

Genesis 1:1-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

1 In the beginning when God created^[a] the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God^[b] swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Revelation 21: 1-5

The New Heaven and the New Earth

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.

He will dwell^[b] with them;

they will be his peoples,^[c]

and God himself will be with them;^[d]

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Kerra Becker English

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“A New Heaven and New Earth”

Genesis 1:1-5; Revelation 21:1-5

If these two scripture texts are indeed the “bookends” of the Bible, as my Old Testament professor and friend Bill Brown proposes, then how do we begin to understand God’s creation and the realm of heaven, the planet earth and the expansive and expanding universe? We do so by bringing to the table both knowledge and wonder. There is much that we do know when we count in both the wisdom of the ages and the science of right this very minute. And then there is much that involves the full capacity of human imagination, whether that’s our propensity for embracing story and metaphor as evidenced by the scriptural themes of creation and the heavens, or the scientific curiosity that marvels at the complexities of life on our own planet and theorizes about what may be discovered at the farthest reaches of the universe.

Knowledge changes over time

Let’s go with knowledge first. What do we know about, well, “life, the universe, and everything” because that’s really the intended scope of these two texts. We’re talking earth and all that is in it, and the universe as absolutely far reaching as it may be. Calvin, a product of the renaissance that he was, thought knowledge was about THE most important thing. He has that in common with the scientific revolutionaries of his day, like Galileo and Copernicus who basically displaced the common knowledge that we were the center of the universe to be just another planet orbiting the sun. Calvin, therefore, starts his lengthy tome on the Christian religion, his

Institutes by saying, "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other."

Calvin believed there was a connection, a multi-tied connection, between anything we could learn about ourselves, our environment, our planet, or our universe, and what we would find to be true about God. AND he did not claim that knowledge of God had to come first. He was aware that such knowledge about our world could be both inspirational and spiritually enlightening, but he didn't necessarily make any guarantees that it would make our faith feel more secure, and for that I give him total props. It's the fundamentalism of today, of our own peculiar time and culture that really muddies the waters between the nature of Christianity and the realm of scientific knowledge. It's those who have held extreme positions, either then - trying to protect the assumptions of earlier eras, or now- trying to promote certain aspects of the faith as inerrant and unchanging who have done such hateful and destructive things in the name of Jesus Christ. I have found that any time someone claims to have knowledge that is the complete and ultimate truth or to be in possession of the one right answer will find themselves challenged – most likely in both religion and science. Science just seems to have a tougher skin about it! What we know to be true changes over time – surprise, surprise. That's my first assumption, and I dare say that it's a correct one until I'm proven otherwise. Knowledge, all knowledge that we have about life, the universe, and everything, is constantly changing.

And yet, Knowledge builds upon itself

Now I get that there are those who say that “science is science” and “faith is faith.” They aren’t the same fields, and trying to force them to be the same or even to try to answer the same questions only diminishes both in the process. Bad science and terrible theology are the outcomes of the kind of thinking that wants them to always mesh. One tends to work in facts, the other in metaphor and story. Both are kinds of knowledge about our world and how it works. And as people think in general about how any knowledge is gathered, I suppose that most folks would reckon that biblical understanding is something “old” and scientific understanding is something “new.” So depending on your own personality, and probably a bunch of other things about your particular worldview, you might prefer or prioritize one over the other. Some think old knowledge is better because it is tried and true. Some think new knowledge is better because our later means for observing our world have become so much more accurate. Both sides would be correct. Science doesn’t start new, from scratch, everyday. It has to build upon its own body of knowledge and methods for testing out new theories for the truth of a new idea to emerge. And ancient texts, history, archeology, and the stories of faithful people over time contribute greatly to the complex knowledge of how Christianity (and other religions for that matter) move forward today. Those who seem to claim, with certainty, a literal immovable interpretation of the Bible are often those who know the least about its context, its languages, and its interpretation over time. Either discipline can get stuck in the old and lose its “aliveness” or get stuck in its novelty and lose its connection to its longer traditions and history. Knowledge may be constantly changing, but it’s also constantly building upon itself as well.

These are just a couple observations about knowledge. Calvin’s books start there on an exposition of Christianity and continue for thousands of pages, and what we know about our world now is ridiculously huge thanks to the curiosity of those who have taken the challenge to

explore and study it. Notice I haven't given you any details yet about what we claim to know as people of faith or what we empirically know as people who are educated about the natural workings of our world. That's OK. It's vast and it's complicated. Knowledge then is also dependent upon our careful discernment and interpretation – which is a much bigger story for another day.

New I am making all things/Emergence

So let me finally get to the other category of how we approach massive subjects like God, creation, and the universe. Once we get past what we KNOW, then what do we do? We wonder. We imagine. We find our sense of awe. Now this is what I think that Bill Brown was getting at in calling his lecture series, “The Common Ground of Wonder.” Deep people of faith and creative people in science share this human impulse to marvel at the bigness of the universe and the intricacies that make up life as we know it. This journey of life is too amazing for us not to find a way to try to make sense and meaning out of its parts. And I find the real spark and energy behind that awe in the best mysteries we have in both fields. When we arouse our curiosity, amazing things have been known to happen. The old life must be let go for a new life, a new understanding to take place.

Both science and faith ask the hardest questions about those very things that are being made new. In science, I'm learning, so forgive me if I don't get it 100% right, but this principle is called “emergence.” There are some times when the conditions are just right for the new to be made out of the old. Bill quotes Robert M. Hazen's book *Genesis: The Scientific Quest for Life's Origins* saying, “Emergence is a process by which something unanticipated appears, either

gradually or suddenly, from existing conditions. The hallmarks of emergence are complexity and novelty.” Billions of years ago, single celled organisms make the jump to multi-celled organisms, and the possibilities for a variety of life forms began. Or it could mean that our built upon knowledge finally converges into a breakthrough that we couldn’t see before. It’s the “aha” moment, the “eureka” in the bathtub, the moment that crystallizes in such a way as to give us new eyes with which to see the world. The scientific thinkers that I’ve known to have such a moment, or to be able to create such a moment for a student to see the whole world in a new way, describe that as a transformational experience – with or without a God reference.

And for me, the essence of the spiritual journey is embracing the metaphor that comes through John’s vision in Revelation when he says about God, “See I am making all things new.” And to clarify the sentence structure here, God isn’t making all new things. No, God is in the business of “newing” as Bill Brown puts it. A more accurate read of the original language sounds like Yoda-speak, “See, NEW I am making all things.” It’s the newness that brings light and life in Genesis. It’s the newness that continues to create a new earth and a new heaven. Resurrection is the same promise. Out of the dead, something new. We forget this impulse is in faithfulness because it is in our humanness. We cannot stay the same, and be transformed. We cannot stay dead, and experience resurrection. And to understand the world, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of it as God sees it, we must make room for new insights. To close the canon on experience is the quickest way to make a dead religion. God may be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but unless God is also new every morning, we will get stuck and miss out on the gift, the great gift of wonder.

I was quite fortunate to be taught from an early age to love learning, and to remain curious about the world. I do believe that scripture, especially in these bookend texts confirms

this desire to understand our world, and be curious about what enlivens it and what lies beyond it. I know not every person gets that message from Christianity. Much has been taught to paint a far different picture about our faith. And yet, how can you have a faith that claims resurrection as its primary good news and yet doesn't believe that new things can happen in our world? New information is not something to be feared. New insights are not to be ignored. Both are to be placed within the longer traditions, the wide stream of knowledge that makes room for wonder around the edges. Faith and science are both concerned about getting to know this world we live in. Faith makes the extra claim that we are concerned and curious because we believe it to be God's world. And yet, we can learn from science that knowledge and wonder are the mind and soul of what it means to be human. Amen.