

**Message: “Faith & Science”**

**I believe one of the primary reasons people struggle to find a church or spiritual place where they fit is because they don’t see how faith applies to their life.** That’s always one of the top reasons given in the census and surveys. So, as we begin a new year together, let’s take a few minutes and look at how faith and work intersect. That’s even harder than home life. Reading from Matthew 2:1-12 this week, I reflected on the lives of the magi. That led me to a question.

**“Can you be a good scientist and believe in God?”**

The magi were the scientists of their time. They were learned people, wise in the ways of the natural world. They were used to working with rulers, traveled far and wide, and visited Jesus when he was a small child. They weren’t from Israel. Most likely they were Persian astrologers and natural scientists, since the word “magi” has origins in the Persian word *magu*. Even though they weren’t Jewish, they honored Jesus as a king.

**Why?** Somehow their faith and their profession intersected in a meaningful way. We can learn from them. I’ll return to our exploration of Matthew’s text in a moment. Back to the question ...

**Can you be a good scientist and believe in God?** That question was posed at a scientific conference at City College in New York in 2005. One of the panel members, Herbert Hauptmann, a Nobel prize winner in chemistry gave a sharp answer, “No.” Dr. Hauptman declared, “this kind of belief is damaging to the well-being of the human race.”<sup>1</sup>

**That disdain for faith is far from universal.** Francis Collins, who directs the National Human Genome Research Institute, says this, “[Faith] should not be a taboo subject, but frankly it is in many scientific circles.”<sup>2</sup> “Dr. Collins was a nonbeliever until he was 27 – ‘more and more into the mode of being not only agnostic but being an atheist,’ as he put it. All that changed after he completed his doctorate in physics and was at work on his medical degree. Dr. Collins helped treat a woman dying of heart disease. ‘She was very clear about her faith and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/23/us/scientists-speak-up-on-mix-of-god-and-science.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

she looked me square in the eye and she said, “What do you believe?” he recalled. ‘I sort of stammered, “I’m not sure.”’

**Dr. Collins said he realized then that he’d never considered the matter seriously, the way a scientist should.** He began reading about various religious beliefs, which only confused him. Finally, a Methodist minister gave him a book, Mere Christianity, by C.S. Lewis. In the book Lewis, an atheist until he was a grown man, argues that the idea of right and wrong is universal among people, a moral law they ‘did not make, and cannot quite forget even when they try.’ This universal feeling is evidence for the plausibility of God.

**When he read the book, Dr. Collins thought, ‘This guy is me.’** Today Collins doesn’t embrace any particular denomination, but he is a Christian. Colleagues sometimes express surprise at his faith. ‘They’ll say, “How can you believe that? Did you check your brain at the door?”’ But he has discovered in talking to students and colleagues ‘there’s a great deal of interest in this topic.’<sup>3</sup>

Let me rephrase the question ... **Can you be a good scientist, engineer, physician, lawyer, first responder, teacher, nurse, business professional, mechanic, homemaker or \_\_\_\_\_ {fill in the blank} and believe in God?**

**Without a doubt, the answer is YES. Thank you for that response!** The journal Nature did a survey of American scientists in 1997 and found “40% of biologists, physicists and mathematicians said they believed in God - and not just a non-specific transcendental presence but a God to whom one may pray ‘in expectation of receiving an answer.’” The results were exactly the same as a survey done in 1914.<sup>4</sup> You can be a person who looks at facts and figures and believe in God.

**I’m living proof.** I have a Master’s degree in Physics and completed the course work for a Ph.D. I have a Ph.D. in Earth & Atmospheric Science. I worked in support of NASA and for a think tank in the Boston area for a decade before changing paths and, after a long spiritual journey, found myself at this door, becoming your pastor.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/23/us/scientists-speak-up-on-mix-of-god-and-science.html>

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**But don't rely on my story.** Let's look at the record of those who are proven experts. And let's use the scientific method to do so fairly. That means making a hypothesis, gathering data and then analyzing it to see if we prove or disprove the theory.

**I offer this hypothesis: faith and science are compatible.** To define the simple process we'll use in our examination this morning, I offer the words of **Galileo Galilei** who said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."<sup>5</sup> Let's use our senses and reason.

**Let's start with the biblical account: Matthew's narrative.** The magi were the scientists, philosophers and learned ones of their day. They were wise in the ways of nature. There is a strong indication they were powerful, known as "king makers." They were the power behind the throne in Babylon, Persia, Midian and the Parthian Empire, which is where modern day Iran is located. That's the land of the Chaldeans. Some scholars have proposed a strong Jewish-Midian connection, since both were conquered by Alexander the Great.

**Herod's fear is understandable as these are the people who could replace him.** The sudden appearance of the Magi in Jerusalem, probably traveling with pomp and a cavalry escort to insure their safety, alarmed Herod and the people. The Magi may have been attempting to create a border incident to bring swift response from their army. When they asked Herod about the one who "has been born king of the Jews," it was a calculated insult to a ruler who had bribed his way into office.

**That's a different picture of the magi than we normally hear.** They may not have been benevolent older men, but men with a mission and purpose. Matthew notes some key aspects of the narrative: the magi follow an illuminating light, they worship the child Jesus, and they give fabulous gifts, befitting a king.

**While the magi may not have had a Messianic focus on their trip, they give homage to one who is a king, who our tradition tells us is the king of kings.** Jesus himself says he is the Messiah. Matthew tells us God communicated with the magi in a dream, so they avoided Herod

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<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit., Forbes*

and traveled another way home. Dreams were an acceptable form of communication, no questions were asked. This indicates the magi believe in God. They are scientists who have the ear of rulers and yet they listen to God.

**Professor Sir Neville Mott** (Nobel Prize for physics, solid state physics, Cambridge University) sums it up well, “...we can and must ask God which way we ought to go, what we ought to do, how we ought to behave.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Let’s look at evidence: are there scientists who believe in God?**

Here’s a brief list: Blaise Pascal, Johannes Kepler, Gottfried Leibniz, Leonhard Euler, Maria Agnesi, Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell, Lewis Carroll, Heinrich Hertz, Louis Pasteur, Lord Kelvin, Guglielmo Marconi, George Washington Carver, Robert Millikan, Wernher von Braun, Gerty Cori, Mary Keller, Richard Smalley, and many, many others. I invite you to Google it or check Wikipedia – the list is long. This isn’t just a “that’s the way it was back then” list. It includes scientists living today.

**So far, we have two key points:** we have a verified narrative of scientists who believe in God and we have the traditional writings and research of thousands of scholars and scientists to rely on. Next, let’s look at our experience.

### **So there are scientists who believe in God. Are they good?**

Let’s look at the cream of the crop. **Madame Curie** (Catholic), **Isaac Newton** (Anglican) and **Albert Einstein** (Jewish) all believed in a higher power, though they had complex beliefs. Curie was raised as a Catholic but wavered over time. **Charles Darwin**, most famous biologist of all, said, “I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God.”<sup>7</sup> He had a problem with the creation myth, not with God.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://magiscenter.com/23-famous-scientists-who-are-not-atheists/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2018/06/26/did-historys-most-famous-scientists-believe-in-god/#164b8bb44f21>

**Professor Abdus Salam** (Nobel Prize for physics, Director, International Centre for Theoretical Physics, Trieste) says, “Now this sense of wonder leads most scientists to a Superior Being - der Alte, the Old One, as Einstein affectionately called the Deity - a Superior Intelligence, the Lord of all Creation and Natural Law.”<sup>8</sup>

**Professor Arthur Schawlow** (Nobel Prize for Physics, Stanford University): “It seems to me that when confronted with the marvels of life one must ask why and not just how. The only possible answers are religious... I find a need for God in the universe and in my own life.”<sup>9</sup> I resonate strongly with Dr. Schawlow’s view.

**We have three points. Let’s take Galileo’s advice and use reason to consider a fourth point: what DO scientists believe.** Yes, it’s possible to be a person of faith and a scientist. The two aren’t mutually exclusive. What does seem to be mutually exclusive is science and religious fundamentalism. If you believe God literally made the world in seven days, formed humanity in God’s image, created women from a man’s rib, and other creation myths, then it’s unlikely you’re a scientist.

**I’m not trying to invalidate anyone’s beliefs.** I’m observing what seems to be true about the opinions scientists hold in relation to God. Several scholars believe physicists are more likely to be religious than other disciplines. The people who ask “why” rather than “how” tend to have faith. They tend to see much of the Bible as allegorical in nature, meaning they see much of it as a parable telling us how to live a good life. Interpreting this narrative is how we get closer to God. Scientists of faith believe by investigating the universe they’re scrutinizing the work of God, observing God’s creation in ever deeper glory.

**Professor Werner Archer** (Nobel Prize for Physiology/Medicine, University of Basel): “I don’t think our civilization has succeeded in discovering and explaining all the principles acting in the universe. I include the concept of God among these principles. I’m happy to accept the concept without trying to define it precisely. I know that the concept of God helped me to master many questions in life; it guides me

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<sup>8</sup> <https://magiscenter.com/23-famous-scientists-who-are-not-atheists/>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

in critical situations and I see it confirmed in many deep insights into the beauty of the functioning of the living world.”<sup>10</sup>

**So I ask you: have we met the hypothesis?** I believe so, but I leave it up to you to do your own research. Use your own intellect, senses and reason. Be fair. Examine your sources carefully. Compare notes with others. Share your experiences. Make up your own mind; don't let others tell you what to think.

**Can you believe in God? Yes, you can.**

**I invite you to join us on the journey.** Faith has great meaning to life. Let's give thanks to God for what has been revealed.

*Let us pray ...*

**Isaiah 60:1-6 (CEB)**

Arise! Shine! Your light has come;  
the Lord's glory has shone upon you.

Though darkness covers the earth  
and gloom the nations,  
the Lord will shine upon you;  
God's glory will appear over you.

Nations will come to your light  
and kings to your dawning radiance.

Lift up your eyes and look all around:  
they are all gathered; they have come to you.

Your sons will come from far away,  
and your daughters on caregivers' hips.

Then you will see and be radiant;  
your heart will tremble and open wide,  
because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you;  
the nations' wealth will come to you.

Countless camels will cover your land,  
young camels from Midian and Ephah.

They will all come from Sheba,  
carrying gold and incense,  
proclaiming the Lord's praises.

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<sup>10</sup> *Op cit., magiscenter.com*

**Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.