

## All Nature Sings: Humans

*A sermon preached on Psalm 139 and Acts 2:1-21 on Sunday, May 19, 2024,  
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### I.

I learned this week that the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History is currently collecting answers to the question, “what does it mean to be human?” The responses are telling. Of course there are the ones you might imagine about thinking and feeling, acting and being. “To be human is to choose to love,” says Brian from China. “To be human is to have the potential to enjoy hurting others,” posits Meredith from Pennsylvania. And the ever so slightly less-serious: “to be human is to live, laugh, love,” says Ella from England. Or my favorite: “to be human,” 8-year old Amelia from Moldova tells us, “is to have abilities, to have consciousness, to wear clothes, and take care of the environment.”<sup>1</sup> (Here’s to Amelia!)

When one says they’ll preach on “humans,” one quickly realizes just how many nuances of the human experience and condition to capture, how many words they could say. (One also pledges not to say them all, and perhaps to pick a narrower focus of the sermon in the future!) Because we could wonder: what does it mean to be a human being? Who qualifies? What characteristics are uniquely revealed in human expression? What is human about our living? These folks I just mentioned have given the Smithsonian Museum a glimpse, but what else might it mean?

### II.

Scientists would tell us that uniquely among other creatures, humans stand upright with unusually large brains and useful appendages. Humans tell

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<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, *Human Origins Initiative*, <https://humanorigins.si.edu/about/become-involved/submit-your-response-what-does-it-mean-be-human>.

stories, describe ideas and feelings, hold responsibilities, exercise the capacity to speak and listen, to know and be known. But an only-scientific rendering of human living has its limits. Take this line of thinking much farther, and we're in philosophers' territory. Questions like, "what does it mean to be human?" and "how should we live?" lead to ideas like "I think therefore I am," and "I doubt, therefore I am," and "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am."<sup>2</sup> (Philosophers, God bless 'em!) Keep going, and we're with the artists and the poets who place the human in relation to others. Here, we experience descriptions, renderings, images of beauty and wonder and awe, suffering and fear and anger, and love above all else. "Imagine all the people sharing all the world," the artists invite us. Then we're to the politicians, who would have us believe that how humans are different from each other matters more than how we're the same. Of humans, the capitalists want to commodify. The technocrats want to artificialize. The authoritarians want to rule. And the libertarians – just leave alone!

Now of course I'm oversimplifying a bit here. As we say about Baptists that inasmuch as there are Baptists, there are different ways of being Baptists! Similarly, inasmuch as there are humans, there are ideas about what it means to be one, right? But as we continue to distill and understand the human experience, we enter the realm of the psalmist, the pastor, the practitioner of faith and hope and love, and no less than the divine Creator. Because to be human is to be alive in this world: created and creative, thoughtful and responsible, open-hearted and open-minded, one part of a much wider whole, knit together on the inside and the outside to all who surround us.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito\\_ergo\\_sum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito_ergo_sum)

### III.

Among all the created world, Genesis tells us that it is only humans that God deems as *imago Dei*, uniquely bearing the image and likeness of God. Humans are formed from the dust of the earth, humans from humus, and animated with the breath of God. From one human creature comes a second, both imbued with the soul and the image of their Creator. The humans engage in discovery: discovery of the world around them, of pleasure and beauty and anger and hope, of their limits and possibilities, of their faults and finitude.

All of the words of scripture that follow represent a human response to God. But there are two in particular I want us to explore today that illuminate a particular way to be human, and perhaps, a particular way to live in all our humanity.

First from Psalm 139. Like many of the other Psalms we've been reading together this month, the words of the psalmist speak praise to God and of the intimacy of relationship with the Creator. Highest among the qualities the psalmist praises the Creator for is that of knowing. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me," he says, knowing when I rest or rise, knowing when I walk or talk, knowing the words I speak even before I do, knowing the deepest corners of my inner life, even knowing my enemies. This divine knowledge is beyond human comprehension, the psalmist says.

For not only does the Lord know, but the Lord is there. *Present*. Present in the hemming in, behind and before. Present in the farthest reaches of the earth, from heaven to Sheol, from morning to night, from darkness to light. Present from the very beginning to the very end.

When we step back and consider the picture of God and human life that the psalmist is detailing, perhaps we are struck by the intimacy of the whole endeavor. Indeed he seems to say, there is no corner of human life that God does not know, no place in human living that God is not there. God knows everything and is everywhere. This is not a God to try and run and hide from, no. This God is like the mother rabbit whose runaway bunny wants to test the limits of her presence – like going up the mountain, away on a sailboat, swimming through a stream, flying through the air to leave her. “I’m going to become a crocus in a hidden garden,” the bunny declares to his mama. “If you become a crocus in a hidden garden,” his mother responds with a wink, “I will be a gardener and find you.”<sup>3</sup> The God who finds and knows and is ever-present is a God that invites a particular form of surrender and vulnerability on our part, right?

The second scripture is that of Acts 2. You know the story, I bet. It’s a wild one, this Pentecost narrative, one of breath and fire and tongues, one of innumerable languages and proclamation and hearing, one where Spirit fell and rushed on all, one that birthed a church and transformed the shape of the world. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit,” Acts tells us ALL were filled! — “and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

And best of all, when the Spirit fell, there wasn’t one language the disciples spoke but many. “How is it that we hear,” the bewildered crowd asked, “each of us in our own native language?” Acts gets specific: we’re talking Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Wise Brown, *The Runaway Bunny*.

Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” When the Spirit fell, the differences in their mother tongues weren’t eliminated or collapsed into one, but rather proclaimed and understood in their own unique distinctiveness. God’s Spirit poured out and enlivened *particular* languages of *particular* people with *particular* customs, nuances, practices, habits, colloquialisms, sayings, slang, poetry, stories, and memories. Power fell upon particularities and peculiarities, because God and God’s mighty deeds cannot be whittled down and stripped away and homogenized and consolidated. For as local as God’s presence on earth was – one person and one locale – God in God’s depth and height and length and breadth needed humankind in all its boundless variety and vast complexity to become the bearers of the story from then on. They – we – became the speakers, the proclaimers, the revolutionaries, the witnesses of what God has done. Quite simply, they – we – became the church.

#### IV.

So what have Psalm 139 and Acts 2 to teach us about how to be human? Two thoughts for today. They teach us to live with vulnerability and particularity.

**Vulnerability**, researcher Brene Brown tells us, is “the feeling we get during times of uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure.”<sup>4</sup> You know those times – when we show our feelings in a big way, and aren’t sure how it will be received. Or when we really are passionate about something new we’re trying, and risk others knowing about it even if we fail. Vulnerability demands

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<sup>4</sup> Brene Brown, [Courage and Vulnerability Part I: Definitions and Myths](https://brenebrown.com/uploads/2021/09/1...) Brené Brown <https://brenebrown.com/uploads/2021/09/1...>

our courage, a word with “cor” or “heart” right at the heart who’s original definition was: *“To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.”* Like Psalm 139 says, the God who knows us and is present with us in the most intimate, vulnerable places of our lives – knitting our innards, going to the highest and lowest places to find us – is the God who softens and opens our hearts in our living. Perhaps what it means to be human is to be vulnerable, whole-hearted, willing and able to risk failure for the sake of relationship.

**Particularity** can mean “the quality of being individual,” and the “fullness or minuteness of detail in the treatment of something.”<sup>5</sup> It means being human in all the uniqueness of our individual selves, leaning into the fullness of who we are as God created us to be, and trusting that, like the particular voices of Phrygians and Pamphilians and all the rest speaking through the Spirit in Acts, our particularities are useful to the work of Love God is doing in this world. Since Pentecost is the day we mark the birthday of the church, this call extends too to churches. A wise pastor friend of mine says of his church, “we strive to be a church for anyone, which means we can’t be a church for everyone.”<sup>6</sup> It’s ok to be particular, unique, flavored as a community in the precise way we are – because our community – like every community – is made up of particular folks. The church isn’t just a nameless, faceless institution. The church – our church – is Kyle and Zack, Liam and Nancy, Meredith and Gary, Jim and David and Elmer and Roper. It’s us in all the beautiful, vulnerable particularities that make us, us.

Vulnerability and particularity are but two of the gifts of being human, and I want you to practice these this week. Risk telling someone you love

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<sup>5</sup> [Definition of particularity](#) from Google.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Dennis Foust and the witness of St. John’s Baptist Church in Charlotte for this particular phrase!

something you've never shared. Try something new and don't let yourself stop it when it gets hard; it's ok to not be good at everything. Ask yourself, "what makes me, me?," and make a list of at least 10 unique things about yourself. Get specific, like "what makes me, me is that I love an exquisitely blended and chilled cup of gazpacho" or "what makes me, me is that I need at least an hour alone in the mornings to come alive." You fill in the blank. As you list them, celebrate those particularities! Do them. Love yourself through them. Don't water them down to fit in. Speak to the goodness and mercy of God right there, just who you are. Then – a crucial step, don't leave this one out – celebrate the particularities of others! Don't just tolerate them, or roll your eyes at them, or be annoyed. Remember bell hooks – don't just pay attention to your own self-improvement and forget the practice of love and celebration of particularity in community. Vulnerability begets vulnerability, as Brene says, and to that I'd add, particularity begets particularity. Enjoy to the fullest each others' particularities even as you do for yourselves.

## V.

Last night, I had the great joy to attend the Hooding Ceremony for Wake Forest's School of Divinity. Several of our church members and friends were among the class of 2024 – Zack, Georgia, Bethany, and Marian – and in the Hooding homily, Dr. Derek Hicks, Associate Professor of Religion and Culture, offered a host of encouragements to the graduates. Threaded throughout were themes from a quote he offered early in his homily from Maya Angelou, who said "I am human, and nothing human is foreign to me."

With the seal of the University's motto, *Pro Humanitate*, hanging just below him, Dr. Hicks called these beloved graduates to a *pro humanitate* kind of life, a life "for humanity." I borrow his charge to them to share with you:

“Hold each other’s humanity in high regard constantly. Believe in humanity unceasingly. Love other humans deeply because none are foreign to you. Go serve humans humanely.”<sup>7</sup> Let those with ears, hear! Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Derek Hicks, 2024 Commencement Homily, Wake Forest University School of Divinity, [https://commencement.wfu.edu/livestream/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAR2TcWPAlkBt19D2crcH\\_vgnV2QI7cyB2cYqKqiDle75JCWqc81P7wmzM5g\\_aem\\_AU7qiY\\_4oyeDrPMm1xbWkRJj-J-yZhHerGy-koPdUx4YEm6CzaeFchT5AN6Hg2bJqKsvObxSc99L5r2NJP1gfGzu#divinity](https://commencement.wfu.edu/livestream/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAR2TcWPAlkBt19D2crcH_vgnV2QI7cyB2cYqKqiDle75JCWqc81P7wmzM5g_aem_AU7qiY_4oyeDrPMm1xbWkRJj-J-yZhHerGy-koPdUx4YEm6CzaeFchT5AN6Hg2bJqKsvObxSc99L5r2NJP1gfGzu#divinity)