett gives away the game, for as long as humans feel awe we will always be essentially religious creatures.

We have a taste for awe, a longing for the same transcendent glory described here in Luke’s story of the transfiguration. I’m frankly not sure what this story means, exactly. I’m not sure anyone does. I think that’s part of the point of it. It’s meant to make us . . . wonder.

What I do know is that we all have a hunger for mountaintop experiences, and a longing for the sacred that will never disappear so long as there are human beings with beating hearts alive on the earth.

Of all the aforementioned books, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* is perhaps the most ambitious and the most harshly critical. Like C. S. Lewis, Dawkins also calls Oxford home.

But that is where their similarities end. Mr. Dawkins sees religion as a source of great evil in the world, and goes so far as to argue that parents who raise their children in a faith-filled environment are guilty of child abuse.

We all know that religion has a mixed record and that parts of Christian history in particular are very dark, including, regrettably, it’s treatment of children.

To the extent that more churches are not calling out the current policy of separating refugee and immigrant children from their parents, you could argue that this is happening at this very moment.

But still, it’s impossible to imagine that the children of our congregation are somehow being abused. Quite the opposite in fact.

¹ Quoted on *The World Question Center* website, http://edge.org/q2007/q07_1.html.

Our children are being loved and supported by an entire community. And they are being nurtured on and taught stories whose truth and meaning will stay with them and continue to deepen for the rest of their lives.

We're not just teaching our children that they can climb mountains like Peter, James and John did; we're teaching them that they can move them.

I believe a large part of the animosity between science and religion is driven by a simple misunderstanding. I friend of mine who teaches science wrote me the following email a while back:

If I seek truth I can find intellectual truth through the process and content of science and the majority of scientist will agree on this truth. The question is, can spiritual truth be found, and if so, how?

And there's the problem. Yes, science and faith are both about the truth, but they're not about the same kind of truth. They are not trying to explain the same things, or answer the same questions.

Science is about certainty, and well it should be. Science tells us that when an aircraft that is heading down a runway and reaches a certain speed, it can't do anything other than fly. I don't know about you, but I want that to be true 100% of the time I board a plane.

That is exactly what we want from science: certainty. But certainty is exactly the opposite of what we want from faith; that's why we call it faith.

And if someone tells you that they have a firm grip on absolute truth, and insists that you share that view, and believe everything they believe in exactly the same way they believe it; and if they tell you that religion explains the origins of the physical world as accurately as science does, well, run from this person, cause they're likely wearing a literal or a figurative bomb vest and they're just waiting for the right time to set it off.

Like all religions, the Christian faith is ultimately not about certainty. Nor is it about history, or biology or geology or physics or any branch of scientific inquiry.

Our faith, rather, is about experiencing the holy, or the divine, or the sacred. That is what happened to Peter and James and John that day on the mountaintop and that is why we are here this morning--to come into God's presence and to experience and explore mysteries beyond knowing.

And of course our faith is also about loving and serving God and loving and serving our neighbors and learning to love ourselves, and, as we saw last week, loving even our enemies, a discipline that can take years to master and with which we need each other's help.

And finally faith is about mining our sacred stories for meaning and insights that will help us understand our lives and make sense of the wild journey we're all on.

Here's a simpler way of putting it. Science is what we do with our intellect. Religion and spirituality – those are what we do with our souls. I think it really is that simple.

There is no doubt that science answers a great many questions – particularly the “how” questions. And it answers them better than religion will ever do. And that is the way it should be. That, I believe, is the way God intended things to be.

But for me, I can't imagine trying to understand my life, I can't imagine trying to understand the world, I can't imagine trying to understand the “why” questions, without my faith.

I can't imagine trying to understand family rivalries without reference to Cain and Abel's early, archetypal rivalry.

I can't imagine trying to understand the geopolitical realities of the Middle East without reference to Isaac and Ishmael.

I can't imagine trying to understand the arc of life, including my sojourn through this bewildering world, without the aid and illumination of the Israelites' sojourn through the wilderness; without stories about parting seas and burning bushes and manna sent from heaven, stories that give me hope when I am hungry and tired and trapped in my own kind of Egypt—hope that I will someday be liberated, hope that I shall someday be fed, hope that I shall someday find my home.

I can't imagine how impoverished my life would be without the stories of Daniel's courage in the lions' den, in the face of imperial threats.

Or Jonah's reluctance to embrace his destiny and do what God was calling him to do. Without stories about Peter's enthusiasm and Thomas's doubt—spiritual tendencies, which we all feel from time to time.

We can't prove the truth of these stories through traditional empirical means.

But we nevertheless know they're true because we've stood with Peter on that mountaintops and in hospital rooms during births and deaths, and in sanctuaries just like this one; stood in the presence of mysteries we could not understand, mysteries that can't be explained, when the presence of God was so palpable we wanted to take our shoes off, or build a temple right there on the spot and never leave.

When the glory of God carried such weight it nearly pressed us into the ground, when the only language to describe this experience is "Alleluia!" and, "Glory be to God!"

Amen