

The Worry and Wonder of Being Human Psalm 8

Trinity Sunday/ 12th June 2022

When I was in college, in the early 1980s, I was asked to teach the senior high church school at my home church in North Arlington, NJ. It was up to me to choose the curriculum. I stumbled upon a book on a shelf in the Christian educator's office with this curious title, *The Worry and Wonder of Being Human*.¹ It was written twenty years earlier, in 1966, by pastor-theologian Albert Curry Winn, professor of theology and president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The discovery of that book was a gift to me. I devoured its opening chapter. Winn quoted the most fascinating thinkers, writers, and poets who opened a world to me; each in their own way, pushed me deep into the question: What does it mean to be human? Winn's book, particularly the first chapter, was built around Psalm 8, which came to be one of my favorite psalms: "O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens...." And these two verses held me in their grip: "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? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:1, 3-5). It's this paradox that held me: the awareness of finitude, our nothingness when compared to the size and marvels of the universe and human existence that reflects God's glory and majesty. Both the worry and the wonder of being human. Both-and.

It's worth reflecting on this tension, this paradox, this fundamental experience of human existence because it's inherent to the life of faith. We probably don't spend a lot of time dwelling in this existential space. We fill our lives with all kinds of distractions and obsessions to avoid wrestling with and coming to terms with human experience. Maybe we're too busy being human, living our lives, caring for children and loved ones, paying the bills and concerned about rising gas prices, following our dreams, and waiting for summer vacation. Maybe we're too busy living our lives to consider what it means to live.

Perhaps considering the weighty thoughts of the psalmist is depressing. Ruminating on the immensity of the universe, the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) encountered a similar kind of existential shock. "When I consider the short duration of my life," he said, "swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."²

Pascal had no idea how infinite those spaces really are. The observable universe is 93 billion light-years in diameter. Some scientists believe its actual size is even scarier. The universe is thought to be 250 times larger than that. How do you feel when you hear these numbers? Don't they make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside?

"Who am I, O God, that you should be mindful of me—*of me*—that you should care for me?" Care for my life, my infinitesimally small life; it's almost as if I've never lived. The length of our lives, maybe "three-score and twenty," as scripture says (Ps. 90:10), is but a blink of an

eye—a very quick blink—when compared to the age of the universe and the vastness of time. So brief, in fact, the universe hardly takes notice, so brief it’s as if we were never born—a near-death experience.

Warms the cockles of our hearts, doesn’t it?

I recently heard philosopher Bernard Kastrup talk about the history of our species on this planet. Kastrup is a very smart dude. He has a Ph.D. in philosophy and a Ph.D. in computer engineering and worked at the CERN laboratory outside Geneva. “We are monkeys,” he says, “that popped into existence yesterday. And human intellect came into existence seconds ago.” We have four billion years of biological evolution behind us, two million years for our genus before the appearance of homo sapiens. Therefore, it is preposterous, he says, to think that human beings have the intellectual capacity, that we have evolved enough to capture everything salient about reality. To believe otherwise is not arrogance; it’s profoundly naïve.³ There is so much about nature and reality that cannot be corralled by the intellect, alien to us, unknown.

Another philosopher, the great Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), had a more optimistic take on human existence. “Two things,” he said, “fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” These words are on his tombstone in the German city formerly known as Königsberg (today, Kaliningrad, the capital of the Russian province sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland). Here we are closer to the psalmist’s claim, “Yet you, [God,] have made me little lower than you, and crowned me with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:5).

Ruminating on human experience, like the psalmist is doing in this text, can lead us to a greater awareness of the worry and wonder of being human and places our humanity within the wider frame of God’s sovereign love. Being aware of our finitude can be an expression of grace. There’s a time to claim our glory, majesty, and dignity as human beings, endowed as we are with the Spirit of God, created in the image of God, and to live from this awareness. And there’s a time when we need to come up against our limits and remember that we are not God, that we are small and powerless and naïve and fearful creatures, full of anxiety.

It was Winn who first introduced me to the Christian existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who knew a lot about all of this. I came to love the word existential (still do) and was drawn to Kierkegaard and those influenced by him. His life and his writings gave (and give) expression to my own struggles and questions about what it means to exist. Winn begins his book citing Kierkegaard: “Where am I? Who am I? How came I here? What is this thing called the world? What does this word mean? Who is it that has lured me into the thing, and now leaves me there? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted, why not made acquainted with its manners and customs ...? How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? Why should I have an interest in it? Is it not a voluntary concern? And if I am to be compelled to take part in it, where is the director? I should like to make a remark to him. Is there no director? Where should I turn with my complaint?”⁴

My mentor at Princeton Seminary, James Loder (1931-2001), would often ask, “What is a life, and what is it for?”⁵ Loder was heavily influenced by Kierkegaard. I had an entire

semester on Kierkegaard taught by Loder. These soulful questions, taken together, are like a strong, steady current flowing through the river of my life from an early age. I am a Christian—and remain a Christian—because the gospel addresses, speaks to, and helps me wrestle with these ultimate questions.

In 1835, Kierkegaard traveled alone in northern Zealand, north of Copenhagen, and spent time on an isolated beach. With a “look of contemplation,” he said, he looked out on the sea and recounted his experience in his journal, which I think we all relate to: “Often, as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity, my eye catching not a single sail on the vast surface, and only the sea framed the sky and the sky the sea, while the other hand the busy hum of life grew silent and the birds sang their vespers. . . . When the whole, seen thus in perspective, presented only the larger, bolder outlines and I didn’t lose myself in detail as one so often does, but saw the whole in its totality, I gained the strength to grasp things differently, to admit how often I myself made mistakes, to forgive the mistakes of others. –As I stood there . . . alone and forsaken and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my nothingness, while the sure flight of the birds reminded me on the other hand of Christ’s words, ‘Not a sparrow will fall to the earth without your heavenly Father’s will’ [Matthew 10:29], I felt at one and the same time how great and how insignificant I am.”⁶ *Both-and*.

And when these moments occur, and every time they occur, we become more conscious of our humanity, both its glory and beauty as well as its limits. We’re given the ability, as Kierkegaard said, “to grasp things differently” – reality, creation, everything – and we’re given a greater awareness of God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Sure, reflecting upon our finitude can scare us and depress us. However, it can also lead us deeper into love. In 2015, Kate Bowler, a church historian at Duke Divinity School, age 35, was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer and given two years to live. In her book *No Cure for Being Human (And others things I need to hear)*, she writes about her experience and what she has learned and is learning. She writes with humility and honesty, as well as humor. I heard her speak several weeks ago at Princeton Seminary. She was the keynote speaker for Reunion. She’s a beautiful soul, and she’s hilarious. She’s not afraid to be real and face her life. For, “. . . no matter how carefully we schedule our days,” she says, “master our emotions, and try to wring our best life now from our better selves, we cannot solve the problem of finitude. We will always want more. We need more. We are carrying the weight of caregiving and addiction, chronic pain and uncertain diagnosis, struggling teenagers and kids with learning disabilities, mental illness and abusive relationships.” However, she says, profoundly, truthfully, with an insight that echoes the psalmist and Kierkegaard and countless others who have written about human existence, “In my finite life, the mundane has begun to sparkle. The things I love—the things I should love—become clearer, brighter.”⁷

Scripture bears witness that our greatness and insignificance, our mundane, finite lives, are held by a sovereign God. Did you notice that Psalm 8 is held together by these words, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Placed at the beginning and the end. We exist—our lives, time, creation, reality, the universe— within God’s sovereignty. And when we have the slightest awareness of this and fathom its mystery, we stand in wonder before

it all and stumble into doxology and praise. “Wonder,” Kierkegaard said, “is the beginning of all deeper understanding.”⁸ Wonder leads us toward God, not the intellect. Perhaps wonder is the only way to approach the Trinity.

Albert Curry Winn wrote, “For the Christian, the worry of being human is very small compared with the wonder of it.... The wonder of our destiny beckons us on. What shall we be when God finishes what [God] has begun in us? It exceeds all our dreaming and imagining.”⁹ And wonder sends us forward into the world, into our lives!



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

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (“Thoughts”) from 1669. Cited in William Barrett, *Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1986), 8.

³ From Dr. John Price’s interview with Dr. Bernard Kastrup, “Decoding Jung’s Metaphysics,” Episode 79: The Sacred Speak podcast. <https://soundcloud.com/thesacredspeaks/79-bernardo-kastrup-decoding-jungs-metaphysics>.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition* (1843).

⁵ The core theological question posed by James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). For more on Loder, see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Notebooks*, eds. Howard and Edna Hong, cited in Christopher B. Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 117.

⁷ Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)* (Random House, 2021).

⁸ Cited in Barnett, 119.

⁹ Winn, 31.