

Our Precious Lives

Psalm 8

11th Sunday after Pentecost/ 25th August 2019

When I was in high school and college I spent a lot of time hanging out at my home church, the First Presbyterian Church in North Arlington, NJ. One day, in 1984, I was going through the shelves in the Christian Education office looking at books and old curriculum and one title caught my eye: *The Worry and Wonder of Being Human* by Albert Curry Winn.¹ There were several copies on the shelf. My high school class never used them. It looked like they had been sitting there for a while. It was around that time that I was asked to teach the senior highs on Sunday mornings, and work with the youth group in the evenings. This became the text, which I adapted for the class. I devoured that book, especially the first couple of chapters, chapters that explored the question of what it means to be human. Winn (d. 2012) was a pastor, a theologian, and president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. What struck me then was the way he showed that the Bible and theology had something significant and relevant to say about what it means to be human. Winn incorporated philosophy and theology, with citations from Calvin and Kierkegaard (that's when I first became interested in existentialism, which continues to shape my outlook and theology), and he brought contemporary literature and plays into the conversation—all of this written for a high school class.

Winn gave special attention to Psalm 8, and I remember being drawn to the profound paradox of this text, a text that beautifully captures something of the worry and wonder of being human. The worry and wonder are held in tension that, together, yield an experience of awe before God and God's creation.

Psalm 8 gives voice to the fundamental questions of life, which every being with consciousness has asked since the beginning of consciousness: Who am I? Why am I here? What is this world? How did I get here? Why here and not another time? What does it mean to be human? What is a life? What is it for? What is all of this *for*?

These are archetypal questions, old questions. They're situated deep in the oldest places of the psyche. They're always there, just below the surface of our daily frenetic lives. We often forget about them, run from them, push them down, replace them with compulsions and addictions and hobbies and careers and obsessions and binge watching Netflix. But stand by yourself at the edge of the ocean at dawn and they come to the surface with the rising of the sun. Or go to a remote place on a moonless night and look up at the heavens and gaze at the stars and soon you're channeling the spirit of the psalmist: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:3).

What are human beings?

When compared to the size and scale of the universe, how is it that you see us, God?

How is it that you notice us?

Compared with the beauty of creation, the universe—how can I compare?

How do I matter?

The mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wrestled with this existential shock before the scale of the universe. In his class work, *Pensées (Thoughts)*, he wrote, “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of the space of which I am ignorant and which knows me not, I am frightened, and I am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than here. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and this time been allotted to me? The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me.”

It's not surprising that we struggle with a sense of alienation in this universe—oddly, it can feel like we're the aliens in a universe (as far as we know) devoid of humans. It's easy to feel isolated. Insignificant. Alone. That's how Pascal and the psalmist felt. What Pascal and the psalmist didn't know is that the age of the universe is about 13.75 billion years old. What they didn't know is that the diameter of the observable universe is estimated at about 93 billion light-years. And a light-year (I looked it up) is a unit of length equal to just under 6 trillion miles. These numbers are difficult to comprehend. They're dizzying. Six trillion miles times 93. It's enough to give us a massive headache. What Pascal and the psalmist didn't know is that our entire solar system, of our sun, is right now cruising through the universe at an average speed of 514,000 mph, which is approximately 1/1300 of the speed of light. And what Pascal and the psalmist didn't know is that the entire universe is expanding, not contracting, and not slowing down, but speeding up and getting faster and faster.

It's easy to get lost in the cosmos. Or at least feel very small and insignificant. How are you feeling right now?

What are human beings that you are mindful of them? James Irwin (1930-1991), Apollo 15 astronaut, on the fourth human lunar landing expedition, [recalled](#), “As we got farther and farther away, the Earth diminished in size. Finally, it sank to the size of a marble, the most beautiful marble you can imagine. ...seeing this has to change a man.”

It's easy to feel small, inconsequential. What does our life on this big blue marble mean? The span of our lives compared to the age of the universe is a blip—and when compared with the age of the universe it's as if we've never even existed. A blink, shorter than a blink of an eye. It's estimated that we blink our eyes 28,000 times a day (I looked that up too). A fraction of a fraction of a blink. Infinitesimally small. Almost nothing. *Nothing*. Now that's an existential thought.

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Yes we are a blink—but what a wondrous and beautiful blink we are! Sure, we can be frightened, like Pascal, by those “infinite spaces.” But just consider this: a human being is *conscious* of *all* of this! And what is perhaps even more remarkable—we *are conscious that we are conscious!* The universe comes to consciousness through us and we need the universe in order to be conscious.

Zoom in, come back to earth, look at the beauty of this world, look at the people. Consider yourself as you look at the world, as you look at people—*really look*—consider yourself, look in the mirror, look at your life, your unique, beautiful, gift-of-a-life. Endowed with

breath, endowed with consciousness, endowed with reason, endowed with spirit or soul or *something* that makes you a bearer of the image of God. The mystical poet-priest-theologian Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) imagined what it might feel like to be a child born into the world, coming to awareness:

*A stranger here, strange things doth meet, strange glory see,
Strange treasures lodged in this fair world appear,
Strange, all, and new to me.
But that they mine should be, who nothing was,
That strangest is of all, yet brought to pass.*²

What are human beings that you are mindful of them? Why should God care? Because God has made us a little lower than God, and “crowned us with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5)—and value and worth. That glory and honor and value and worth are the ground of human dignity—remove these, take them away, and we lose our humanity. In fact, Rowan Williams insists that, “If there is one great intellectual challenge for our day, it is the pervasive sense that we are in danger of losing our sense of the human.”³

Yes, it’s true, we hear much in the church about sin, about falling short, about not measuring up. Yes, we hear a lot in the news about the pain and suffering inflicted by human beings. We can be destructive and violent and mean and cruel. We’ve discovered a way to destroy this planet many times over, and we may have irreversibly changed the climate. Yes, we are bound by sin. And there’s certainly enough in the news these days—day after day!—to prove Calvin right: human beings are totally depraved!

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But that’s not the full story. Our depravity doesn’t change the fact that our lives are still precious. Even John Calvin knew that. I get annoyed when people pick on Calvin. We need to remember that Calvin was a humanist. He wanted human beings to thrive.⁴

The divine spark remains within us. The image of God, the imprint of God is indelible. Our uniqueness in the cosmos remains. Sure, we have to be careful of *inflation*—of thinking we are more than we really are. This was/is perhaps the hubris of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, when humans threw God aside and made humanity the measure of all things. Inflation is someone boasting, with no humility, “[I am the chosen one](#).” Inflation is always dangerous. But we must also be careful of *diminishment*—of thinking we are less than we really are. A lot of Christians are guilty of this. Diminishment can be just as destructive as inflation.

Again, listen to Traherne (he’s one of my favorite poets) imagine an infant talking about her sacredness:

*Sweet Infancy!
O heavenly fire! O sacred Light!
How fair and bright!
How great am I
Whom the whole world doth magnify!*

*O heavenly Joy!
O great and sacred blessedness
Which I possess!
So great a joy
Who did into my arms convey?
From God above
Being sent, the gift doth me enflame,
To praise His Name.
The stars do move,
The sun doth shine, to show His Love.*

*O how divine
Am I! To all this sacred wealth,
This life and health,
Who rais'd? Who mine
Did make the same? What hand divine!⁵*

This might smack of arrogance, “Oh how divine am I!” Perhaps. But what if we need to restore a sense of the divine to human life— isn’t this what Jesus embodied and offered?— because there are plenty people walking around who don’t think they matter, who don’t think that their lives matter, who take no delight in themselves, who don’t think they count. There was a time when our own Constitution counted black Americans as [3/5ths](#) of a person—3/5ths of a person! And there were plenty of folks in the nineteenth century who turned to the Bible to justify this blatant inhumanity. Today, there are people being told that their lives don’t fully count, don’t matter, or matter less than others—and when that happens we won’t think twice about placing them in cages—indefinitely. We need to remember our divinity to correct, counter, and compensate for our inhumanity.

Human life is holy. Our life—your life, my life, every life—is precious. As we’ve explored throughout this summer sermon series, your story, my story, every story is precious and matters and needs to be honored. Our lives—these beautiful blinks—are precious because we bear the image of the living God.

And so we have a responsibility, a duty, to receive what has been given us—this *life*— and to use it wisely, being good stewards of our “glory and honor,” being good stewards, being generous with what has been given to us. We are called to be stewards of our stories and the stories of others, to honor their humanity. You matter. Because through you—*your* story—God continues to bless the world. Through you—through *you*—God continues to bless the world. Consider all of this at the edge of the ocean at dawn, or below the vault of heaven on a starry night, or right here in worship and stand in wonder—or, better, kneel, *kneel* before the majesty and beauty and wonder and glory and love of the Lord. *Amen.*

¹ Albert Curry Winn, *The Worry and Wonder of Being Human* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966).

² Thomas Traherne, “The Salutation,” *Selected Writings*, Dick Davis, ed. (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 1980), 20.

³ Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), 25.

⁴ See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Marilynne Robinson’s discussion of Calvin’s humanism [here](#).

⁵ Thomas Traherne, “The Rapture,” *Selected Writings*, 42-43. The English composer Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) set these poems to music in his cantata [*Dies Natalis*](#) (Day of Birth), Op. 8, 1938-1939. I’m using Finzi’s version of the text here.