Readings –

#1 - From *The Descent of Man* (1871) by Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882):
I am aware that the conclusions arrived at in this work will be denounced by some as highly irreligious; but he who thus denounces them is bound to shew why it is more irreligious to explain the origin of man as a distinct species by descent from some lower form, through the laws of variation and natural selection, than to explain the birth of the individual through the laws of ordinary reproduction. The birth both of the species and of the individual are equally parts of that grand sequence of events, which our minds refuse to accept as the result of blind chance.

Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen...may give him hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future. But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it. I have given the evidence to the best of my ability...

#2 - From *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy* (1910) by John Dewey (1859 - 1952):
Old ideas give way slowly...Moreover, the conviction persists--though history shows it to be a hallucination--that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume, an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them.

#3 - From *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (2006) by renowned biologist E. O. Wilson (1929 - ), written in the form of a letter to a Southern Baptist Pastor:
You and I are both humanists in the broadest sense: human welfare is at the center of our thought. But the difference between humanism based on religion and humanism based on science radiates through philosophy and the very meaning we assign ourselves as a species. They affect the way we separately authenticate our ethics, our patriotism, our social structure, our personal dignity.

What are we to do? Forget the differences, I say. Meet on common ground. That might not be as difficult as it seems at first. When you think about it, our metaphysical differences have remarkably little effect on the conduct of our separate lives...[S]urely we...share a love of the Creation.

[H]owever the tensions eventually play out between our opposing worldviews, however science and religion wax and wane in the minds of men, there remains the earthborn, yet transcendental, obligation we are both morally bound to share.

Sermon
Charles Darwin, in his most famous book, *On the Origin of Species*, did not deal directly with human origins. Though the implications were clear, he left them unspoken, but he concluded his book attempting to explain the reverence that this new understanding of life offered:
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.

While Darwin saw grandeur in this view of life, others saw a threat to the very foundation of their religious faith. Darwin, no doubt confirming the worst fears of the faithful, deleted any mention of a Creator from this passage in later editions of *The Origin of Species*, and later took up the task of addressing humanity's origins directly in a book entitled *The Descent of Man*. Here, he professes in the passage that Ellen read a possibly disingenuous surprise at the prospect of religious objections. Why, he says, is it any more sacrilegious to attempt to describe the scientific realities of the birth of a species than it is to describe the scientific realities of the birth of an individual? We do not begin life, in other words, as fully formed humans, but as possibilities created by the interaction of sperm cell and egg, requiring the appropriate circumstances in which to grow into an individual human. Just so did our species arise from simpler forms, origins we share with other species, to become the humans we are. As to the question that the Joyful Noise Singers sang; that scientists explore; that religious seekers ask; as to that fundamental question, “Where do we come from?” Darwin humbly says, “I have given the evidence to the best of my ability.”

And Darwin's evidence has held up. Though, of course, his work has been expanded, corrected, revised and reimagined with the introduction of new data, the process of natural selection has become the foundation of understanding life's biological origins. It has been tested again and again against the realities of life as we know it and has stood strong.

Yet, the controversy that Darwin rather tentatively sought to address, rages on. It is no coincidence that Michael Zimmerman, founder of the Clergy Letter Project and dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of biology at Butler University, picked Evolution Sunday, the Sunday closest to the celebration of Charles Darwin's birthday, to ask congregations across the country to talk about the compatibility of science and religion. A great majority of the time in contemporary U.S. society when we discuss the problems of science and religion, we are really talking about evolution and religion. Since the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, no other scientific theory has so rattled the creidal cages of Western religions, seeming to strike at fundamental religious answers to those three questions from the Anthem: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Much of traditional religious thinking, and no small amount of secular thinking, in this country has rested on the assumption of a unique place for humans in “the way things are.” David Quammen points out that Darwin's understanding of life arising from a common origin and diversity of life forms stemming from the process of natural selection, does not so much undermine the place of God in traditional religious thought (though that is often the charge against it), but rather undermines the place of humans in traditional religious thought. If we are not created in the image of God (or at least not alone in being created in the image of God), there is much about our relationship to the world that we need to reassess. If we are not distinguished, in spiritual terms, from the rest of life, born to discover a purpose that is inherent in our very existence, but only (and I use only very loosely) products of a natural, purposeless process, where does that leave our understanding of existence?

Darwin sidesteps this very neatly in the concluding pages of *The Descent of Man*, which you heard earlier. He begins by “forgiving” the human tendency to award a special status to ourselves.
Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen...to the very summit of the organic scale;

But he points out in the middle of that sentence that the pride is misplaced, for even if we allow that we are “at the summit of the organic scale,” this status was not achieved by human exertions. He goes on to say that humanity may derive some hope from the same source that offered the opportunity for misplaced pride, saying

the fact of his having thus risen...may give him hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future.

Though why this should give hope any more than it should give pride is unclear. In other words, we must be excused for feeling pride and hope in where we find ourselves on the evolutionary chart, because there is really nothing in the understanding of natural selection or evolution to support such feelings.

Darwin is on dangerous ground here, and he knows it. He is unequivocally saying that humans were not created as a separate species Though there may be grandeur in Darwin's view of life, there does not seem to be any special connection between humans and God or the Source of Life, (as pictured here). And though we may wish to fool ourselves into believing that somehow we climbed the evolutionary ladder, that's really just not how it works.

Maybe Darwin felt that at this point in his writing, his own opinion was called for, and he avoids this minefield brilliantly, saying:

But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it.

So, to recap, he says humans can be forgiven for having pride in their present status and hope for an even grander status ahead, though there is no evident reason for such pride and hope...then he adds, quickly, we're not really talking about pride and hope anyway. We're talking about truth.

And that's an interesting distinction; one that is often drawn in the discussion of science and religion. Famous writer and evolutionary biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, drew such a distinction in his book on science and religion entitled, Rocks of Ages. Religion, he said, is concerned with the Rock of Ages; science with the age of rocks. Religion tells you how to go to heaven; science tells you how the heavens go. And if this all sounds a little too neat; too tidy; too simple;...well, from my perspective, it sounds that way because it is. Gould's point was that conflict arises between science and religion when we seek to answer a religious question with a scientific explanation, or seek to understand a scientific proposition by reading a sacred text. Religion and science, he said, are separate, non-overlapping magisteria. To which I respectfully say (and, believe me, I have a great deal of respect for Stephen Jay Gould, but in this case I respectfully say), nice try! Would that it were that simple.

Darwin, in the passage I read, is basically distinguishing between truth and meaning. All I can offer as a scientist, he says, is the truth as best I can determine it. I cannot tell you what it should mean to you.

That distinction is echoed in our Principles when we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
But this wisdom that I find in our Principle is that, while the search for truth and meaning are distinct, they are also inseparable. I daresay it is a human trait that the question of meaning follows quickly and inevitably upon the discovery of any truth. What, then, does this mean to me? What does it tell me about where I come from, what I am, where I am going. Truth, if we are to accept it as truth, has ramifications. The truths we hold as foundational will effect the way we view the world. Though humans are pretty good at compartmentalizing, I believe that, ideally, a holistic view of the world and our place in it is what we are after. A world view that makes sense in every part of our life; that nurtures us spiritually and ethically; that illuminates rather than obscures; that affirms rather than negates. The meanings we create are not arbitrary, but are based on our experience of the particular truths we accept. Thus E.O. Wilson, while rather curiously categorizing both the Southern Baptist Pastor whom he is writing to and himself as humanists, acknowledges that there are differences:

\[ T \]he difference between humanism based on religion and humanism based on science radiates through philosophy and the very meaning we assign ourselves as a species. They affect the way we separately authenticate our ethics, our patriotism, our social structure, our personal dignity.

The differences, based on the truths we find to be foundational, affect the way we authenticate our ethics, our social structure, our personal dignity...These strike me as pretty major differences. So what does Wilson suggest we do about the differences?

*Forget the differences*, he says. *Meet on common ground.*

That is a rather shocking suggestion. Just as there are those who gloss over the conflict between science and religion, there are those who see no possibility of common ground. Writers Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, for example, have come out strongly against traditional Western religion as not only illusory, but dangerous enough that they suggest cleansing humanity of its harmful residue. Common ground between humanism based on religion and humanism based on science? Not hardly. Dawkins' title *The God Delusion* sums up his prescription for what ails us. Get rid of the outmoded, outlandish, outrageous, unsupportable theory (delusion!) of God.

On the other side, there are plenty of ministers and writers in conservative Christianity that would echo similar sentiments about “The Evolution Delusion.” They, also, can find no common ground between the two humanisms that Wilson identifies. The very word humanism might send them scurrying to their Bibles as they vehemently reject the notion that their religious perspective is anything but God-given.

Both sides understand that there are real differences in what they believe about the world. And Wilson admits that there are real differences...and with that said, suggests that we now set those differences aside. It doesn't mean we compromise our own beliefs. It doesn't mean we allow Intelligent Design to masquerade as science. It doesn't mean we don't challenge one another; that we ignore the excesses and dangers of bad science or bad religion. But rather than fighting this out to the bitter end, with one side or another emerging victorious in the centuries-long argument, we simply stop trying to convince one another and, instead, look for common ground.

*That might not be as difficult as it seems at first*, Wilson writes. *When you think about it, our metaphysical differences have remarkably little effect on the conduct of our separate lives...Surely we...share a love of the Creation.*
However the tensions eventually play out between our opposing worldviews, however science and religion wax and wane in the minds of men, there remains the earthborn, yet transcendental, obligation we are both morally bound to share.

In other words, we've got no time for this argument about which of us is right. We have work to do: namely, to borrow Wilson's subtitle, to save life on earth. And John Dewey, if he were alive today, just might agree.

Old ideas give way slowly, he says....Moreover, the conviction persists--though history shows it to be a hallucination--that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume, an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them.

In other words, as Wilson suggests, it may be time to give up trying to convince one another of the superiority of our own beliefs in the science vs. religion debate in favor of addressing a problem of urgent interest. If we are out to reverse the devastating trends of the destruction of natural habitats, environmental degradation, global warming, privatization of water rights, and the depletion of natural resources, does it really matter if we all agree on the reasons for our action? Isn't a more important question not what you believe, but to what sort of life your beliefs call you? What does what you believe mean for your actions in the world; your relationship and responsibility toward your fellow humans; your relationship & responsibility toward the whole of the natural world? And if you are called to join in this struggle to reorient our lives and societies to work in conjunction with natural systems and with a reverence toward life, no matter whether it's your God who mandates it, or your reason that dictates it, or your spirit that affirms it...we can work together.

I say this in full recognition that not everyone sees this as a primary focus; there are those in conservative religion who decidedly do not consider Earth their home, so they are apt to treat it like a rest stop rest room, useful for now but hardly worthy of long-term attention. And there are those of a more secular orientation who may not treat seriously the implications of the interdependent web of all life and see the Earth and its resources as things to be controlled and exploited for short-term gain and pleasure. Not everyone considers Wilson's “earthbound yet transcendental obligation” to save life on earth as a high priority. But there are many...there are many who do, and they come from a wide variety of philosophical and religious and scientific and humanistic orientations, and it would be a shame—no, a tragedy, and maybe the greatest tragedy humans have faced so far if the stakes are as high as scientists insist—it would be a tragedy if we couldn't work together.

It may be, after all, that we just find ourselves working from different sides of the same myth. Take the story of the Tower of Babel. People come together to build a city and a tower in the center of the city that will reach to the heavens. God says of these humans: “Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them,” and he confuses their languages so that they will not understand each other and disperse over the earth. A traditional religious interpretation is that, in our technologically advanced society, we have undue confidence in our own powers, and the high tower symbolizes our desire to take the place of God. The sin is our pride; our inappropriate proximity to the powers of God.

Looked at another way, in building the Tower, moving toward some mythical source of power, perhaps, humanity is also moving away from the earth. We have, indeed, reached a point where it sometimes
feels like “nothing that we propose to do” is impossible, but the decisions about what to do are made in the Tower and the people in the Tower no longer have a connection with the people, the life, their home on the ground. The sin, here, is not the prideful proximity to God, but the distance from the earth itself. Drunk with all that we can do, we have lost any discernment about what we should do. We have lost touch with our “earthbound yet transcendental obligation” to all of life.

But we can regain it. We can dismantle the Tower and restore the Earth. We can honor, from a diversity of viewpoints, the grandeur of life.

So may it be.