

Something Someone Somewhere Said (#1 in the “*Only This and Nothing More?*” Lenten series)

*Someone has testified somewhere,
“What are human beings . . . ?”
(Hebrews 2:6)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday in Lent, **February 18, 2018**
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What are human beings? Where did we come from? Where are we going? And, what is our meaning in the light of our answers to those fundamental questions of our Human . . . Being, of our Being . . . Human? These are the questions around which our philosophies and religions dance on and, for Christians, especially pertinent questions to reflect upon during the forty days of Lent, a liturgical season beginning with ashes and the dark reminder of our mortality: “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*”

This morning we’ve read two passages from the Hebrew bible which address the question, *What are human beings?* The Hebrew phrase is *Mah enosh?* (“*What is man?*”). Modern English translations rightfully remove the gender specificity of the ancient Hebrew. I want to point out, though, not the different translations but the different answers offered in these two famous texts.

The psalmist asks the question in a context of utter wonder and worshipful adoration: “*O LORD our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established -- Mah enosh -- what are human beings that you are mindful of them? Yet you’ve made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.*”

It is this psalm the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews quotes. In the scholarly world it’s paramount to academic integrity to provide proper citation when quoting another. To do otherwise is dishonest, a form of literary piracy known as plagiarism. Writing papers at the University of Michigan I remember well the many “*midnight drearies*” when I “*pondered, weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,*” working to get the bibliography perfectly right as guided by *The Chicago Manual of Style* with its intricate rules on scholarly citation. It seemed to me a waste, honestly, making me study the manual as much as I did my research subject, and so leaving me “*nodding, nearly napping.*”

I haven’t picked up *The Chicago Manual of Style* in many years, but I’m pretty sure it would not have been allowed for me to cite a known passage with my title, “*Something Someone Somewhere Said.*” So I have to love how the author of Hebrews introduces his quote, “*Someone has testified somewhere.*” And what *Something Someone Somewhere Said* is the stunning proclamation of the worth of human beings in the creative order.

Our second reading from the Hebrew bible asks the very same question – *Mah enosh?* -- in a drastically different context and arrives at a profoundly different answer. That questioner was Job. If the psalmist asks the question in rapturous wonder, Job frames the question in rabid bitterness. For Job it is not the heavens that are in view as he lifts his eyes. No, but rather his eyes fall upon the the grave as he feels himself a target of God.

*What is man, that You should exalt him,
That You should set Your heart on him,
What have I done to You, O watcher of men?
Why have You set me as Your target?
For now I will lie down in the dust,
And You will seek me diligently,
But I will no longer be.*

“*What are human beings?*” The psalmist looks up and sees the stars. Job looks down and sees the grave. Behold the paradox of both the littleness and the greatness of humankind.

This is a 5th century B. C. Etruscan plate now in the Vatican museums, a scene inspired by the famous riddle of the Sphinx as Oedipus, the mythical King of Thebes, ponders a riddle posed by the sphinx. The sphinx guarded



Thebes devoured all travelers who could not answer the riddle. “*What is the creature that in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two legs, and in the evening on three legs?*” Oedipus, of course, guesses correctly that the creature is none other than humankind – an infant crawling on all fours in the morning of life, an adult on two legs at the midday of life, and the elderly aided with a cane in the evening of life.

On Ash Wednesday the church places ashes on the foreheads of those in each of these categories, from babies cradled the arms of mom to the elderly standing only with the aid of a cane. With each -- the baby no less than the aged – the formula is spoken: “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*”

But, is this Ash Wednesday proclamation all? Are we only this and nothing more? This series will focus on that question: is our journey from cradle to grave all there is to our being human? Are we *Only This and Nothing More*? I’ve danced around these and other words this morning. Some will have no doubt recognized them from Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore --
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.*

*"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door--
Only this and nothing more."*

This image seemed like Ash Wednesday to me, the black raven perched on the skull (just as the ashes adorn the forehead of our flesh) as a reminder of our mortality. The question hangs overhead, *Only This and Nothing More?*

Approaching the chancel to receive the ashes we are responding to a knocking on our chamber door (our heart). Do we not, arriving at the chancel, ask, "What are human beings?" And, I suppose, receiving the ashes, we may think we have the answer. *Dust to dust, earth to earth, ashes to ashes.* True, but are we "*Only This and Nothing More?*"

Something Someone Somewhere Said suggests otherwise. We are not *Only This and Nothing More!* *Something More* is compounded within the human molecule separating us from other orders of Being. This human sense of uniqueness finds expression in our sacred texts with God breathing life into dust, creating in his image, placing within the "chamber" of our flesh a divine light Paul called a Treasure within these clay jars of our physicality.



As Human Beings we seem to be the only creature participating consciously with our creator in the journey of our becoming – transitioning across the thresholds of life from the 4 legs to the 2 legs to the 3 legs. What other collection of molecules so complex as to be called a living thing has the capacity to look in the mirror and ask, "*Mah Enosh -- What is man?*" Yes, all living things change -- physically, morphologically -- but though change is inherent to all living things humankind alone is gifted to ponder its own identity in the face of those changes so that we hear a tapping on our chamber door, a Call to Become more tomorrow – spiritually, morally -- than we are today. And more . . . the capacity to share that tapping with others around us, even to record them for future generations by passing notes to them so others can build upon our own pondering in their search.

Psalms 8 and Job 7 (as different as they are with one looking to the heavens and the other to the dust) share this – they are both passing notes, sharing their inmost heart in a way that can live outside the womb of the moment so that they are still teaching and inspiring thousands of years and countless generations later.

What an interesting word pair! Human . . . Being. Being . . . Human. We are, essentially, *Being*. Very different though, is our Being from, say, Bird-Being, or Bug-Being, or Plant-Being. *Human Being* suggests that we can look beyond this moment of our Being, that we can transcend it. All living things change. The trees around us will soon shift from the barrenness of winter to the blossoms of spring. The difference for humans is that we not only change but that,

knowing we change, this Knowing is regarded as a tapping beckoning us to ask ourselves the question – Who are we?

“*In him we live and move and have our Be-ing,*” Paul told the philosophers at Mars Hill in Athens, a place where ancient thinkers gathered to pass notes among themselves. Liv-ing. Mov-ing. Be-ing. You see, we are always I-N-G-ing something, even if only breath-ing. We are parent-ing or lawyer-ing or doctor-ing or nurs-ing or pastor-ing or soldier-ing or teach-ing or learn-ing or build-ing or buy-ing or sell-ing or read-ing or writ-ing or think-ing -- whatever ING you wish. But if we are described as I-N-G-ing anything at all -- it affirms our most basic I-N-G of all, our BE-ING, so that at the core of our self-definition it need not be said, “*I am this*” or “*I am that*” but simply, “*I am.*”

“*I Am . . . Be-ing,*” a sentient glow-point of me – here – now, animated by a basic energy from the same life generator. “*In him we live and move and have our Be-ing.*” This tapping on our chamber door hints that our physical Being is not the sum of us. Not yet finished is what we are Becoming, so that we are not *Only This and Nothing More*. *Something More* invests our lives with meaning beyond the present moment.

So my own Lenten reflections have led me today to slip a few notes to you, Mars Hill style, pastor to congregation. People are forever slipping notes to one another. *Hallmark* has built a business understanding that we pass notes – lover to lover, parent to child, brother to sister, friend to friend. Notes R Us! Artists on canvas – passing notes. Authors in books – passing notes. Radicals in manifestos. Children in class. Musicians in their scales. Even God, who sent the “*Word*” to us when the Word became flesh.

Now, if I need a rationale for “*passing notes*” today – these particular Lenten notes – let me point merely to my recent birthday, 64. It’s all relative, I realize full well. For some of you this mere 64 is fresh and young – still on 2 legs without a cane. For others, the children who gathered here at the chancel earlier, these 64 are unimaginably ancient. For me, it’s merely a fact worthy of reflection during Lent, that I’ve been here, in *Human Being*, for 64 earth trips around the sun.

But, at 64 years of *Human Being*, something within feels, I suppose, exactly as it did at 64 days, or 64 hours, for that matter – an Awareness of Aliveness, of being a sentient glow-point of me-here-now. We hear this awareness as a tapping upon our souls to ask the questions, “*Who am I? What is my meaning?*” A light there is within to suggest – no, More than suggest -- to Declare that we are not *Only This and Nothing More*.

But why should I bother to describe it? You know what I’m talking about as well as I. It’s exactly the same in you. These notes I slip to you today come from my own quest to discover this treasure, this inner light of Knowing the Beyond of what may be seen, measured, weighed and analyzed in the human genome. Paul once passed a note to the Corinthians, a note still bringing comfort and peace today to those who grieve – an assurance that we are not *Only This and Nothing More*. He said, “*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day . . . we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*”

I embarked on this theme thinking that perhaps the clarity of Lenten discipline will assist me to sound clearly these notes I pass to you today, that *Something More* is compounded into the human molecule. “*What?*” you ask. Well, I don’t know precisely what. I’m not sure language has a word for it. Oh, I suppose I could go scavenging through Sanskrit and Sumerian, Hebrew and Greek, looking for some term that approximates this *Something More*. But I won’t. Were I to find such a word it would only sound foreign, when the truth is, what I’m describing is anything but foreign. So I’ll stick with Paul’s word, *treasure*, a word implying that this *Something More* is worth expending time and energy to discover.

For such a task I thank God for those who have passed the notes – the many *Somethings* shared by the many *Someones* writing in the many *Somewheres*. I could never, in 64 years or in 64 centuries, become myself by myself alone, any more than a seed could become its tree if what surrounded it refused to nurture it, if air and water, sun and soil, withheld themselves from the project of a seed’s Becoming. To cite an instance for you I’ll cite, well, why not? I’ll cite this very instant.

I glance up from the pulpit to a congregation becoming more and more a part of me, precious to me, with each passing week. Why? Because of the many notes we exchange. And I can see you because light pours like a waterfall through inspiring stained glass windows, a light shimmering with warmth and washing over the Holy Table as if to declare its elements true sacrament. This did not just happen. So that this vision might occur, there were dreamers and planners and givers. There were architects and craftsmen who sent their notes, and there were sellers and transporters and builders and more.

Moreover, the light which falls upon us this morning is not mere human doing. Beyond our creating are the electromagnetic waves launched by a colossal ball of flaming hydrogen, streaking over these last eight minutes through 92 million miles of interstellar blackness just to flood our sanctuary with light.

Literally, factually, here is a vision created for you! A divine note for you. Amazing, That! But far more amazing than That, is this – *This Knowing of That!* This patch of light inside you given to recognize blessing as this sunlight taps at your chamber door to elicit an opening to the light. What a treasure, this Light of the Knowledge of the Glory of God!

So, my friends, my congregation, the shadows of death gather around us during Lent – tapping, tapping, tapping as we make our way toward the darkness of Good Friday and the stillness of Jesus in the tomb on Saturday – let us move in faith that we will see light shine forth on Easter. May our hearts be ready to see that light and to live within that light as disciples of the Risen Christ. Glory be to God. Amen.

Sources and notes:

In this sermon I offer nothing original. I am dependent on the notes of others passed to me. That is especially true in this message, inspired by an amazing “note,” an essay by Robert Granat, “*The Gift of Lack*,” published in PARABOLA (Volume 8, Number 1, Winter 1983, Guilt). I tired early of attempting to place quotation marks on the many excellent phrases I’ve borrowed from this essay, so I merely say that virtually the entire sermon, if any wording seems particularly well-written, consider it to be Mr. Granat’s work. While his essay did not refer to Paul or 2 Corinthians or the “treasure” of light within us as humans, he yet sounded the theme clearly, showing that we are called to Something More than we are today.