

“What Is Man That You Are Mindful of Him?”

Psalm 8

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This past week, I caught a television interview with Amanda Knox- she’s the former American Exchange Student who while living in Italy eighteen years ago, was arrested and falsely convicted of the murder of her roommate. It became a world-wide sensation with some newspapers even referring to her as “Foxy Knoxy.” She and her boyfriend would eventually spend four years in an Italian prison before gaining her release when questions about her involvement in this case grew too great to ignore. Ms. Knox has just published a new book, but it was not about setting the record straight and making the case for her innocence which she did in a previous work, but rather a memoir of sorts as she has tried to make sense of the injustice she was subjected to and what she learned from it all. Her new book is entitled *Free- My Search for Meaning* and it details her life AFTER prison and what she has learned about herself after this experience. She thought that after she was finally released from prison, her life would return to some normalcy- but that has been anything BUT the case. She knows this horrible event will always follow her but insists that she will not allow it to define who she is. She found herself on a journey she never wanted to be on and admits mistakes were made. But there have been important lessons she has learned along the way and hopes they may help others faced with similar injustices in their OWN life. As she related in her interview:

*This is a book where I realized that I learned something over the course of trying to regain some sense of self and unpacking that horrible quandary that I'm in where my identity is. Now inextricably linked with the death of my friend that I had nothing to do with, what does that mean? And I learned so much about what it means to exist in the world, what it means to find your place and ultimately my goal is not about proving anything about myself- it's about connecting with others and through this book, showing what it looks like to overcome an extremely life-defining, traumatic experience.*

One doesn’t have to be a professional philosopher to ask the question, “Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live?” or “What can life teach me?” as such questions are universal in scope. Like Amanda Knox, at different times in our OWN life, we are confronted by similar questions OURSELVES. Life will often thrust us into situations where we can either allow events to destroy us, or we can stop and reflect on them, allowing us to learn new things about ourselves as well as discover those resources that will not only make us stronger but enable us to help others who might share SIMILAR experiences.

Such self-introspection is unique to HUMANS ALONE- cats and dogs don’t ask them and NOT EVEN chimps and orangutans, our closest evolutionary cousins. While they remain creatures governed by their natural instincts, we humans are equipped with a unique capacity for SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS that leads to MORAL REFLECTION. This is a philosophical process which allows us to raise questions that involve purpose and meaning. Viktor Frankl, a famous Jewish psychologist who survived the horrors of Auschwitz, wrote a bestselling book about his experience called *Man’s Search for Meaning*. His experience in the concentration camps taught him that man’s primary drive in life is not PLEASURE, as many might assume, but rather the pursuit and discovery of what we PERSONALLY FIND MEANINGFUL in life.

While happiness is an emotion we experience in the here-and-now, it eventually fades, the same as ALL OTHER emotions do. But where pleasure may be fleeting, our search for meaning is a process that never ends. Frankl discovered that those prisoners who were able to derive some meaning in their life, to establish some clearly defined purpose for all their SUFFERINGS, were able to SURVIVE LONGER than those who didn't.

Subsequent studies have corroborated his thesis. For instance, college students who felt their lives were imbued with a sense of meaning and purpose were far happier and more productive than those who felt their lives LACKED such elements- they experienced a greater degree of autonomy, competence, and a desire to maintain connections with others. However, WITHOUT A REAL SENSE OF PURPOSE, they were left feeling depressed, anxious, and likely to engage in acts of social and physical aggression.

I find that when we get to a point when we lose all interest in asking such questions, then we are DIMINISHED as persons and become FAR LESS INTERESTING as human beings. As Owen Gingerich, professor of science and astronomy at Harvard University observes:

*One consequence of this self-consciousness is that we ponder our place in the universe, and we seek to find meaning and to find God. The search for God is subtle, but perhaps it is this long journey, this search, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, that makes us human. We are the thinking part of his vast and sometimes very intimidating universe, and OUR QUEST could well be the purpose of it all.*

What makes such questions different from all OTHERS is that we are the ones who both ASK them as well as the ones who SEEK the answers to them- in other words, we question OURSELVES. I think that's why I became a philosophy major when I was in college and a theology major in seminary- I was seeking to understand what the heart most desperately yearns for and why we were even here in the first place. I felt so lonely inside and was hoping to discover how and where one could find TRUE love in this world. And it wasn't ROMANTIC love I was so much seeking, an emotion that can be as fickle as the wind, but a love that was ENDURING and UNCONDITIONAL. Eventually, I DID find such love- at the foot of a two-thousand-year-old cross.

Because the answers we seek either elude us or leave us unsatisfied, we human beings become the GREATEST PUZZLE THERE IS. Take for example the question posed by the psalmist in our text this morning. CHARLES DARWIN, in trying to find an answer to "What is man?" theorized that human beings were simply the highest evolved species among living things and NOTHING MORE. KARL MARX declared human beings as pitiable creatures trapped under crushing economic circumstances. SIGMUND FREUD insisted we were merely a collection of psychological drives and impulses that determined our future. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS have contended that the human soul was a great battleground where because we are both saint and sinner, great spiritual battles rage deep within us. For the PSALMIST, his question "What is man?" arose from staring up into the vastness of an infinite universe which left him feeling impotent and insignificant before it. Yet, at the SAME time, he possessed an awareness that behind it all existed a CREATOR and WHAT'S MORE, that this Creator KNEW him and LOVED him with an INFINITE and UNCHANGEABLE LOVE. This led him to ask the question, "Why!" "How could the architect of such a grand construction as the heavenlies love someone so small and inconsequential a figure AS HIM?" Overwhelmed by this realization, he exclaims, "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the

stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" (vv. 3 & 4)

Following Darwin's line of thinking, biologists and anthropologists tell us that we are nothing more than a species of animal with highly evolved brains. Science, because it is strictly limited to description and analysis, can describe and analyze who or what we are solely on the basis of our most basic functions--that we eat, drink, procreate, and eventually die. What it CAN'T do is begin to address those MORE BASIC QUESTIONS of how to live a full and honorable life or even tell us what it means to be human. Science can explain "HOW" things develop or work, but it can't tell us "WHY" or "FOR WHAT PURPOSE" they exist. Science, for all its accomplishments, is incapable of providing such answers because it simply can't recognize that there exists a WHOLE OTHER component to human lives whether you call it the "spirit" or the "soul." Each of us possesses a spiritual core from which all mystery and wonder originate and it is from there that all those great questions we ask are derived but ALSO where those answers we seek can be found. Thus, artists and poets, philosophers and theologians can do a far better job of providing those answers than any SCIENTIST can.

The Bible says we are unique among the rest of creation, that each of us possesses the "imago dei," that is the "image of God" at our center- we are not only formed of the dust of the ground but by the BREATH of God, AS WELL. We were made BY God FOR God and all of us are ultimately responsible TO God. Like God, we TOO are rational beings who can do more than just THINK- we can feel and hope and sing songs and write beautiful poetry. We cannot know God as an equal for God is transcendent, and yet we've been created with the capacity to KNOW who this God is and WHAT'S MORE, TO LIVE IN FELLOWSHIP with him. Thus, what our religion can reveal to us which science NEVER CAN is it is only through a personal relationship with God that we will ever experience that degree of serenity and contentment and total fulfillment which the heart never stops yearning for.

Following the psalmist's question, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?", he immediately follows that up with a description of man's place in God's creation. He says, "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor", that is, that God conferred upon us a special rank within his creation- we are NATURAL BEINGS with SPIRITUAL NATURES, thus locating us somewhere between that of GOD HIMSELF, on the one hand, and the ANIMAL KINGDOM on the other. I think the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr summed it up best when he said that although we are created in the image of God, we are NOT God. The divine part of our nature is always reminding us that we are MORE than part of the animal world, that we are creators OURSELVES. At the same time, we are still part of God's creation; we remain material beings who inhabit a material world and thus remain completely dependent upon it for our very survival. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal grasped all-too clearly this tension and conflict between the spiritual and the material within us when he wrote, "What a mystery, then is man! What a novelty, what a monster; what a chaos, what a subject of contradiction; what a prodigy! A judge of all things, stupid worm of the earth; depository of truth, sewer of uncertainty and error; glory and refuse of the universe!"

However, our rank in the order of things is not without its limitations- you can say that God created us to be both FREE and BOUND at the same time. We possess the power to domesticate as well as destroy, but not with COMPLETE LICENSE as creation is not ours to do as we please. We may use animals for food and their hides for leather but we may not abuse

them. We can harvest lumber from trees and extract oil and minerals from the earth, but we may not leave the terrain a devastated wasteland. According to God, we exercise control over nature but only insofar as we do so for worthwhile ends. Therefore, any dominion exercised by humans is, in fact, a trust, a form of stewardship. Humans are only masters of the world insofar as they recognize they are completely dependent upon their creator and on nothing or no one else. This demands then that we exercise the SAME kind of RIGHTEOUS RULE over the earth as God does over his created order. As righteousness and benevolence are inherent qualities of God's kingly rule over his creation, so are WE to reflect such character and values in our OWN management of the earth.

Well let me go back and summarize the main point of my argument. When the psalmist looked up into the midnight sky and saw the immensity of it all, he was overcome with a sense of his own smallness, his own limitedness and inadequacy; he realized just how insignificant he was compared to the rest of creation. To again quote the French philosopher Pascal, he could say, "The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me." But then he remembered that he was a child of a God who CARES for him and KNOWS his name, and this led him to ask, "What is it about human beings that you love us so?" He wanted to know how such a majestic God could be bothered with persons as seemingly small and insignificant as himself.

What makes this psalm especially relevant to US is that he is describing an experience we know OURSELVES. Like the psalmist, we stand between two great infinities: on the one hand, there is the infinite above us in which looking up into the night sky, we can see hundreds of millions of stars all around us with each of those little specks of light residing hundreds of light years away. As we stand in awe and wonder before the immensity of the cosmos in tandem with the beauty and variety of our natural world, we can't help but measure ourselves against it, that is, recognize how infinitely small and brief and fragile our short lives are in comparison to it all. The prophet Isaiah could feel it and which is why he could say, "All flesh is like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field... The grass withers and the flowers fade but the word of the Lord endureth forever." And yet EVEN GREATER than the awe and wonder of God's greatness as revealed through his creation, is the awe and wonder inspired by the thought that this same great God has such love and care for persons as small and insignificant as you and me!

Over 40 years ago, I served as the only full-time minister in the Redwood National Park. The community in which I lived was a World Heritage Site, a designation established by the United Nations reserved for only those cultural or natural sites considered to be of "Outstanding Universal Value." The park was situated along California's northern coast, about fifty miles from the Oregon border, and the world's largest trees were situated right there in our community. I have to confess that whether walking up and down the beach or exploring those immense primeval forests, there was never a time I wasn't overcome with a sense of awe and wonder--whether watching the sun slowly sink beneath the horizon of the Pacific each evening, or studying the stars late at night, or gazing up at the 400-foot height of the world's tallest trees. When you stood amidst those ferns, surrounded by thousand-year-old arbors--the largest living entities in existence--you felt as though you were standing on the edge of creation, gaining a glimpse of the world as it was many millions of years ago and it simply took your breath away!

But you know what does the same, except on a HIGHER LEVEL and to a GREATER DEGREE? When I think of the immensity of God's love for ME, a love I am in no way deserving of. Like the psalmist, I find myself ALSO wanting to know how such a great and

majestic God could be bothered with someone as puny and insignificant such as myself. It is a love amazing beyond all comprehension- a love that was ultimately revealed and achieved its full realization with the death of God's only begotten son on a cross, a death that was not for HIS benefit but for OUR OWN. And it wasn't just that he sacrificed his life on our behalf that affects us, but it was HOW he did it that is still so astonishing. In his execution, we see one who was forsaken as no man before or since. He was betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another, abandoned by all the rest except for one. He was subjected to a mock trial, found innocent yet condemned to death any way. He experienced cruel mockery at the hands of the priests and soldiers, was scourged and spat upon, and afterward was forced to carry his cross along a path lined by a hysterical mob. They nailed his hands and his feet to that cross between two thieves, stripping his cloak from him to expose his naked body to the crowds. They placed a crown of thorns upon his head piercing his brow, mocking his claim of kingship. They taunted him saying, "He saved others. Now let him save himself!" From beginning to end, it was a free act of his will. He didn't HAVE to subject himself to any of this- and yet he did so because he loved us. He could have easily turned his back on the cross. He could have said in that garden, "Not thy will but MY will be done." He could have chosen to return to Nazareth and reopen his dad's carpentry shop, marry Mary Magdalene and raise a family as was expected of every Jewish male. But he voluntarily chose instead the Via Dolorosa, the "way of the cross"- ALL BECAUSE OF LOVE.

In that cross, in that terrible instrument of death, is revealed the very personification of God's love. In spite of all the pain and humiliation, Jesus managed from that cross enough mercy to pardon his executioners, enough compassion to offer paradise to one of the thieves, and enough concern to see that his mother was cared for. By enduring all this for US, by dying on behalf of the same world that rejected him at his birth and eventually succeeded in nailing him to a cross, he demonstrates a love UNLIKE ANY OTHER. He could have given up on us. We could have been left in our sinful condition, and the hellish punishment Christ received would have been OUR punishment- but he didn't. God so loved the world that he sent his son to voluntarily take our sins and receive our judgment, there on that cross that we might be saved. He bore our sin, our guilt, our judgment, and our death, and through his death, we now have life. If THAT isn't enough to engender awe and wonder within our OWN breast, if THAT doesn't inspire US to exclaim, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" then sadly God will never receive from us the praise he so richly deserves, never experience the same love with which he has constantly shown to US, nor will he ever hear from our lips those same words which the author opened and closed his psalm with, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we don't know why you still love us the way you do after you have experienced such contempt and rejection in return. Yet, we will remain forever grateful that you DO and ask that you CONTINUE to be patient with us, whom you call "your children." May the first and last words as expressed by the psalmist in his psalm always be the first and last words upon OUR OWN lips at the beginning and end of each new day. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*