

## **Psalm 8**

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants

You have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

What are humans 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.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!\*

## **Signs of the Times: What are Humans?** - July 24, 2022

### *Psalm 8*

When I start my car, a screen comes on with a computer generated map. The map is tied to the GPS in my smartphone and the map tells me all the turns I need in order to get to my destination. Quite amazing, isn't it? Such technology didn't exist twenty years ago and just started to be built into cars maybe five years ago.

But what is more amazing is not only can my car plot the route to where I want to go, it guesses where I want to go based on the day of the week and the time of day. For example, Monday through Friday in the morning, the system guesses I want to go to the school where I teach. In the afternoon, it guesses I want to go home. However on Sunday mornings, it automatically knows that I probably want to go church. I never told the computer my schedule, it learned it on its own.

Friends, what my car's mapping system is doing is an example of what is called "artificial intelligence." Artificial Intelligence, or AI for short, is a way of programming computers to respond to our requests and also to adjust themselves as they learn more about how we act. If you tell an online music application the names of some of the songs you like, the computer can create an entire list of songs that it thinks you would like based not just on your ideas but the ideas of lots of people whose musical tastes are similar to yours.

The way computers "learn" and modify themselves is not terribly different from how a baby learns how to control its environment. How do babies learn? They experiment. We might not call it experimentation, but babies are constantly figuring out the world around them. They figure out how to use their hands. They learn how to shut their eyes to make things go dark. They learn what is good tasting and bad tasting. They learn to use their voices to get attention when they are hungry or want to be held. Babies teach themselves how to crawl, then walk, then run mostly by falling down a lot. They try one way. If it doesn't work, they try a different way.

The Google company recently put one of its employees on leave because he claimed he had invented a machine that was so sophisticated in its Artificial Intelligence abilities, that it answered questions and held conversations as well as a seven year old human being. The Google scientist claimed that his machine was alive. In other words, he said his machine could think for itself.

Well, in 2022, few scientists believe we have machines that can think for themselves at any level. Nonetheless, there are robot dogs and robot butlers and all kinds of devices which act somewhat close to the living things they were designed to imitate. Some researchers do predict that we will someday have machines that will think for themselves and will replace humans, humans whom they call "mere bags of meat."

And that's an interesting question, isn't it? Am I a "bag of meat?" Ask an angry bear and yes, I suppose I am. I wonder how tasty I am? Of course for us humans, cows, pigs, and chickens can also be understood as "bags of meat" which many people consume in great quantities.

So if for some computer scientists I am a "bag of meat" and for me, many of nature's creatures are also "bags of meat" what is so different or special about me, a human being? In other words, what is so special about my being human, if anything?

The psalmist wrote, asking God, "What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Clearly, the psalmist is making two claims: First, there is a creator God and second, this creator God made human beings and does care about them.

Now these are interesting assertions. Is there a creator God at all? Let's assume, for the moment, there is no such thing as a creator. Let us assume that who we are, all we see, every aspect of the physical universe came into being on its own, no outside help required.

Indeed, some have speculated that the universe we see around us is simply a successful version of the right "pieces" coming together: the right elements, the right physical laws, the right mixture of matter to enable this particular version of the universe to exist. Perhaps there were other universes before this one having different properties and different physical laws. Perhaps they were around for longer or shorter times than this one. Ask any Graphics Novel fan about the "multiverse." They can tell you about all the alternative versions of life and existence.

Whew! Am I getting esoteric or what? Multiverses, alternative creations, what am I talking about?

These ideas do matter because to state that there is a creator who is somehow responsible for making the reality as we see it — that is a very important idea. Recognizing that there is God is fundamentally a very human idea. Only humans, as far as I can tell, are even capable of appreciating the very idea that there is God.

What are you saying, preacher? Of course there is God. Period. Now stop your nonsense and go on.

Well, not quite yet.

This sermon series, "The Signs of the Times," is about how churches and members should respond to the social justice issues of our day. We started by defining social justice. We moved on to explore the standards, rules, or laws by which we should use to bring about social justice. But now we get to the bedrock argument. Should social justice even be something that concerns human beings in the first place?

In other words, what are human beings?

The concept behind Psalm 8 is about defining the very identity of humanity. Now we might say, why is that an issue at all? Clearly human beings are in charge of this thing called earth. We call the shots. We decide what to do with the earth's resources. We decide what to eat, what to drink, what to build, what to destroy, what to change. If we decide to plant a forest, that's our decision. If we decide to burn down the Amazon, that, too, is our decision.

Wait, our authority goes further. Human beings decide how we will treat each other and over the centuries we have enacted all kinds of systems for how we should get along.

Every human society has some form of government. The power might be vested in one individual with the ability to affect the lives of millions. Or the power may be shared among a group or even many persons. Humans have developed religions of all sorts to define their understanding of what cannot be explained: the mystery of gods or a single God. All kinds of rituals accompany religious beliefs, some of which have involved literal killing of animals or even other human beings to worship God or gods. Every society has ways of determining how wealth is divided. In some systems, a few are super-rich at the expense of most. In other places, governments divide wealth among people.

Over the centuries, endless combinations of governance, religion, and wealth distribution have been tried with varying degrees of success. How do we measure success? Well, if a society is able to stay together for a considerable period of time, perhaps it is successful. By that definition, very few societies can be considered successful. Perhaps the Jews could be called the most successful society because they have been in existence for over 3000 years. Yes, successful, despite repeated attempts to destroy them wherever they have settled.

And what is the most important truth of the Jewish people? The heart of Judaism is this: Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). In short, central to the Jewish tradition is that they acknowledge a creator God who is in charge of the universe. For Jews, it is God and not humans who run the show.

Let's think about what that means. If, as Jews assert, there is a God, then it means that human beings are responsible not only to themselves, but to something/someone beyond them. Now you might say, "Of course, God is in charge." But the simple truth is, friends, that while we might say with our voices that God is in charge, do we act as if God is in charge?

Face it, friends, much of human misery stems from one fundamental cause: we suffer as individuals, as nations, and as the human race whenever people cast themselves in the role of God. Why is there war in Ukraine? Because Vladimir Putin decided he was god and had the power to order his armies to fight and kill and destroy. Why are there mass shootings in the United States? Because the shooters

made themselves gods and granted themselves the power to kill on their terms. Moreover, the laws of most states granted them easy access to weapons. Why are there hearings going on about what happened on January 6, 2021, in Washington? Because a handful of people decided they were gods and could force their will on the American people all for the sake of retaining power they did not earn.

I can go on, but whether it is life on an international scale or even life in our workplaces or families, whenever human beings cast themselves as gods, horrible things are bound to happen.

Now the atheists in the world believe there is no God. There is no creator. There is nothing to whom human beings are responsible. If that is the case, then it makes all human beings gods, free to do what we want until someone stops us. Moreover, in the absence of a God to place human beings in their God-assigned role as caretakers of creation, there is nothing to distinguish me as a human from any other creature. Without a God, I truly am a sack of meat no different from you sacks of meat out there or for that matter, the sacks of meat called cows, chickens, and pigs. I am therefore, just like you, responsible for nothing and responsible to no one.

Under this scenario, what Lord Voldemort told Harry Potter is correct, “There is no good or evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it.” (JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone). The Lord Voldemort of fiction is reflected in reality of human history: from the Caesars of Rome, to Lenin and Stalin, to Adolph Hitler, to Putin, and possibly Trump and his enablers. They sought power only for the sake of having power and when they grabbed power, horrible things happened. People died.

Psalms 8 acknowledges the concept of power, but power is assigned to God and only to God to use as God chooses. We see time and again the disastrous consequences for the world when humans act as god. On the other hand, we see what happens when a society called the Jews have trusted God’s power and have tried to make their lives God-centered and not human-centered. The Jews are still here despite all the attempts to destroy them over the centuries.

I understand that there are many people who question the existence of God. Most of us have experienced hard times during which God seems very remote. Yet, when we step out of our homes and into the blazing heat, we remember that human beings are at least partly responsible for climate change. In other words, we are not caring for creation as God intended for us to do. Rather, we are abusing it.

Caring for creation is more than just “having dominion over the works of [God’s] hands.” Indeed, God has “put all things under [our] feet.” In the world of the Psalmist, human beings have a definite purpose: We are the managers of God’s creation. Therefore we are responsible for making creation work to the glory of God and therefore benefit each other.

In a world without God, without human beings accepting and actively caring for creation and caring for each other, we are indeed merely animated “bags of meat.” We should be grabbing as much power as we can — exclusively to benefit ourselves.

I tremble with fear for our society today. Fewer people believe in God and many who say they believe have constructed their own versions of a god who conveniently agrees with all their choices. The God of the Jews and the God of Jesus is a standard to which human beings should adhere. We certainly don't fully understand God and we humans do a magnificent job of misinterpreting God's will. Yet, as we discussed last week, God does provide a path for us to follow in how to manage this world and care for each other.

Personally, I'd rather try to follow God's standards, as imperfectly as I understand them, than to trust exclusively in the leadership and guidance of my fellow “bags of meat.” With God, we know our place. We have our work. We care for creation and each other — not just ourselves.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.