From So Simple a Beginning (Summer Saints 2021: Charles Darwin)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 1, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

"Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go
and say to you, 'Here we are'?
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,
or given understanding to the mind?
Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?

"Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
when they crouch in their dens,
or lie in wait in their covert?
Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God,
and wander about for lack of food?

"Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?
Can you number the months that they fulfil,
and do you know the time when they give birth,
when they crouch to give birth to their offspring,
and are delivered of their young?
Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open;
they go forth, and do not return to them.

"Who has let the wild donkey go free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the swift donkey,
to which I have given the steppe for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling-place?
It scorns the tumult of the city;
it does not hear the shouts of the driver.
It ranges the mountains as its pasture,
and it searches after every green thing.

"Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings towards the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up

and makes its nest on high?
It lives on the rock and makes its home
in the fastness of the rocky crag.
From there it spies the prey;
its eyes see it from far away.
Its young ones suck up blood;
and where the slain are, there it is." (Job 38:34 – 39:8; 39:26-30, NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, NRSV)

As you all know by now, I have loved science and the study of the natural world for as long as I can remember. My first great love was learning about fossils. I was always fascinated by the idea that life on this planet has existed over millions and millions of years, and I would try and try to imagine such lengths of time.

But as you also know, religion was in my blood too, and the Bible and our Presbyterian church were always at the center of my life. But somehow, even though I grew up in the very buckle of the Bible Belt, it never occurred to me before I was about 10 that there could be a *conflict* between my love of science and my love for God. It never occurred to me before then that some people might reject the amazing picture of natural history that science presented. And to their credit, nothing I ever heard from my family or my church suggested differently.

But around 10, I learned that science and religion have had an uneasy relationship over the last few centuries … Some said that science has made religion obsolete, while others said that a lot of science contradicts the Bible, and so the Bible, which apparently must be read literally, is right and science is wrong!

And as I dug deeper, I learned that one man's name seemed to come up again and again at the center of this controversy. While the great Galileo certainly had his own run-ins with the Church, it is our Summer Saint for this morning that still, after 150 years, is a lightning rod in our culture wars – the 19th century British naturalist Charles Robert Darwin, best known for his Theory of Evolution by means of Natural Selection. There are certainly many Christians to this day – perhaps some of you – who would question his inclusion in any "Summer Saints" list, but I stand by the choice, for Darwin offers us, as people of faith, a profound gift that is all too easy to miss.

Darwin was born on February 12, 1809 in the small town of Shrewsbury in west-central England, as the 5th of six children of wealthy society doctor Robert Darwin and his wife Susanna. From an early age, young Charles was an avid explorer of nature and all-around collector of creepy-crawly things … much like me a long time ago!

At the age of 16, he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh to follow in his father's footsteps and become a medical doctor, but as the lectures bored him and the sight of blood made him queasy, he neglected his studies – annoying his father to the point that he pulled Charles out and sent him off to Cambridge with the suggestion that he study theology, with the goal of becoming a perfectly respectable country parson in the Anglican church.

And that perfectly respectable plan might have worked, as he read widely in theology and appreciated it, but he was drawn to the study of nature even more. Through a number of influences and experiences, his fascination with entomology, botany, geology, and other related fields grew until, at the age of 22, he found himself being recommended by his close friend and professor John Henslow for a self-funded position as a naturalist on the *HMS Beagle*, which was soon set to leave on a long expedition to chart the coastline of South America. His father objected to his son's involvement – believing it to be a waste of time for one who had just graduated from Cambridge – but was soon persuaded to fund Charles' participation anyway.

After a few delays, the voyage began in December 1831 and lasted (as it turned out) almost five years. It would prove to be the opportunity of a lifetime for a budding young scientist – and in its way, would change the world. Over the course of the trip, Darwin collected a variety of natural specimens, including birds, plants, and fossils. Through hands-on research and experimentation, he had the unique opportunity to observe principles of botany, geology, and zoology up close. The Pacific Islands and the Galapagos Archipelago were of particular interest to him, as was South America.

By the time he returned to England in 1836, he was already something of a celebrity in scientific circles due to the efforts of his former professor Henslow, who had published some of Darwin's fascinating and detailed letters over his travels. That enormous collection of specimens (of animals, plants, and fossils) sent back to England also generated much interest, and kept him busy visiting institutions, conferring with fellow naturalists, and soon, writing professional

papers. It was from this voyage and his work on its specimens afterwards that first gave him the idea that species may not be fixed and unchanging, as had been widely believed, but instead as arising and thriving and dying out, with new species in nature ever in the works to take their place.

He was given to overwork, and it took its toll on his health – often being incapacitated with episodes of stomach pains, heart palpitations, trembling, and other symptoms, particularly during times of stress, such as attending meetings and making social visits. Those things notwithstanding, the social expectation of one of his class and standing was that he would marry, and so by the late 1830's, he braved such symptoms and considered his options. Already accustomed to jotting down daily notes for himself, he scrawled rambling thoughts about marriage and future prospects on scraps of paper, on which he listed marriage's pros and cons. The "Pros" included "constant companion and a friend in old age ... better than a dog anyhow," against such "Cons" as "terrible loss of time" and "less money for books." ☺

The Pros eventually won out, and he discussed matters with his father, and then went to visit his charming and intelligent cousin Emma Wedgwood, with whom he had come to be close. He did not propose *right* away (perhaps he had not yet bought all the books he wanted), but did do so soon and married Emma in early 1839 in an Anglican ceremony.

In the 1840's and early '50's, a number of lines of thought came together in Darwin's mind, linking his own research to the revolutionary geological ideas of Charles Lyell and the population studies of Thomas Malthus. What emerged in those years was a theory that would, first, posit that species are *not* fixed, and then explain how they *arise* through natural mechanisms, ultimately deriving from common ancestors over vast expanses of time.

This of course finally led to the publication of Darwin's most famous work, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. It proved to be unexpectedly popular, with the entire stock of 1,250 copies already sold when it was sent out to booksellers in November 1859. In it, Darwin set out an extended argument of detailed observations, inferences, and consideration of anticipated objections, knowing that it would likely stir up controversy.

The response was widespread and mixed among scientists, theologians, and the informed public, and not necessarily along lines one might expect. Some of Britain's most distinguished scientists – among them, Sir Richard Owen, Lord Kelvin, Michael Faraday, and James Clerk Maxwell – expressed deep misgivings about the new theory, while many Anglican clergy enthusiastically embraced it.

But not surprisingly, many others in the broader church saw it as a *threat* to the faith, to the Christian doctrine of Creation, and to the authority of the Bible. There were multiple reasons for this. It certainly presented a picture of natural history in which the very *struggle* for existence is the *driver* of evolutionary progress. But most importantly, it seemed to contradict the Genesis account of an orderly Creation over six days, with animal species fixed from the

beginning and human beings clearly created separately from animals and bearing the divine image. Even Darwin's wife Emma was troubled by the apparent implications.

While Darwin did not explicitly include human beings in the evolutionary equation in 1859, he was *thinking* it and threw out hints, later spelling it out in his 1871 sequel *The Descent of Man*, by which time the lines were mostly drawn, with the scientific community having broadly accepted the evolutionary view, and the church being sharply divided between those who saw Darwin's vision as a harbinger of atheism and others who saw it as a profound glimpse into God's mysterious works in nature and as an opportunity to think about the faith anew.

His health, never good, continued to deteriorate in his final years, and he died at his home – Down House, southeast of London – on April 19, 1882, surrounded at his bedside by his wife and children. He died as one of the most famous scientists in history, and one week later was buried close to Sir Isaac Newton in Westminster Abbey – the funeral attended by *thousands* of people, including family, friends, scientists, philosophers, and dignitaries.

So – how is Darwin a "Summer Saint"? First of all, it should be admitted up front that he was not a person of faith, at least not by the time he published *On the Origin of Species*. But he was also not an atheist, nor did he see any reason that one could not be both an evolutionist and a believer.

His own personal engagement with faith was a complicated one, but it is clear from his letters and his autobiography that he thought about spiritual and theological matters often. We know that when he left on the *Beagle* in 1831, he considered himself an orthodox Christian, and there is no reason to doubt this, though it's important to recognize that his orthodoxy was a rather specific, typically early 19th century, rational, civilized, gentlemanly kind of orthodoxy – one heavily influenced by the English theologian William Paley, whose work *Natural Theology* confidently argued that nature contains "every manifestation of design… [That] design must have had a designer … That designer must have been a person [and] that person is God."

Christianity, then, for the young Darwin was primarily a *rational* proposition, and Paley represented that angle about as well as anyone could have. But the *suffering* involved in nature was an issue. The whole idea of natural selection, with its inevitable competition and suffering as the driver of evolutionary change, made Paley's optimistic, if dispassionate, view – that all pain and suffering in the natural world are justified in the name of the greater good – more problematic than he would allow.

And so, when Darwin's emerging theory began to undermine these ideas, it also undermined the rationally-constructed version of Christianity he had built up. It didn't happen immediately. His notebooks show him trying to accommodate an intellectually credible idea of God to his new theory – in many ways successfully. In the late 1830's and into the 1840's, he was balancing the pain and grief involved in natural selection on the one hand, with the extraordinary beauty and diversity of life on the other. Everything hung on how the scales balanced between these two.

When, however, his beloved daughter Annie died in 1851, at the age of 10, this balance moved from being a *theoretical* problem to an agonizingly personal one. Most Victorian families lost children (Charles and Emma themselves lost two others in infancy), but Annie was his favorite and, unlike most Victorian fathers, he was *there*, *with* her, and witnessed every last, sad moment of her short life. That experience destroyed what was left of his Christian hope, though he never let go of the possibility that God existed as a First Cause and Lawgiver.

And so, the claim that his evolutionary ideas destroyed his faith is only partly true, usually made to prove somehow that "Evolution kills God," when the facts paint a very different picture – revealing this supposed enemy of the faith as the tender, loving, heartbroken, and spiritually struggling man that he was.

And I do not believe for a moment that his struggles were wasted. His life and ideas, I say, are a *gift* and a *challenge* to us, and a gift *because* they are a challenge.

For one, he gives us the gift of the *truth*:

- That the earth and its life did *not* arise spontaneously over six literal days between six and ten thousand years ago …
- that life on this planet has been here, in some form, for at least 3.5 billion years …
- that all life on earth, including *human* life, is ultimately connected …
- and even that the ongoing process of Creation, Evolution itself, could suggest a mysterious divine creativity at work.

Some of these truths, perhaps *all* of these truths, challenge us. They may shake us up some and disturb us with their call to re-examine things we thought we knew, and I know that this is rarely easy. But the pay-off is *freedom*: Freedom *from* ideas that may be familiar, but don't align with reality, yes, but also freedom *for* some things –

- *For* fresh readings of the scriptures – like the first chapter of Genesis – revealing depths of meaning and application we would never have imagined and would never have looked for …
- *For* a re-visioning of how we articulate our faith, given what we can now know of the splendid workings of Nature.

Working from within the evolutionary paradigm of Nature, many theologians have come to see Darwin's disturbing picture of life – rather than being hostile to Christian faith as many skeptics and believers alike have thought it to be – actually provides a most fertile setting for a fresh, mature reflection on the idea of God. A preoccupation with signs of deliberate design can obscure the theological riches we might discover by contemplating Darwin's "dangerous idea" in its all its rawness.

A truly open theology which engages with evolution may well bring out our appreciative recognition of the God of the Bible who pours himself out for creation and lovingly renounces any claim to domineering omnipotence. Biblical teachings about the Trinitarian character of God, Divine action and power, the Incarnation, the Cross of Christ, and the work of the Spirit – all of these, indispensable to Christian theology, stand to take on rich, new nuance and significance.

In fact, our common recognition of God's gift in natural laws – God's allowing the world to "become itself" – is entirely consistent with evolution's experimental winding through an endless field of possibilities, and with the evident creativity in the life-process itself. In that sense, evolution presents us with what we have *always* known of life … joy and pain … fragile beauty and mortality … what the book of Job so beautifully expresses … and that all of it, together, makes up the great fabric of creation. Charles Darwin gave us new lenses to see that creation … to see, in his own words from the final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*, that

> *There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved*.

To the Glory of God! Amen.