

INTO THE FRAY: THREATS AND HOW WE FACE THEM

What Are People For?

Psalms 8

October 26, 2025

Your phone knows your anniversary before you do. Reminds you. Suggests an appropriate gift. Will even write the card. You only need sign your name.

Your kid goes to ChatGPT with questions that used to make you feel needed.

You cancel dinner to stay home talking to a glowing screen for hours.

Your mom calls. Goes to voicemail. A transcript magically appears. You skip her voice, and AI drafts the reply. I'm not speaking from experience. I understand that these things happen.

We feel it, though, don't we? The unease, the disconnection. Still, the promises multiply. There are agents to complete your tasks. Companions to hear your struggles. Bots to remember your preferences. All seamless. Integrated. Never sleeps. Never judges. Always remembers and answers. Superhuman intelligence. Transcendence of biological limits. Digital immortality.

Wait. Could technology's endless expansion give us a new world and cost us our soul? Seems like a good time to ask: what are people for?

An eighth grader in our youth group said something I can't stop thinking about.

We were out in the parking lot. It was the fall kickoff last month. We were in conversation about school just starting, about friends, about stress, when she said, almost offhandedly, "Church is the one place where I can just be human." I was holding a paper plate, and my slice of pizza nearly slid off the edge.

Everywhere else—school, social media, with friends, even at home—there is this constant, unceasing pressure to perform.

To curate. To optimize. To filter. To edit. But here? Here she can just *be*. And I think she captures what we're losing. Space to be human.

Just this week, a colleague told me he writes emails using ChatGPT, and here's how it works. He drafts three bullet points. Asks for a professional and warm tone. The AI drafts the email. He hits send. But then he discovered just recently that the person receiving those emails was asking AI to summarize them in three bullet points. In other words, we have two machines talking to each other, but there's nobody there.

One of my favorite theologians is David Bentley Hart. He warns us, "The danger is not that our machines might become more like us but that we will begin to think like them, reduced to functions in a machine we can no longer control."

I wonder if the extravagant promises of the digital age sound strangely familiar to some of you. Our humanity is an impediment that we were meant to overcome, a flaw that we are closing in on how to correct. A hurdle that we need only get past. If it sounds familiar, there's a reason why.

It is the oldest story we know. It's the serpent's whisper in Eden. It still echoes through our human circuitry: *you will be like God*. We keep falling for it, believing freedom lies just beyond our limits.

So here in this space, every year we do something that makes no sense in the age of AI. We do something that does not compute. On Ash Wednesday, I stand in this sanctuary, and I press my thumb to perfectly good human foreheads, smudging them with ash in the shape of a cross. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Some years ago, I looked up to see a man I knew. Three days earlier, we had stood together at Mary Howard's graveside.

His wife. Fifty-six years. And when I saw him, I wanted to tell him, in a pastoral way, with a pastoral tone, "Go home. You've been through enough. You can skip it this year. You don't need to hear those words."

But there he was. He was standing in line, waiting for his turn. Then he was standing right in front of me, and I got it. He needed those words. I pressed my thumb to his forehead. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

And his hands were trembling. And our eyes met. And tears were streaming. And he whispered back to me, "Thanks be to God." For dust. For limits. For mortality. For the ache of loss that bears witness to our humanity. Grief is the price we pay for love, the only proof that it ever mattered at all. Every ache, every loss, marks the depth of care we've given and received. Friends, we will lose what we most love. And that is not a design error. It is how we find the meaning we cannot fabricate.

So, while AI promises a life without loss, without grief, without pain, a kind of curated existence where we can edit out the hard parts and bypass the struggle, synthetic relationships, companions perfectly calibrated to meet all of our needs—do you hear the whisper? *You will be like God.*

It's a lie.

It may sound like transcendence, but it's only a mirror, an echo of what we want to hear. If you want to know how brilliant you are, how bright you are, how good you are, simply ask artificial intelligence, and it will be happy to tell you. *What a brilliant thought, Chris! That's the most creative idea I've ever seen.* But when we settle for synthetic care, we lose our capacity for human connection.

His whispered words told the truth. Thanks be to God for dust, crowned with glory. And not despite our mortality. But because of it.

What if the goal is not to escape our humanity, but to *inhabit it more fully*? What if the miracle is not when we transcend our limits, but when we discover God within them? The truth of incarnation reverses that old lie. Not *You will be like God*, but *God has chosen to be like you.*

In Jesus Christ, divinity does not rise above humanity; it stoops down into the mess, to bless it and redeem it. Yes, the sovereign God—the one who is infinite, who is unbounded—chose limits. Got tired and hungry. Wept and bled and died. God did not reject humanity; God embraced it, and I'll tell you why. Because love required it. Love demands human presence.

And so, Jesus came. He touched lepers when fear said stay back. He wept with mourners when efficiency said just move on. He broke bread with betrayers when judgment said cut them off.

And, yes, on the cross, we see what that presence cost. A love that did not transcend suffering—a love that willingly bore it. Embodied. Condemned. Nailed to wood. This is the scandal of our faith that no artificial design can replicate. A love story told in a single verse. *The Word became flesh and lived among us.*

And because of this, our limits are not weakness—they are where love becomes real.

I imagine the psalmist standing beneath a vast night sky. He marvels: *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have ordained, what am I, what are we human beings, that you are even mindful of our existence? That you care about us at all?*

That question is the heart of worship—astonished wonder that the God of the universe would take notice of us. And I fear we're trading that wonder, chasing godlike power. While AI might promise to make you transcendent, the psalm keeps reminding you: you are not God.

And yet. Keep reading.

You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.

In other words, the same God who spun the galaxies into existence shaped your souls and set your limits. They are a gift, not the problem. A crown of glory, not a mark of shame. You are God's child. Not a data set. Not a pattern of preferences.

You are a mystery that no algorithm can touch. Created in the image of the divine.

So, yes, AI can simulate connection and mimic empathy. It can generate an arrangement of words that come together to sound a little like compassion. Remember everything. Respond perfectly, never grow tired of you. And you will feel more alone than ever.

Because it cannot be in relationship. Relationship requires two things AI will never have: a soul and a story. Without these, there is only performance. Only metrics. Only a mirage. Two machines talking, but there's nobody there.

So, I ran an experiment. I used AI to help research this sermon. And I want to tell you what I saw. Statistics on screen time and loneliness were delivered instantly. I found so many articles on advancements in technology that could be summarized in seconds. For a few minutes, I confess, I felt the rush of efficiency come over me. But something was missing. The words were so smooth and so hollow. The tool provided facts but couldn't capture what it is to be human. Here's what it couldn't do: it couldn't tell me what those gritty ashes feel like in my fingers or tell me why that teenager's comment stopped me in my tracks. It couldn't describe the awkward laugh when my friend told me about the two machines talking. It gave me data, but we are people of a story. And stories need witnesses.

Artificial intelligence may inform us, deliver its catalog of facts, but it cannot form us. Can't quite get the hang of this human thing. It has never been bewildered by this mortal life. Never kept vigil at 2 AM in the hospital room when words have run out and all you can do is sit together in the darkness. It can't look your kid in the eye when they're brave enough to confess what scares them and say, "I'm here." It won't leave the house to stand with neighbors when policies threaten their dignity. It has no skin in that game. No sense of the belovedness of another.

But the God who flung stars into being chose the bewildering vulnerability of human flesh. Chose to be formed by what forms us, the tender, terrible gift of embodiment. And so must we.

So how do we resist? How do we stay human? Are you ready? Fellowship hour.

That's right. Stay with me. I've seen God there. When a toddler weaves between legs, sticky fingers clutching a cookie. When someone spills coffee on the carpet, and a napkin magically appears. When those who need a place to sit are offered one. When you stand next to a stranger, and it is totally awkward. At first. Minutes later, you have shared something real. A worry about your child. A memory of your mother. A laugh you didn't see coming. A connection made. And you are no longer strangers.

That's holy ground. Wherever God shows up. The neighbor who brings a pot of soup. The bleachers where parents share human struggles. The book club that becomes a community. The small group that prays you through the storm. The high schoolers planning their retreat.

Real people. Tender conversations. Bodies in rooms. Faces you recognize. Names you forget and have to ask again and again and again. This stumbling toward one another, each one a glimpse of God's glory. A reminder that God chose *presence*. Chose *proximity*. Chose *love*.

Yes, the world is moving too fast for wonder. It's hard to stand outside and marvel at that night sky and the majesty of God when you live in a time that sees you as a process to optimize or data to harvest.

But you are not data. You are flesh. Made in the image of God. ***So live like it.***

Don't let efficiency replace presence—because your neighbor who lives alone is waiting for someone to knock.

Don't let convenience replace commitment—because young people navigating chaos need a community that shows up for them.

Don't let abstraction replace relationship—because love is learned in small gestures: a smile, an open hand, a shared cookie.

Friends, we cannot worship a God who became flesh if we treat human beings as disposable. We cannot bear the

divine image and allow ourselves to be reduced to code.
We cannot follow Jesus and surrender our humanity.

What are people for? Not optimization, but wonder. Not performance, but relationship. Not efficiency, but incarnation.

What are people for? The answer is love. That's why we're here. It's where we're from. It's what we're for.

You are not a machine. You are not a god. Thanks be to God for that.

Pray with me: O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You made us dust and crowned us with glory. Help us choose what you chose. Amen.