

Sermon  
Sunday, May 14, 2023  
The Rev. Nancy Conklin

The week after Easter, I spent time with family in Michigan. It was the first time I had a chance to meet my godson Trevor's 18-month-old son, Oliver. Oliver doesn't speak as yet — at least in ways which adults can fully understand. He babbles constantly — a running commentary as he engages the world around him.

Like his father, Oliver never sits still, he is so intrigued by all things new. The morning I arrived, Oliver and I went for a long walk, and it was so fun to watch him explore every rock, bug, and stick along the way, babbling as he looked hard and long at them.

At first, I wanted to know what this tiny “babbling” was trying to say, but it wasn't long before I could actually imagine what he was saying in his own language. Such a precious reminder of how we all began to learn about the nature of the world and the creatures and creation that surround us even before we have the language to describe what we are experiencing.

Later at lunch, I was sitting next to Oliver, who was looking like a primitive caveman attempting to navigate a spoon to scoop up his food. Trevor, who is a youth pastor, was sitting on the other side of me. Not surprisingly, he was looking at his phone, and precedes to school me in yet another marvel of modern technology — artificial intelligence. As you might have heard, there is now an app called “OpenAI” that is causing quite a stir among educators, artists, and musicians.

Trevor opened the app and said “create a five-week Bible study on John 3:16 for college students, including discussion questions.” Within nanoseconds, his phone began creating one. I was both awed and dismayed at the same time, and echoed other's concerns that this is plagiarism at best and complete lack of original thought and creativity at worst. To which Trevor responded, “To make matters worse, because college professors have become savvy at spotting A.I.-produced materials, the technology has adapted so that you can now ask it to produce a paper on George Washington, but include four glaring errors to throw off the professor's suspicion.”

The juxtaposition of watching Oliver's intrigue with all things new (though he gave up on spoon and ate with his fingers) and Trevor introducing me to this form of artificial intelligence seemed like a spirit-produced coincidence.

The day before, while at Harrisburg Airport waiting for my flight to Detroit, I decided to pick up the New York Times. It's been a long time since I held an actual newspaper in my hands, now that I digest my news from the internet, so I thought it would be fun to do so. In the science section there was an article entitled “AI: A Mind in Search of a Body” exploring the question whether a body is necessary for acquiring intelligence. The author wrote:

These questions, agonized over by philosophers for centuries, are gaining new urgency as sophisticated machines with artificial intelligence begin to infiltrate society. Apps like OpenAI have minds in some sense: Trained on vast troves of human language, they have learned how to generate novel combinations of text, images. When primed in the right way, they can express desires, beliefs, hopes, intentions, love. They can speak of introspection and doubt, self-confidence and regret. But some A.I. researchers say that

the technology won't reach true intelligence, or true understanding of the world, until it is paired with a body that can perceive, react to and feel around its environment. For them, talk of disembodied intelligent minds is misguided — even dangerous.

We who have been created for a life of wholeness in body, mind, and spirit have entered a new age of asking ourselves how our insatiable thirst for knowledge, our intellectual prowess, will form, shape, and define how we engage the world around us. Most importantly, how will it shape who we are as those created in the image of our Creator, and how we are to be in relationship with God and another? It's the age-old Tower of Babel question: Have we become too smart for our own good? (Mindful that that story of modern technology ended in the scattering of people who were once united in place and language.) Are all things new and novel dangerously becoming new graven images in the gods of our own making?

Question confronted Paul in today's reading from Acts. After his life-changing encounter with our Risen Lord, the Spirit of Life dispatched Paul into the Gentile world to witness to the resurrection power of God. He has arrived in Athens, the heart of the very best of pagan culture — the home of Plato and Pericles.

Yet, in Paul's eyes the renown cultural center has become nothing more than a waste land full of idols. Bold in his witness, Paul begins to argue with Jews, Epicureans, and Stoics in the marketplaces and on the streets. There was no shortage of traveler teachers or philosophers (in Greek, literally "lovers of wisdom") in those days. Without mass media, such public speakers could be both educational and entertaining. They strived to become proficient at their chosen craft, shaping their messages to the standards of rhetoric and persuasion so as to be both credible and convincing.

His listeners think Paul's strange teaching is about some sort of foreign god. Some of them thought he was merely babbling nonsense. Others were intrigued wanting to hear what more he had to say. They invited him to speak in the Aeropagus, where the academic elite spent their days, doing what those intellectuals enjoyed — searching and debating new ideas. Novelty tended to attract their attention more quickly than truth; that's the essence of "P.I." — "Pagan Intelligence"

Paul affirmed their search for the divine by saying, "I see that you are very religious by all the idols throughout the city." But then, in good rhetorical form, adds, "I even found an altar to the unknown God, therefore, the One you worship without knowing is the One I now proclaim to you. God, the Creator of the World and everything in it is Lord of Heaven and earth does not live in temples made with humans, nor is the Creator worshipped with human hands, as though the Creator of all is in need of anything, since the one true God gives to all life and breath and all things necessary."

Then, Paul moves beyond who the Creator to who we are as God's creatures — our common humanity created to seek God in the hope we might find the One in whom we live and move and have our being. We are God's offspring. The ultimate assurance of the divine nature of the one True God, dwelling in us and not in the things of our contriving is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Where that message is proclaimed, some will mock it and others will be intrigued to hear more.

John Calvin would remind us that "the human mind is a perpetual factory of the novel and the new," with the potential to create a wasteland full of idols. We all also know that morality, law,

ethics, and religion always lag behind technological advances and cultural shifts. The challenge of our age, quoting our Confession, the Brief Statement of Faith:

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, **to unmask idolatries in Church and culture.**

The gods of “P-I” demanded people bring gifts to them and to do things for them. The gods of our day still make demands on us. Those things that have become of prime importance, demanding our time, our energy, our talents, some of which are not worth living, yet, we must work for them.

Our God in whom alone we worship, and in whom alone we trust, does not exist in those spaces, places, or things of our human contriving, rather it is we who live and move and have our being in God. Are we willing to honestly evaluate and courageously confront and name our personal idols? How are we sacrificing our time, our very lives, to those idols? Our lives that no longer belong to us, but to Christ?

Our God who is the giver of good gifts doesn't need anything from us other than to use our very human selves: our gifts, our passions, our intellect, our bodies, our talents, and our treasure to unmask the idolatry in our world by witnessing to the truth that we and our lives are not the result of our human achievement, but of our relational dependence upon our Creator, in whom we live, move, and have our being.