



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 24, 2021

Live Abundantly with Alexa and Siri

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 2, 2021

Today, we conclude our sermon series, *Live Abundantly*. Over these past six weeks, we explored various aspects of our lives that may seem fraught with overwhelming demands or too few resources, to instead recognize how faithful stewardship, active pursuit of loving and serving God, turns us to experience abundance.

The stewardship of our lives calls for an active and hopeful outlook, always focused on what God has done for us and what we offer in return.

Today we consider how to steward our digital technologies.

Our text comes from an ancient prayer. Perhaps 1,000 years before the common era, a person stood or knelt in prayer, praises God for the vast expanse of creation, and implores God for wisdom.

Before we read, please join me in prayer.

Dear God, throughout the ages, we have stood in wonder of your infinite and intimate presence and remain humbled by our finite lives. Settle your spirit into us, silencing the noise around, and sooth us with your strength that we rise to live with imagination, wonder, and love. Amen.

Listen for how this psalm begins and ends, the divine majesty and human dignity, and the grace.

Psalm 8

- ¹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- ² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a stronghold because of your foes,
 to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your
fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
- ⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 mortals that you care for them?
- ⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than gods,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
- ⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of
your hands;
 you have put all things under their feet,
- ⁷ all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
- ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
- ⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

“Alexa, are we humans special among other living things?”
One sunny day last June, Linda Kinstler posed this question
to an Amazon device in the Seattle home of Shanen
Boettcher, an artificial intelligence researcher.

At first, Alexa spit out her default, avoidant answer: “Sorry, I’m not sure.” But after some word smithing from Mr. Boettcher (Alexa was having trouble accessing a script that he had provided), she revised her response.

Kinstler asked again, “Alexa, are we humans special among other living things?”

This time she replied, “I believe that animals have souls, as do plants and even inanimate objects.” “But the divine essence of the human soul is what sets the human being above and apart. ... Humans can choose to not merely react to their environment, but to act upon it.”

Boettcher is a former Microsoft general manager who is now studying for Ph.D. in artificial intelligence and spirituality at the University of Edinburgh. He hopes to understand how devices are transforming the way society thinks about the “big questions” of life.

Kinstler was one of thirty-two people from six faith backgrounds who Boettcher asked to rate Alexa’s answers. She is completing a Ph.D. at Cal Berkeley in rhetoric and writes extensively about technology.

More often we think of Alexa and Siri as technologies to merely expand our capacity to remember information and calculate results of finite problems. Rarely do I ask much of Alexa beyond quiet dinner music, the weather, or to set a

timer while cooking. Occasionally, I ask for a joke or her app *open a box of cats* and let the sound annoy my dogs.

Alexa sits on the kitchen counter and seems to poke her nose into my life with all sorts of offers to help me. Even speaking of it as a female gives this black orb anthropomorphic qualities it doesn't deserve.

Boettcher, like many other creators of technology, appreciates the great risks we take, the big collective of you and me and markets, as we step further into the realm of letting technology guide our lives. Those who code and deploy such advanced programs inevitably filter their beliefs and desires into what they create to influence our lives.

Just as our ancestors debated the impact of beating iron ore into plowshares or spears, and Christian since the first century debate just war theories ("just war theories" pursue the proper use of military force in combat), and physicians deliberate the ethics of medicines and surgeries, we too cannot avoid seeking moral clarity in how we allow this technology in our lives.

We ask, as the psalmist claims is within our dominion, to what end will these tools further our ability to praise God's divine majesty and respect human dignity?

Artificial intelligence, often abbreviated as just AI, is already embedded in our everyday lives prescribing which streets we drive to reach a destination, screening job applicants'

resumes, who we date, and of course, what other news articles we might read, or products we might be tempted to buy.

How do we actively steward Alexa and Siri and other AI tools in our lives?

In the '90s Rob Barrett's boss at IBM told him to "do the right thing" in coding the privacy settings for an internet browser – what information about you was made available. Barrett paused. He said, "I don't know enough theology to be a good engineer," and requested a leave of absence to study the Old Testament.

No surprise, when researching for this sermon, despite the perceived norm that faith has no place in the realm of high-tech, I found vast resources about Christian ethics and AI among churches in the Silicon Valley and Seattle.

University Presbyterian Church doesn't shy away from asking what others might think of as complex questions to discern how to embrace these tools, when to set them aside, the risks of sliding into thinking of ourselves as gods, or the way they may distance us from each other. When this church collaborated with other faith traditions, universities, and companies in their community, they found Seattle-area Mosques were way ahead. Muslims and people of color are too easily profiled by the algorithms in AI.

At Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, pastor Paul Taylor talks with congregation members, who are tech workers and investors about integrating their faith with technology. Taylor summarizes his conversations as “in some sense all roads led to the question of: ‘what does it mean to be human?’”¹

Three thousand years ago, a psalmist asked just this.

At the onset, the psalmist notes God invested God’s strength with babes and infants to overcome the forces of evil. Babes. God lifts the innocent to prevail over those who seek to rule us or position themselves as gods. Amid all this vast universe, God reaches to the least likely of humans to be agents for bringing God’s will to triumph.

While gazing at the work of God’s fingers, stars thrown in the sky, birds aloft in the air, the sheep and oxen milling in fields, and plunging to the depth of the sea in creatures, the psalmist asks, “what are human beings that you are mindful?”

Notice also, this psalmist includes all humanity, not just rulers or kings or priests, who would of at the time be in the presume position of authority. All humans are called to steward creation.

¹ Linda Kinstler, “Can Silicon Valley Find God, *The New York Times*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/07/16/opinion/ai-ethics-religion.html>. Kinstler’s article prompted research to AI and Faith, <https://aiandfaith.org/>, the churches referenced and numerous rabbit holes.

Whatever dominant position humankind enjoys, that position flows from God's grace, God's purposes, and some great end known by God.

Joanna Ng holds forty-five patents in technology, particularly AI, and describes her work as;

“honoring God...through the works of my hands and my intellect, is a form of worship. It never stops to intrigue me that the humbler and more insignificant I can be in divine partnership with God, the more I experience the embodiment of divine wisdom and divine wisdom is way more intriguing than AI.²

When we, like the Psalmist and Ng and all those who stand in awe of what God has done, humbly accept the burden and privilege to steward God's creation, we advance human dignity, and our collective lives grow.

So where do we go with this? Remember that we shape our tools before and while our tools shape us.

Technology, like all gifts from God, is best understood in relationship. It pushes us to ask questions like: how does God call us to employ this particular gift? How might technology support or hinder the call to love God and neighbor?

² “Meet Joanna Ng Computer Scientist and Disciple of Jesus,” *AI and Faith*, March 9, 2021, <https://aiandfaith.org/meet-joanna-ng-ai-pioneer-computer-scientist-and-disciple-of-jesus/>

Thankfully, more and more people are asking these questions outside and inside the tech companies that create social media networks and AI.

And we can do this at Westminster.

Rather than passively accept standard operating settings from devices and applications that could make us pawns for others to influence, we can choose who can see us and how we interact.

Rather than abdicate our future to the whims of investors and markets seeking more growth by addicting us to the devices, we can observe a sabbath, turn them off.

If we fall prey to the notion that the purpose of life, for individuals or communities, is to leverage our tools at the expense of others. If we believe we need to fear one another or feel helpless, then we will continue to retreat from one another online and in-person.

But if we trust that humankind was created made by a good, wise, and loving God, and that God wants us to pursue virtue and mutual care for one another and all living creatures, and that our lives can have profound meaning if we align ourselves with God's character, and dreams, then we can move society in a radically different direction.³

³ McLaren's optimism inspired my thinking of the role of technology in our faith. I hope you find similar encouragement. Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Thomas Nelson: 2007).

However much we might feel intimidated, God chooses to work through babes and innocents, and even luddites like me and maybe you have agency.

Last week I asked Alexa the same question, “are we humans special among other living things,” only to receive a more circumspect answer. My black plastic orb said, “humans are cognitive beings beyond plants and animal life.”

Someone changed her script...but our script relies upon the truth spoken throughout the ages, revealed in the life and resurrection of Jesus, and remains alive through our bold stewardship of technology.



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