

I joked during Bible study that the only way to preach a sermon on what it means to be human is with a truckload of trepidation. There are only about a million potential pitfalls - it's like a "choose your own adventure" for how you might fail. Especially since I preach to a congregation with a bunch of professors and scientists who are going to begin from a place of balking at creation stories. So I hope you will permit me a bit of a preamble before we dive in. And that you will know that I preach not only with trepidation but also a heap of humility - because I, like each of us, am still becoming human.

At the start, I need you to notice that our scripture reading this morning is a poem. Quite purposefully, I might add. I chose a poem very deliberately - because biblical poetry is distinct from other parts of biblical literature. Poetry does something different in us and for us than some of the more explicitly instructional scripture passages. And while poetry can teach us - while we can approach reading it as if we are to uncover the "correct" message. Elaine James reminds us, "that to imagine this is the only thing biblical poems can do, is needlessly limiting." Biblical poetry is its own way of knowing and viewing and processing the world - which is particularly helpful when trying to tease out some understanding on the infinitely complex question of what it means to be human.

And so I want to invite you to explore alongside me - not as a scientific enterprise - but quite explicitly through the lens of poetry and theology. There are scientific explorations of this topic - but that is not the task of this moment. So do not hear the scripture as if it were meant to be scientific fact. It is not trying to be. It is trying to be poetry - to be its own way of knowing and viewing and processing the world - that is not greater or lesser than science, nor is it in competition with it. Instead, "[Poetry] invites us to look closely and listen to words, to notice how they trigger associates and invite the mind to play with meaning, how they summon feelings that take us by surprise. [Poetry] slows us down", writes Marilyn McEntyre. "[Poems] teach us to stop and go in before we go on. They play at the edges of mystery, holding a tension between line and sentence, between sense and reason, between [epiphany] and the deeply, comfortingly familiar."

Psalms 8 does this - it wraps the comforting expanse of God - the Creator, the beginning and end, the One beyond our control and grasp, the love that unites - it wraps the infinite God around the finitude and mortality of humanity - bookending itself in praise. What does it mean to be human - it means we are not God. We are not the biggest thing in the universe - or the best thing. There is strange comfort in being wrapped in that expanse - part of something larger than ourselves. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The poem then draws us into the familiar imagery of another poem - the poem of creation. Maybe it is new for you to think of Genesis 1 as poetry - but it absolutely is. The rhythm of there was morning and there was evening on each day. The repetition of, and God saw that it was good. It's poetry. Inviting us to the edges of mystery.

But we have a long cultural tradition of reading this passage as something other than poetry. Of hearing these words and seeing humanity as the pinnacle of creation. Which makes all of my evolutionary biologist friends in the choir squirm. And it makes careful

Bible readers squirm too - humanity is not the culmination of creation in the Genesis poem - Sabbath is. But the baggage of years and years of thinking differently about it remains. We get caught thinking of ourselves as superior to the creation around us as opposed to a part of it. We forget that we are made from the dirt of the ground. We exploit rather than tend to all that God has placed around us.

And yet - there *is* a distinctiveness to humanity - of course there is - these scriptures are human testimony to what life lived with the Living God is like. The assertion of scripture is that we are each made in the image of God. God's very breath is breathed into each and every one of us.

We shudder at words like dominion over and rule - and yet the lived reality of our time is that human impact on the natural world is dominating the health and well being of creatures and organisms everywhere. And so claiming that we are not is just an abdication of responsibility. We cannot shrink from the charge to steward the earth - to care, to tend, to serve, to love the creation as God does.

Even still - who are humans that God should think on us? Who are we that God would imagine us, breathe into us, bring us to life?

We did this little thought experiment with our kids at dinner the other night - what does it mean to be human we asked. 10 fingers and 10 toes? Well what about people with 11 toes? Or what if we lost a thumb in an accident? Ok...hmmm....we can communicate - well lots of animals can do that. Hmmm...we can talk. There are plenty of non-verbal people - including babies - aren't they human?

We stumbled onto the same problem that the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas did. He was a Jew, reckoning with the horrors of World War 2 when he wrote his book *Totality and Infinity*. In it he recognizes that any definition of humanity leaves someone out. And that becomes especially problematic when we then use that criteria to de-humanize others.

In our 21st Century world - we do not have to look hard for the de-humanization of groups - it has been done based on the color of skin, on gender and sexual identity - it is being done in Israel and Palestine right this moment, it is done in our civic discourse when we call differing viewpoints trash or refugees a poison. And dehumanization in and of itself is bad - but the violence, terrorism, torture, mistreatment, and killing that happen as a result of it is truly horrific. It is inhumane.

Levinas argues that humanity is something we encounter in the other - and that because the Image of God is imprinted on each other - we recognize and are drawn closer to God in our humanity. This sounds like good philosophy to me - it's lovely and hopeful and feels right - but what do I know - I was never all that good at philosophy. In fact - this interpretation of Levinas is really my professor, Stacy Johnson's interpretation - because I could not make heads or tails of Levinas' actual writing.

And so I continue to wrestle with my answer to the question of what it means to be human. I am drawn to Luke Powery's idea that we are still striving to become human. We haven't quite made it yet. We are becoming. Each of us. All of us. It's a process - and not even a linear one.

I wonder - I wonder if we get closer to an answer if we do not think in terms of capacity and instead in terms of purpose. That what makes us human is not how many fingers or toes we have or the color of our skin or the way we communicate, but instead is rooted in our purpose - our calling as creatures made in the image of God.

And here we return to the poetry of Psalm 8. Through even the children and infants, you have founded a bulwark against evil - a stronghold that silences wickedness, says verse 2. We are a bulwark against evil. You are a light against darkness; a caretaker of all the earth; you are a co-creator of this world - making it as good and healthy as it can be. You are a steadfast hope in the midst of despair; a voice of justice and mercy in times of trouble; peace in times of violence; love in times of hatred. Even children do this - perhaps especially children do this. What if what makes you human is that you stand as a testament to the goodness God spoke over creation in the beginning. Or at least that what it means to be human is that we are called to do and be those things. Called to bear and be the image of God in this world. Alive and at work. Human because of our purpose, not our capacity.

A purpose that continues to grow and unfold within and among us. We are still becoming human. We still act and think in inhumane ways sometimes. We do not always recognize the humanity of others. We deny the image of God in ourselves and in others. But we are called to this purpose whether we are living it or not. We are a stronghold against evil and we are still becoming -

Thanks be to God, our Lord - how majestic is your name in all the earth.
Amen