

Sermon: What Are Humans?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, January 5, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy New Year! On this particular Sunday, the first Sunday of the calendar year of 2025, and in light of our recent celebration of the incarnation, of the Christ child coming into the world, becoming human, taking the form of an infant, I would like to invite you to be in awe, to ponder over this question: “What are human beings?”

Of course, this question is not of my own, but posed in Psalm 8, by David the psalmist king bursting forth in praise as he gazes upon the vast splendour of the heavens that God created, and opens the psalm with this declaration: “*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*”

David’s adoration is inspired by his recognition of a contradicting reality, of God whose glory is set above the heavens, whose fingers establish the moon and stars, yet who is mindful of humanity. “*What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*” (Psalm 8:4)

Gazing upon the heavens, David’s awe is not difficult to understand. When David looked upon the stars in Psalm 8, he was only able to see a tiny fraction of the 100 billions stars in our galaxy. The field of astronomy has taken great strides in the past century. Through the advent of telescopic lens, and placing them in and around the orbit of the earth, high above any cloud covering, we are now able to gaze upon the vast expanse of the universe, and our souls sing of the sheer enormity of God’s creation. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, alone is spread over a 100,000-light-year expanse, and that is only one among millions in the universe.

Indeed, our understanding of the heavens, incomplete as it is, leaves us with two thoughts: the incomprehensible greatness of our creator, and the inconsequential smallness of humanity. If gazing upon the heavens reveals to us our own smallness, what then is the answer to David’s bold question: What are human beings that God should be mindful of them?

Before we look into the Scriptures, particularly the Creation story in Genesis 1, I like to take a detour of the other creation myths prominent in the Ancient Near East.

The Enuma Elish, also known as The Seven Tablets of Creation, is the Babylonian myth whose title is derived from the opening lines, "When on High". It tells the story of the great god Marduk's victory over the forces of chaos, and his establishment of order at the beginning of the world. Now different traditions tell this story in different ways, but most prominently, Marduk, the patron god of the city of Babylon, led a rebellion of younger gods against goddess Tiamat, the goddess of chaos and supposedly their mother. When Marduk's arrow finally penetrated Tiamat, thus killing her and splitting her in two, her corpse became the foundation of heavens and earth, and her tears became the flow of waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Out of her blood and the blood of her champions, human beings were then created. They were thus created through violence and bloodshed, and imposed upon them were the service of the gods, thus setting the gods free to pursue whatever they desire.

In another creation myth, the Greek mythology, human beings fair a bit better, but not by much. They were created as an afterthought, by a minor god Prometheus, out of mud, and the goddess Athena supposedly breathed life into this creation. Since man was the last of all that were created, and since all other good skills and qualities were already assigned to other creatures, Prometheus made man stand upright, kind of out of pity, and gave him fire. However, this made Zeus exceedingly angry as the god of all gods was not very fond of man. So as sort of the punishment, Zeus bestowed upon man Pandora, the first woman, and gifted her a jar full of misfortune, disease and plagues, and dangled at the bottom of that jar a sliver of hope. I won't go into more details, but suffice to say humanity does not fare well at all in the Greek mythology, as human beings are just playthings for the gods.

So if we were to answer David's question based on those two creation myths, one prominent in the time the Old Testament, the other prominent in the time of the New Testament, we would have no choice but to conclude in the negative: What are human beings? Not really much! However, the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments beg to differ.

We see in the account of Genesis 1, that God created the heavens and the earth, not out of conflict or struggle, but simple by saying so. God

said, *“Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.* (Genesis 1:3-4) In fact, every day God spoke, God created; and everything God created, God saw it as good, with the exception of the sixth day, the last of God’s creative days. Human beings were created in God’s image, male and female God created them, and God saw them as ‘very good’. Not just good, but very good!

Humanity was God’s crowning achievement, as David the psalmist praises, *“Yet you have made them a little lower than the gods (or Elohim in Hebrew), and crowned them with glory and honour”* (v.5) This divine coronation is manifested in the way God has *“given them dominion over the works of God’s hand”, and has “put all things under their feet”: sheep, oxen, beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea* (v.6-8).

But why? Given all that God has created, and the created order clearly displays God’s power, wisdom, greatness and glory, why then would the Lord God confer the divine image upon humanity, and crown us with glory and honour?

Not only so, God also blesses humanity. The OT passage today, in Numbers 6:22-27, contains the so-called ‘Aaronic Blessing’, where the Lord God commanded Aaron and the priestly order after him to bless the Israelites, saying: *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”*

Since Israel as a nation was supposed to play the role of priest to all nations, one could argue that the Aaronic priestly blessing is not limited solely to the Israelites, God’s chosen, but in fact is open to be received by all people. This is consistent with the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:3, that *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* What are human beings that God should create us, crown us, and bless us?

Now, I don’t want you as hearers to come away thinking that the pastor is preaching an anthropocentric sermon that elevates the place of humanity. I am well aware of the futility of humanity and the brokenness of human society. I am well aware and aggrieved that in this contemporary society, human rights are often trampled upon, human dignity elusive, and individual human beings are often seen by political and corporate elites as mere consumers whose patriotic duty is to simply buy, buy, and buy. Left to our own devices, we seem to find new ways to degrade and debase one another. All one has to do is get on the social media platform X, and

witness vitriol spewed out by fellow human beings for one to lose any hope for humanity.

The cynical side of me says that our society is totally broken, beyond repair; yet the pastoral side of me says that precisely because humanity is broken that is why we are in need of the grace of God in Christ. The question posed by the psalmist, 'what are human beings?', is most appropriately answered by the book of Hebrews, in pointing to the person of Christ.

According to author and theologian Bonnie L. Pattison, writing for *Feasting on the Word*, the author of Hebrews invites us to read David's thoughts in Genesis, and in Psalm 8, through a christological lens. "When we do this, we see that God's subordination of the beasts of the fields, birds of the air, and fish of the sea to man and woman at creation pictures a much bigger drama played out in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Just as God crowned the first man and woman "with glory and honor" and "put all things under their feet," the writer of Hebrews makes clear, this divine act that David ponders is ultimately patterned after Christ, on whom ultimate glory and honor is bestowed because of his suffering and death."

In the same way, the Apostle Paul explains in Galatians 4:4-5, that "*when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.*" Incarnation is redemption. Christ came so we could be redeemed, and received as adopted children. And through Christ, we are no longer slaves, but children and heirs to the Kingdom of God.

Gazing up at the heavens, David stood in amazement before God who hang a moon and billions of stars in the night sky, and at the same time is mindful of humanity. A millennium later, Jesus, a descendant of David, reconciles humanity to the heavenly Father. So as the Spirit of God through the Son enters into our heart, we come to a full realization of our place before God, as we cry out, not in exaggeration but in adoration and awe, saying "Abba! Father!".

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**