

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Curiosity”

Psalm 8

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I recently finished Walter Isaacson’s biography of Leonardo DaVinci. My daughter, Paige, often recommends books for me to read and she recommended this one. My hunch is that length is at the top of her criteria for what to recommend. She just can’t seem to find it in herself to recommend any book to me that is less than 500 pages. This biography approaches page 600 before it hits the endnotes.

DaVinci was someone who could *not be contained by a pandemic*. We know this because he lived through them. He self-quarantined multiple times during a series of bubonic plague resurgences. But when he was physically constrained, his curiosity liberated him. He would paint, of course, but also explored any area that captured his attention whether or not it was practical and whether or not it could earn him coin.

Here’s a fascinating example. During one bubonic plague outbreak, he was self-quarantined. He certainly would not go about the plague-infested city of Milan where he normally lived. Milan’s streets were narrow, dirty, congested, crowded and hard to navigate without constantly bumping into people or garbage. It was an ideal place for the plague to spread. DaVinci started studying and thinking about what a city would look like that was cleaner, safer and more beautiful. He put his ideas on paper.

The city he imagined would be built on three levels with commerce separated from living space.

- A network of canals would flow on a subterranean level so that goods could be delivered directly to business basements.



- On the first tier, above the basements, there would be space for trade and shopping, as well as stables with ventilation and easy cleaning.
- Then on a second tier, there would be residential and leisure space.

It didn't matter to DaVinci that his cities would not be built. He enjoyed the creative journey.

That is one of many examples of how DaVinci's playful curiosity kept him *unstuck*. He dissected cadavers and then drew pictures of what he saw: bones, muscles and veins, pictures that were as accurate as they were artistic. Isaacson says that if the drawings had been published, the study of anatomy would have been advanced by at least two centuries. He designed scuba gear, flying equipment, submarines, armored vehicles, parachutes, and mirrors that would focus light to create heat. Hardly any of this was for pay but simply because DaVinci let his curiosity call the shots.

Here's the thing about curiosity. It might begin simply with what fascinates but can surprisingly lead to real life uses. Without his planning it, curiosity allowed not only him, but later scientists, engineers and artists to become unstuck. For instance, the concepts and principles behind his imagined cities are studied by city planners to this day.

Curiosity is as important for a person of faith as anyone. An *incurious faith* leads to that *bad faith* that shuts down rather than opens up: a faith that is dogmatic, unthinking, blind to new truth, and so easily led by cult figures. A curious faith, though, doesn't get stuck. It opens the mind and heart to new revelations, and to a deeper love of the mystery that is God and the potential brother and sister that is one's neighbor.

I want you to imagine something. Imagine a theologian and poet thousands of years ago, standing on his roof and studying the night sky *simply for the joy of it*. Then there comes a night when his study gets him unstuck. He has a spiritual epiphany. He composes a poem that we now know as Psalm 8. Listen for the Word of God as John Robinson reads this psalm for us.

(Video of John Robinson reading Psalm 8)

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 bulwark 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 God,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.



⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
⁹O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

It took less than a minute for John to read the psalm, and yet I just bet that the minute came of hours of the psalmist studying the night sky with a curious mind and a heart of faith.

I didn't tell John this, but I chose him to read this psalm because he and the writer of Psalm 8 are, I think, kindred spirits. John worked as a dentist (he retired recently), but many of us know him for who he is outside his office hours. His curiosity has taken him

- around the world
- into different hobbies from sailing to hang gliding
- and into study of whatever subject interests him.

And, as with the poet of Psalm 8, John is a writer and a man of faith so that what he sees and experiences becomes fodder for prayers and reflections about being a child of God.

That's how I imagine the psalmist. After spending many playful hours on his roof studying the textbook of the night sky and asking what seem to be idle questions of what he sees—questions about the distance between himself and the stars or why the stars shine—he begins to wonder about the one standing beneath them. The stars blink unthinking praise to God. But in his moment of self-awareness, the psalmist realizes that he is giving thinking praise to God. He stands there under the night sky as someone who thinks about more than the distance between star to eye, but also about the distance between injustice and justice, between enmity and reconciliation, between fear and hope. Yes, the sky is so expansive, and he is so small. And yet he feels

not only created
but also claimed,
not only alive
but also loved,
not only as one who sees what is in front of him
but also as one who has been given a vision of what by God's grace could be,
not only as one who hears the sounds of the world around him
but also as one who somehow hears a Word from God—A Word
about who he is called to be
and how he is called to live.

He senses all this is possible because somehow he has a relationship with the Creator, and though he feels physically small, he feels spiritually large... a little less than angels.

Have you had that experience? I know you've probably had the experience where you feel small. Perhaps you've read something about galaxies and light-years, or looked out over the Grand



Canyon for the first time, or heard someone say something that dismissed you as a person of no value, making you feel like a speck. We've all experienced belittlement.

But I bet you have had—I hope you have had—the Psalm 8 experiences where you have been made to feel large. It didn't happen because your ego was overinflated or because you believed lies about yourself, but because some human or divine touch, or some new insight, or maybe some participation in a cause bigger than yourself expanded you.

Maybe you learned something, and it felt like the sky above you somehow reached down to you. Maybe it was when a parent, a child, a sibling, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a grandparent, a dear friend smiled when you walked in the room and you suddenly grew three inches. Or maybe you went full on Psalm 8 and you felt a personal connection with the God of creation, and you feel precious in that sight. And then you feel connected not only with God but with all those around you and through the centuries who have heard the voice and felt the touch.

Do you feel stuck these days? I believe many do. Many feel stuck in the rough realm of the 3 Ps: pandemic, politics and protest. Travel has been restricted, places are off limits, folks spend less time hunting and gathering but now have what they would hunt and gather delivered to their doorstep. It is convenient and safe, but it is isolating. What can you do?

My suggestion today is be curious. Follow T.H. White's advice; advice that he puts in the mouth of Merlin giving guidance to young Arthur in White's novel, *The Once and Future King*:
“The best thing for being sad,” said Merlin to young Arthur, “is to learn something. ... You may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.”

So, following the example of Robinson, DaVinci, and the psalmist, be curious. Be curious frivolously and be curious seriously.

Be curious frivolously because you will never know when an imagined dream can become an impossibility, when a casual study of muscles and nerves leads to a Mona Lisa smile, when wonder at the stars leads to a theological insight, when the exploration of something beautiful and elegant leads to an insight into what it means to live a beautiful and elegant life.

- Is it time to explore that subject that interested you but which you didn't think would earn you coin? I am never going to be an architect, but I studied it recently and it deepened my theology.
- Is it time to get to know the mind of Jane Austin, and explore England and civility through her novels? Just to hazard a guess, those novels might remind us of the benefits of grace and civility in difficult conversations today.
- Is it time to pick up an instrument to learn to play it, tools to create something on your own, or learn to fly a plane with a computer simulation? I am almost certain that there will be



unexpected discoveries about truth and life that won't come if those hours are spent being seduced by talking heads on TV.

That's the amazing thing about good curiosity. It gets you unstuck by both being an escape and being a means to engage. Being the means to engage is what I meant when I said that curiosity can be serious as well as frivolous. When facing the hard parts of life head on, curiosity is a great help to get you through.

- Are you overwhelmed by news of the virus' spread? Let curiosity lead you to the scientists and health workers who can give you the truly helpful information about how best to stay safe, about policies that will work, and about the hopeful development of therapies and vaccines.
- Are you overwhelmed by politics and protest? Curiosity will move you past the artificial divides and diatribes. It will help you dive into the humanity of issues and help you eventually find common ground beneath the arguments; the ways different sides of issues reflect each other's mistakes. Curiosity will also eat away at your own bias, or prejudice or ignorance.
- Do you feel stuck in an uncurious faith that believes that things need to be just so, and when they are not, you feel spiritually alone, abandoned or betrayed since both God and the world are not behaving as you already decided they should? Well, curiosity will destroy an unexamined faith, but is the virtue that can lead to a deep faith in God as a mystery, and to truths that are better described as revelations than certainties. It will lead to the kind of faith that is grounded in love, guided by grace, and fueled by hope.

I will close by offering this. It has been said that in difficult times, we should pray. I agree. Aside from humility, curiosity is the most important virtue in being able to pray as Jesus taught us to pray. Powerful Prayer—powerful, transformative prayer that can bring wisdom, healing and reconciliation—is Curious Prayer. “Pray then like this,” Jesus said: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Are you curious? What does the kingdom look like here on this earth? What is God's will in these times in which we live?

Be curious about what God sees and wants; be curious about what it is that God wants to change in you, not just the world. The prayers of a curious faith will keep you from getting stuck in fear, hatred and demonization. It will carry you to God and to others.

I've heard some people put down prayer in hard times saying that the time for prayer is over and it is time to act. I respect the call to action, but curious prayer is action. It may seem frivolous, like standing on a roof and staring at stars, but by opening windows into the mind and heart to what previously was unimagined, it leads to changed minds, changed hearts, changed lives and a changed world.

So, from now on, when I say, “Let us pray,” hear me also say, “Be curious.” It will help you begin to be unstuck.

