

“Things The Bible Doesn’t Talk About: Artificial Intelligence”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: November 19, 2023



Even though you might not know it if you’ve bought a cup of coffee at Starbucks or been to Home Depot recently, but it’s not yet Christmas (or even Advent). So for the next two weeks – this one and next – I am going to preach what I will call a mini-sermon series. Frankly, I see this window of time before Advent as a chance to do a little one-off...maybe even do something a little off-the-wall.

The title of this mini-sermon series is “Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About.” I confess that when I pitched this idea to my pastoral colleagues many months ago, their response was: “Grrreat...that sounds like a series that you should preach...not us.” So, I will!

Today we are going to talk about Artificial Intelligence. When I was in seminary 23 years ago, if you had told me that I would be preaching a sermon about Artificial Intelligence...not in a futuristic, “I wonder if it will ever be a real thing” kind of way, but because it is already transforming entire industries in ways we are just beginning to appreciate...if you had told me then that I would be preaching about Artificial Intelligence now, I might have just said “Beam me up, Scotty!”

Of course, we now know Artificial Intelligence isn’t a theory. It’s here, like it or not. And it’s already changed the way we work, and the way we communicate, and the way technology communicates with us...so instead of wishing it would just go away, I think it is worth thinking about the implications of it.

By show of hands, how many of you have ever used ChatGPT? If you have haven’t heard of ChatGPT, think of it as just the waterfront of what Artificial Intelligence can do. ChatGPT is a program developed using artificial intelligence technology that learns more and more as people ask it questions and give it requests for information.

Before I sat down to write this sermon, which I promise I will start preaching eventually, I thought I would ask ChatGPT for help. So I opened the website, and I asked the question: “What does the Bible say about artificial intelligence?” As soon as I hit enter, here is how ChatGPT responded:

The Bible does not specifically address the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) as it is a modern technological concept that was not present in the biblical times. The Bible was written thousands of years ago, and its focus is on spiritual, moral, and historical aspects of human life.

When considering ethical implications of AI, individuals may turn to biblical principles such as love, compassion, justice, and responsibility to guide their understanding and decision-making. It's important to note that interpretations of religious texts can vary, and discussions about the intersection of faith and technology are often shaped by individual beliefs and the broader theological traditions within which people find themselves.

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If you're interested in exploring this topic further from a religious perspective, you may want to consult with religious leaders or scholars within your specific faith tradition to get insights that align with your beliefs.

There you have it. I will say, as a “religious leader,” I am glad to know that Artificial Intelligence is willing to give me a referral. And, like religious leaders do, we are going to ground the conversation about what our faith has to say about Artificial Intelligence with God’s word in Scripture.

This morning’s passage comes from the book of Genesis...but I am willing to bet that most of you may not quite believe that what I am going to read is in the Bible. I am certain I have never preached on it before.

It’s a story that comes near the beginning of things – after Adam and Eve and before Noah and the Flood...just after the chapter that lists the descendants of Adam...otherwise known as the really, really old people (including Methuesela who was 969 years old). Biblical scholars call this part of the Bible “Pre-History” – we’re not meant to take these stories literally...but we are meant to take them seriously. Before I read it, please join me in prayer.

By your Spirit, O God, open us to trust that...even through ancient words...you might shine light on the path that we get to walk in the present – and in the future. We ask it in faith. Amen.

I am reading from the sixth chapter of Genesis, verses 1-4.

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When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

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I’m going to give you a minute to wrap your mind around what you just heard me read from Genesis.

In case you missed it, there was a reference to “the sons of God” and a reference to something called “Nephilim.” Neither of those are in the same category as human beings. There is one other place where the Bible explicit references Nephilim (in the book of Numbers), but beyond that what I just read – which, admittedly might sound more like science fiction than Scripture – is the only time these powerful...mysterious...non-human beings show up.

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And, in case you missed it, this passage is where God decides that those who were created – human beings – would no longer live Methuesela-like lives...but would have tighter limits. This is the passage where we get to hear God’s logic for a lifespan...for the flesh of our bodies to be born and...one day, not too, too many years later...to die.

And, in case you are wondering what in thearnation the Preacher is going to say about this bizarre part of the Bible having anything at all to do with this bizarre topic of Artificial Intelligence for a sermon – well, let me cut to the chase: I think this passage can teach us something because (1) it references a time that human beings have coexisted with powerful non-human entities before, and (2) it reminds us that – as human beings – we are finite, limited, and that we don’t have to be the masters of the universe.

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Before I go on any further, let me share two things that this sermon will not do:

- (1) I am not going to pretend like I understand the ins-and-outs of Artificial Intelligence. I’ve read a few books, I’ve listened to a few podcasts, I’ve gathered over a beer with few church members in preparation for this sermon, but that does not make me an expert on the subject. I also recognize that you may know a little bit, or a lot, about AI – so I am not going to spend a lot of time getting into the nitty gritty detail about how AI works. You can Google it, or ask ChatGPT yourself.
- (2) I am not going to give a public policy lecture on how to ethically guide the ongoing development of AI technology – any more than to say that I think, **without a doubt**, governments, corporations, and research groups need to exercise ethics and have some kind of shared accountability as they race to develop AI technology into a more advanced state.

What I **do think** is worth preaching about is what it might mean for us to live in a world where human beings are not the only intelligent species...about what it might mean to share this planet with other, more powerful, entities.

The concept of artificial intelligence has been around for a long time. In 1956 during a conference at Dartmouth, three mathematicians brought the first known report on artificial intelligence called The Logic Theorist, where a computer mimicked the problem solving skills of humans¹. Soon after that conference, scientists starting talking about a concept called “technological singularity” which is the point in the future at

¹ <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artificial-intelligence/>

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which time artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence and, in essence, when computers will begin to be able to “think” by themselves without the need for human programmers².

I’m going to skip over about 70 years of research and development and simply say that many people believe we are now on the threshold of technological singularity. Some scientists think we are 20 years away...others think we are a lot closer...but most believe we’re on the doorstep.

Maybe you remember when you heard this talk about a new-fangled thing called “the internet.” I remember that, and I remember thinking “I wonder, *really*, how much of an impact the internet will have on my day-to-day life?” Lots of people who I have read say that AI will have a much more profound impact on our life than the internet has...especially when computers begin to think for themselves at singularity.

The implications of singularity are many. Certainly, it will be disruptive. Lots of jobs that require people today will be able to be done by machines in days to come...and that transition will, obviously, be difficult. But it may not be all bad: Singularity may be able to solve some of the problems that have vexed humans forever – finding cures and solutions and efficiencies that have long been out-of-reach of the human mind. You can have a field day (or a nightmare) thinking about all of those possibilities.

What I find fascinating is to consider what it will mean (and feel like) when the day comes that humans are no longer the most intelligent beings on the earth.

That fast-approaching probability raises a number of thoughts and questions for me:

Like, how much of our identity as human beings is wrapped up in being the smartest and the most powerful of the world’s “species”?

Or, how natural (and predicable) it will be for us to feel fear and inadequacy in the face of knowing we will no longer occupy the top spot of the “food chain.”

Or, what impact will it have on human ambition to know that no matter how hard we work and innovate, we likely won’t be the best answers to our biggest challenges?

These are all questions that we will have to wrestle as we live into the coming reality of Artificial Intelligence supplanting us as the smartest in the room.

Yet, what I think it important to remember that even when that happens, it doesn’t change the fact that – as human beings – we still have inherent worth;

and that, as human beings – we still are precious in God’s sight;

² <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/ai-singularity>

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and that – as human beings – we are still “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Because we are made in God’s image – and we are claimed by Christ’s life and love – and...ultimately and eternally...we belong to the God who created us...a fact that won’t change even if our place in the order of things in the world does. That is something that has always been true...since the beginning...and will stay true past the end.

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If the first thing this morning’s bizarr-o passage of Scripture does is reference a time for us when human beings had to negotiate our place in the order of things with other more powerful entities and cause us to reflect on that, the second thing our Scripture does is remind us is that our days are numbered.

Wow, Preacher...you’re just full of good news today, aren’t you?

But hear me out: Over the course of my ministry, I have had the privilege of getting to know more than a few people who have lived past 100 years. Never have I had any one of them say they wanted to live almost 800 more to beat Methuesela. Most of the people I met who lived past 100 were full of gratitude, amazed at the change that had taken place over their lives, and...honestly...pretty weary and ready for rest.

There is something beautiful and wonderfully human about the way we age. Moving from being formed as children, to learning to become independent as adolescents, to discovering our vocation as young adults, building a life in middle age, reflecting on that life as we near “older age,” and resting in our memories in our twilight years – barring sickness or tragedy, there is a natural rhythm to our life-cycle.

When you take a step back, one of the most important things you realize as a human being who has a cycle of life is that there is so much we do not and cannot and...even...should not control.

In the face of seismic change like that which will come from advancing AI technology, it is natural for us to want to grip tightly to what we know...and to resist and fear that which we don’t know...and to attempt, as best we can, to shape the future into something that we can expect. But that’s usually not how things work, because seismic change always outpaces our expectations.

What we learn to do as human beings, then, is invest in the next generation – to support and encourage and, finally, learn to follow our children so that they, and our children’s children will be in a position to navigate the future that we may never see.

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As people of faith, when faced with the reality of our finite span of life, **we** learn to trust God past the places we can control – and to remember that when God created this world, it came with a promise that God would provide for our well-being.

To be clear, I believe human beings have (and should use) a lot of agency in helping to shape the rules and the accountabilities for the kind of Artificial Intelligence technology that is being born into our world today – and how we do that now will have an impact on our future.

I just also believe that one of the most holy and beautiful things about being human with a finite lifespan is that we cannot help but to learn the benefit of perspective...and, with that perspective...**trust**...which comes in handy in the midst of change.

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At some point in my process of trying to pull together my thoughts on this rather strange sermon topic I went back to ChatGPT to ask it another question – a test, really.

I typed: “What is it like to be human?”

And, in a nanosecond, the answer came: *“The experience of being human is rich, diverse, and complex. It encompasses a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations.”*

And I thought to myself: Yes.

And what a gift...a gift that **we**...not some machine...get to experience...with all the fragility and limits that come with being human...and all of God’s love and promises that come along with it, too.

It’s a reason to be thankful.

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