

ATLAS AND THE FIRMAMENT
Genesis 1: 1-10; Psalm 19:1-6 (KJV)
July 11, 2004
Union Church of Cupertino
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A father was out for a walk with his son:

“Dad, what holds up the ground?”

Where do questions like this come from? It is enough to know that all questions are important and to rejoice in the product of an inquiring mind.

Dad had just finished reading a book about Bertrand Russell in which there was a story of a time when Russell had been giving a public lecture on astronomy. At the end of his lecture he was challenged by an elderly woman: “Sir what you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” Dad thought he had an answer. “I just read about someone who believed that the ground sits on the back of a great big turtle.”

And that’s all he said. He didn’t think his son wanted information about Galileo or Newton. And the turtle seemed to suffice...., until they got home.

“Dad, what holds up the turtle?”

“It’s a Bengal tiger. The turtle sits on the back of a huge Bengal tiger.” And again, this seemed to be enough.... Until dinner.

“Dad what keeps the tiger from falling down and down and down?”

If you have ever committed yourself to a particular line of reasoning only to discover it has run out of both sense and steam you can understand Dad’s position. He was ready for the questions to end so he went for the biggest thing he could think of:

“Son, the tiger stands on the back of an elephant, an Indian elephant bigger than any the world has ever seen!”

“But, Dad, what holds up the elephant?”

“It’s elephants, my son, elephants all the way down.”

Please don’t think Dad was the only one to ever make up a story to explain how the world holds together.

**The Hebrews told stories about what kept the world secure.
Have you ever seen a diagram of what the ancient Hebrews imagined was the shape of the**

universe? What they thought held things up?

Across the top there is a huge reservoir of water called “the waters above the firmament.” Across the bottom there is another reservoir of water, “the waters under the earth” Straight through the middle is a line that represents the earth’s surface. At both ends of the earth are mountains that support an arch to which is affixed the sun, the stars, and the moon. This arch is called the firmament. The firmament has windows in it that allow the waters above to fall to the earth below. Scientifically speaking this picture of the universe is about as accurate as a stack of elephants and yet it is integral to the creation story:

**And God said, “let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.... and God called the firmament heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.
- Genesis 1:6-8 (KJV)**

The ancient Greeks also told a story about what kept the world secure. It was the responsibility of the gods to keep earth from slipping, or tipping, or falling from its platform and, according to a story by Homer, the gods delegated this responsibility to Atlas. Actually Atlas was being punished for being part of a coup against Zeus. The Titans had tried to overthrow Zeus and failed. Atlas’ punishment was to carry the world on his shoulders forever. Once, when Hercules needed his help and held the earth while Atlas did his bidding, Atlas thought he might just let Hercules carry on, but the big man was not the brightest porch light on the block. Soon Hercules had tricked him into taking the world back again.

The name Atlas has been given to a range of mountains in north west Africa. It is the anatomical name for the top vertebra in the neck, the most immediate support of the head. Since the 16th century it has been the generic name for all books containing maps for many of the earliest of these books had a drawing on their title page of Atlas holding up the globe.

Why do we keep these stories? What good do they do?

Today, we all know something about gravity and centrifugal force, about planets spinning, and orbits in which one force balances another so that everything stays in place...

Why don’t we jettison the old stories?

I believe the creation stories serve an important function. They address issues gravity cannot touch. Science is what it is. It cannot believe but requires proof. Proof and belief are mutually exclusive. Science is stuck with such as the second law of thermodynamics, projections based upon precise measurements suggesting that the universe is slowly sinking into chaos.

What use is this to such as ourselves who need something stable, something that will not let us down?

William Butler Yeats wrote of our fear in his poem, *The Second Coming*:

**Turning, turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;...**

Is there a center? Will the center hold?

Children of every age have sung a song of uncertainty:

**Ring around the rosy, a pocket full of posy,
Ashes, ashes, all fall down.**

The rosy with the ring around it was, of course, the pox. Are we thus vulnerable to the plague. Is there anything that will not come to ashes? Must we all fall down?

Does science have anything to say to that?

Come with me to the lobby of El Camino Hospital. Just for a moment sit on one of the lobby couches and watch as people go by. Doctors, nurses, technicians stride through conveying an air of confidence, but there are others who don't seem so sure; those coming to be patients, those coming to visit patients. Tomorrow my three-week-old grandson will be operated on for a hernia. The doctors say it is a simple operation. The anesthesiologist says he's worked with little babies dozens of times. These assurances have done little to still our family's fear. Is this a safe process? Is there a center and will that center hold?

I believe that stories about turtles, and firmaments, and Atlas are necessary even now in an age of science for we still need to believe there is a center to our universe and that the center will hold.

When Job hit rock bottom God reminded him of creation:

**Stand up like a man! Answer the questions I shall put to you.
Were you there when I made the world? Do you know what
holds up the world's pillars, or who laid the cornerstone?
- cf. Job 38: 1-6**

Creation stories convey the information of who's in control.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... Genesis 1:1

God saw everything that had been made, and God said: "Indeed this is very, very good. - Genesis 1:31

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.... Romans 8:38

The theological word is 'providence.' God's sustaining care of all that has been made.

Yes, I have know people who have dumped God on the basis of one thing that didn't turn out the way they wanted to, ignoring decades of things that did. The creation stories speak of providence: the perception, the trust, the belief that God does everything possible.

Science is what it is.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear,

though the earth should change,

though the mountains shake...

though the waters roar and foam... Psalm 46 1,2

I cherish the creation stories for they tell us it's God, and then beneath that God. It's God all the way down.