

**Sermon: Alpha and Omega and AI**

**Scripture: Psalm 111**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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The 17th-century poet Alexander Pope wrote: “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” So won’t you join this fool, your pastor, for a moment as he rushes into an area of consideration that he really knows very little about. But hey, it's what I do every Sunday, rushing in to speak about God which ultimately I know very little about, so I’m practiced at this, being a fool rushing to where angels fear to tread.

And fear is exactly where we begin. It’s what jumped out from Psalm 111, that phrase that occurs elsewhere in scripture numerous times -**SLIDE**- “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” We liberal Christians don’t go in much for the fire and brimstone approach to the faith that emphasizes fear of the Lord, but the Bible does have a special place for it, which makes sense given how real fear is for us in so many ways. And if we are going to fear something, better fear God at the top who is a God of forgiveness, love and redemption, than many of the other things there are to fear in this world that don’t have an opinion about our well-being.

One of the things we fear these days, a fear that’s being ginned up right now everywhere you turn is the way Artificial Intelligence is taking our world by storm. So I thought for a few moments this morning I would tread into this with Psalm 111:10 as our guiding scripture placing before us first and foremost the fear of the Lord, a fear of AO - the Alpha and Omega - and allow our fear of AI –

Artificial Intelligence - to come in a distant second and make that the beginning of our wisdom in this area.

So to start from the basics, Artificial Intelligence refers to computer systems capable of performing complex tasks that historically only humans could do such as reasoning, making decisions and solving problems,<sup>1</sup> because they are trained on huge data sets that allow for a simulation of these human behaviors. As James Cham from Bloomberg Beta explains -**SLIDE**- “it’s the harnessing of all recorded knowledge into large language models which can then be brought to bear on the problem at hand”<sup>2</sup> whether that problem is the diagnosis of a disease or the best route to get from here to Cambridge at 5 pm in the afternoon.

Brian Green who is the Director of Technology Ethics at Santa Clara University in CA says that a more accurate way to name Artificial Intelligence that’s less apt for misunderstanding is Automated Intelligence, cause what’s important to remember is that Artificial Intelligence is not something *other* than our intelligence, it’s just massively automated human intelligence. He explains -**SLIDE**- “Industrialization took our human *strength* and automated it. Intelligentization (what AI is doing) takes our human *intelligence* and automates it.”<sup>3</sup>

Most all of us are already using AI whether we are fully aware of it or not. If you open your phone with facial recognition you are using AI. If you are on Instagram or Facebook, you are experiencing in your feed the results of AI

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<sup>1</sup> Coursera Staff, *What is Artificial Intelligence? Definitions, Uses and Types*, <https://www.coursera.org/articles/what-is-artificial-intelligence>.

<sup>2</sup> Chang, Curtis, “Where is AI taking us Spiritually? With James Cham and John Kim”, Good Faith with Curtis Chang, Podcast Audio, January 20, 2024, <https://redeemingbabel.org/podcast/>

<sup>3</sup> Nieuwhof, Carey, “Ann Skeet and Brian Green on AI Doomsday Scenarios and Best Case Scenarios”, Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, Podcast audio, October 26, 2023, <https://careynieuwhof.com/mypodcast/>

algorithms. If you ever send an email or text and get a little suggestion for how that word or phrase could be written better or spelled correctly, you have AI to thank for that. If you're searching on Google or voice-activating a smart home device like Alexa, or using GPS on your phone to travel, banking on-line, getting recommendations from Netflix about what to binge next, you are engaging with and benefitting from Artificial Intelligence.<sup>4</sup> And as we've heard, while there are incredible ways it's being used in the medical field for instance, there are also the scarier and nefarious ways it's being used like impersonating someone else's voice in scams where the victim cannot tell it's not their grandson, or manipulating images that cannot be distinguished from reality, creating autonomous weapons systems for more precise and deadly warfare, surveilling people, revealing personal data, manipulating elections and so on. And then people are writing their papers, emails, and obituaries with AI. They are using AI as personal therapists and tutors – You can have an AI large model of all of Jung's writings and correspondences and then do some therapy with an AI Jung and reanimate in a similar way a loved one who has died as well as creating "perfect" albeit virtual partners and spouses to fall in love with.

If you've never explored ChatGPT at all, the AI chatbot that generates human-like responses to anything, it is pretty stunning I learned this week for my first foray into it. I had heard that pastors were using it to write sermons and prayers so I gave it a shot and wrote into the chat box – "write a prayer to use in worship about responsible AI use" and within seconds it wrote back this...

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<sup>4</sup> Marr, Bernard, "10 Best Examples of How AI is Already Used in Our Everyday Life", Forbes Magazine, Dec 16, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2019/12/16/the-10-best-examples-of-how-ai-is-already-used-in-our-everyday-life/?sh=6c4ba54a1171>

### 3 SLIDES –

Gracious and Loving Creator,

We gather before you, acknowledging your sovereignty over all creation, including the advancements in technology that shape our world. Today, we come together to lift our hearts in prayer, seeking your guidance and wisdom as we navigate the responsible use of artificial intelligence.

We recognize the incredible potential of AI to benefit humanity, but we also acknowledge the ethical challenges and moral dilemmas it presents. Lord, grant us discernment and a deep understanding as we strive to align the development and use of AI with your divine principles.

We pray for the creators and developers of AI technologies, that they may be guided by ethical considerations, compassion, and a commitment to justice. May their work be grounded in the values of love, equality, and respect for the dignity of every human being.<sup>5</sup>

I mean it is remarkable. Maeve and I sat and talked about it for a while this week, both a bit rattled by it, wondering if we should tell you all that you really don't need us anymore... kidding, I'm kidding! But it's kind of breathtaking what it's capable of... and not knowing completely and fully what it's capable of now or in the future is part of how fear comes into the equation.

If angels fear to tread in this arena of AI then we're all fools cause every one of us have rushed right in. You could say we haven't had much of a choice in the matter because it's rushed in upon us, but that's part of the problem and the fear, that it threatens to overtake our human agency! But let me say again, it is not alien to us, it's not something other than us. Artificial Intelligence is automated

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<sup>5</sup> OpenAI.(2023) ChatGPT 3.5 [Large Language Model]

human intelligence and there are people among us who have decided that this is where we are going. So, “here we go!”

So what are some things that as people of faith we should be thinking about or wondering here as we are thrust into this new reality? Well, I asked ChatGPT: “what concerns should I have as a Christian about AI?” and it spit out 10 points immediately – SLIDES w/animation – 10 clicks!

1. Ensure AI respects and upholds the inherent dignity of human beings.
2. Consider the ethical implications of AI, ensuring they align with Christian values and principles.
3. Advocate for accountability and transparency in AI systems.
4. Beware of the potential impact on employment and job displacement.
5. Ensure privacy rights are protected.
6. Consider a stance against unbridled use of AI in weapons systems as it could lead to increased conflict and loss of human life.
7. Note the environmental impacts of AI – something I learned this week that AI systems consume a huge amount of enviro resources to run!
8. Be aware of the biases in AI algorithms and advocate for fairness
9. Support the idea of maintaining human control of AI systems to avoid scenarios where AI technologies have unchecked autonomy
10. Be civically engaged in discussions and decisions related to AI policies and regulations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> OpenAI.(2023) ChatGPT 3.5 [Large Language Model]

How's that for a pretty thorough list of what we as people of faith should be attentive to? Thank you ChatGPT for your cautious and honest approach to YOU!

And so our first step in having the correct object of our fear be God and not AI lurking out there somewhere on the edges of our consciousness is to learn about it and look clearly at what's at stake and how we can be a part of ensuring that it's used for good and not for bad. We know exactly what the future will hold, actually. Given that it's human generated and given that we know the story of our human selves - that we are made in the image of God on one hand and that we are fallen sinful creatures on the other hand - we know that AI can and will result in some remarkably good things and some disturbingly bad things. Right? It's already unfolding that way, of course. Any suggestion that what's coming through this technology is the utopia and salvation we've dreamed of - which is being claimed out there by many - is wrong-headed and any suggestion that what's coming is total annihilation is a worthless line of thinking too that just gins up fear for fear's sake.

The truth of the matter, which has been the truth in every other case of human endeavor and technological advance is that we need to ensure that good and faithful people, including ourselves, are working to ensure good comes out of this new technology and in that way outweigh the bad actors who are out there motivated like crazy to use it towards their ends. So we simply lean into what our Judeo-Christian tradition has taught across the millennia cause it never changes that we must seek in this mercy, justice, nonviolence, responsibility, love, peacemaking, forgiveness - those things that God asks of us and has always asked of us. We should fear above all else not answering this ancient and new-every-day call from God.

Fear of AI or of whatever else in this world we fear having no control over is an immobilizing thing while fear of God is ideally a mobilizer, inspiring us to work towards God's intention for this world. Things like:

- caring for our neighbor, not dominating them,
- and forgiving our enemies, not paying them back,
- and seeking the common good as the bottom line and not profit,
- and being humble and acknowledging how we too can get it so wrong,
- and being peacemakers, creating what makes for peace and not war,
- and all the things God calls us towards for the good. We must remember these and call these to mind, encouraging one another in the basic Christian principles.

In the podcast I referred to earlier, Carey Nieuwhof asked Brian Green what the two or three issues are that concern him about AI that maybe we're not concerned enough about right now. He spoke first of automated warfare, but he also said this –**SLIDE**– “mass distraction is something that's really bothering me right now, everyone is very wrapped up in entertainment or various forms of media consumption and this kind of mass distraction and focus on things that are not necessarily solving problems or good for our souls... is dangerous in relation to AI technology.”<sup>7</sup>

Of the deadly sins I've often thought for our country, the ones that bedevil us the most are pride and greed, that if we need to work on and confess anything as a country it's our arrogance that we are simply the best in everything and it's greed that what drives us most of all in our economy is more and more and more

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<sup>7</sup> Nieuwhof, Carey, “Ann Skeet and Brian Green on AI Doomsday Scenarios and Best Case Scenarios”, Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, Podcast audio, October 26, 2023, <https://careynieuwhof.com/myodcast/>

and profit as the bottom line. But Green makes me think that the other deadly sin that is seriously problematic in the face of artificial intelligence is SLOTH, that human tendency to get distracted with what doesn't really matter, to be too tired or entertained or comfortable to really bother with being a part of God's work of love and caring for this world.

**-SLIDE back to title-**

But there are good and inspired people out there - and in here, among us probably - working hard to ensure that AI is a humanizing force for good and not a dehumanizing force for bad.

One of the distinct features of our Christian faith is embodiment or en-flesh-ment, that the Divine Mind does not remain ethereal and disembodied but becomes flesh in Christ Jesus and His spirit and His Mind become enfleshed in us. These large language models are our collective minds placed ethereally outside of our bodies. But they are not gods in themselves and have no power except what we allow them to have and direct them to have in and through our bodies.

God is the only God, Christ is our only savior, and may the Spirit grant us wisdom for utilizing AI for what is good and right in this world, amen.