

# The Days are Surely Coming

Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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October 16, 2022/19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

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I want to introduce you to a term that I have found increasingly helpful as I ponder questions of what it means to be human and how we might live well with one another (and with ourselves) in deeply divided and polarized times.

The term is: low anthropology.

Perhaps you're a little puzzled. "Low anthropology?" What on earth is that? Is it some first year university class on the exotic customs of ethnic groups oceans away?

Well, no. It is the title of a book that I am currently reading by David Zahl, a writer, podcaster, and priest in the Episcopal Church.

The term actually points to a reality that is far from exotic. It attempts to describe a basic truth underlying our everyday lives and relationships and assumptions about the world.

Let's start with the word "anthropology." It's a word that makes its way to us in English, as so many words do, via the Greek. It is a combination of the words *ánthrōpos* ("human") and *lógos* ("study").

So, anthropology is the study of human beings.

In academic contexts, the study of humans is quite rigorous and it at least claims to be "scientific" (I'm skeptical of whether or not beings as gloriously complex as humans can ever be reduced to scientific analysis, but that's another sermon).

I took a bunch of anthropology courses at the University of Lethbridge, and even considering majoring in anthropology before switching to philosophy. I find human

cultures and behaviour and rituals and assumptions endlessly fascinating (often inspiring, occasionally depressing). We are a weird and wonderful subject of study.

But outside of the ivory tower, the word “anthropology” simply points to what we believe about human nature. And according to David Zahl, we all have an anthropology, even if we would never use the term.

Do we believe that human beings are basically good and that all we need is a bit of tweaking to become better? Some better education? More social support? A better childhood?

Or, do we believe that human beings are basically bad and incapable of much goodness? Will our brokenness always find ways to seep out into the world no matter how peaceful our childhood was or how well we’ve been educated?

Are we angels or demons? Or are we somewhere in between?

Our personal anthropology is our “operative theory of human nature.” And it matters. It affects how we see our neighbours, what we expect of one another, what possibilities we hold out for change and growth.

If we expect people to be angels and make no allowances for the darker side of human nature, we’ll be constantly frustrated with them, always expecting better.

If we expect people to be demons and have no hope that human nature can be modified and channeled in brighter ways, then we’ll lock people (and ourselves) into bitter, self-perpetuating narratives that have little hope of progress.

Most of us find ourselves somewhere in between these two poles. But we all walk around with an implicit view of who we are and what we’re capable of and what we might reasonably expect from one another. Every day of our lives. We are *all* anthropologists.

David Zahl’s central point in the book is that a low anthropology is more accurate than a high one. It tells the human story more truly.

It’s also a *better* one because it opens the door for grace and humility and Christ-like love. It recognizes that we are all weak and limited in countless ways.

We are all sinners in need of grace—the grace of one another, and more importantly, the grace of God.

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I think it is safe to say that the apostle Paul was a low anthropologist. There are perhaps few more accurate expression of the human condition than the one he penned in Romans 7:15:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Paul is expressing something I think we all know full well. We can *want* to do good, but sometimes wanting isn't enough. We act in ways that are contrary to our best and highest ideals. We do the very things that we don't want to do, things that are bad for us, things that we know will cause conflict.

We just can't help ourselves. We're "only human."

As I was writing this sermon yesterday, a song by the English pop rock band The 1975 came on in my headphones. The song was called "Human Too:

I'm sorry that I'm someone that I wish I could change  
But I've always been the same  
Yeah, I've always been the same

Don't you know that I'm a human too?...  
Darlin', that's what humans do.<sup>1</sup>

This song expresses the conflicted nature of our humanity. We are indeed weak and limited and broken. Each one of us. We need to acknowledge this honestly.

David Zahl tells a story in his book that I think illustrates this well. He talks about a video tutorial on "How to Get Married" taken from a London based organization called "The School of Life."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://music.apple.com/ca/album/human-too/1632479065?i=1632479844>

In it, the traditional wedding ceremony is reconfigured to allow for a bit more honesty:

The first order of business in this reconfigured ceremony is called the ritual of humility. Each party, dressed in their finest, faces the other and reads from their personalized “Book of Imperfections.” They say, for example, “I’m not good at communicating my feelings maturely,” “I tend to assume that if you’re upset it’s something about me,” and so on. The Hallmark Channel this is not...

After the reading, the couple looks each other in the eye and recites in unison: “Neither of us is fully sane or healthy. We are committed to treating each other as broken people, with enormous kindness and imagination—when we can manage it...”

Next the congregation chimes in with a recitation of their own. As one, they issue the following affirmation: “We are all broken. We have all been idiots and will be idiots again. We are all difficult to live with. We sulk and get angry, blame others for our own mistakes, have strange obsessions, and fail to compromise. We are here to make you less lonely with your failings. We’ll never know all the details, but we understand.”<sup>2</sup>

David Zahl says he’s shown this clip at least thirty times in public settings and the group has never failed to laugh at this point.

Why? Because we see the truth in these recitations. We see ourselves.

(I’m not suggesting that we ditch traditional wedding vows, by the way; I think it’s important to aim high in life and in marriage, important as I think humility and honesty are.)

Perhaps in our most honest moments, we are all low anthropologists. This may be especially true the older we get. We have seen ourselves and those around us at our worst. We know our weaknesses well.

A few preachers that I listen to regularly often begin their sermons with a simple prayer: “Lord, we pray for the one who preaches, because you know his/her sins are many.”

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<sup>2</sup> David Zahl, *Low Anthropology: The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others (and Yourself)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2022), 14-15.

I resonate with this prayer more and more with each passing year. It is the prayer of a low anthropologist.

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Earlier, I said that Paul was a low anthropologist. The text from Romans is the clearest statement of this, but I think we see it in our text from 2 Timothy, too.

In verses 3-4, he warns Timothy of a “time that is coming” when,

people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

The only disagreement I might have with Paul’s assessment is with the “a time is coming” part. The time isn’t coming; it’s here. You could argue that the time has *always* been here.

From the first humans’ ears perking up in the garden when the serpent whispered, “You can be like God,” right down to the present, we’ve always had itchy ears that seek out what we want to hear.

Our itchy ears are low anthropology in action. Psychologists call this tendency of ours “confirmation bias.” We all tend to gravitate toward voices that confirm what we already think or what we want to believe is true.

This is particularly true in our day and age, in a media context where we are drowning in a sea of information that often feels impossible to sort through. Who can say who is telling the truth? So, we choose voices that reflect what we want to hear.

At the risk of wandering into controversial territory, I think we just got a perfect window into this human instinct over the last two and a half years of the pandemic.

There were so many mixed messages and conflicting advice, so much confusion and fear. And in the midst of all this, many people very quickly hived off into hyper-politicized positions and only took seriously information that agreed with what they already thought.

Our positions about the pandemic quickly became almost as much about tribal affiliation and belonging as about public health. And of course this is ongoing.

We *all* have itchy ears. This is not a conservative or liberal phenomenon; it's a human one. We all tend to seek out voices that confirm us, validate our views, make us feel smart or special or right or whatever.

In light of who we are and how we're wired, Paul's advice to Timothy can seem somewhat naive.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching (1 Tim 4:1-2).

It seems almost as if Paul is exempting himself and Timothy from the common human predicament. *You know, all those people out there chase after what their ears want to hear, but you just stick to the truth!*

But what about you, Paul or you, Timothy? What about *your* biases? Does not Paul describe himself in his first letter to Timothy as the chief of sinners (1:15)? How can he claim to see so clearly here?

I think the key is the first part of his exhortation to Timothy:

[I]n the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom...

The truth Timothy and Paul (and we) are to cling to is a person. This is among Christianity's most revolutionary claims and its deepest hope.

The truth is not primarily a set of beliefs that we limited human beings have to figure out and get nailed down; it is a person.

This is the "sound doctrine" that Paul urges Timothy to preach. To preach Jesus and his upside down kingdom.

And this remains the task of the church. To stubbornly and persistently point to Jesus, the one true human, the one ultimately trustworthy judge, the one who knew no sin, the one who is not conflicted or biased in the ways that are so familiar to us.

Jesus is notoriously difficult to squeeze into any of our preferred ideologies. He doesn't accommodate himself or his message to any of our itchy ears.

Conservative Christians who think that the life of faith is mostly about right doctrine and getting our theological i's dotted and t's crossed, are often uncomfortable when they encounter the Jesus who shattered long-held social boundaries and invited in the despised and the unclean.

Liberal Christians who think that the life of faith is about following Jesus' ethic on the path of peace and becoming social justice activists, are often uncomfortable when they encounter the Jesus who claimed far more for himself than the title of "good teacher," and who delivered bracing calls to personal purity and robust belief.

It's good that we're uncomfortable. It reminds us that we don't get to make Jesus in our image. We need a Jesus who stands over all of our preferences, all the things we would like to be true, all of the things our ears itch to hear.

We need a Jesus who summons us to a reality beyond what we can secure for ourselves, beyond what we can often even imagine.

And what is this ultimate reality? Well, for this we look back to the prophet Jeremiah, our second reading today.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah looked ahead to a time when his people would no longer be yanked around by what their ears itched to hear, when our conflicted and divided hearts would find their true home.

He looked ahead to a time when the law, the rule, the standard, the invitation, and the purpose of God would be written on human hearts.

He looked ahead to a time when we finally realize that the God who stands over us and summons us to new life, who rebukes and corrects us, who breaks and mends us, who judges us, is also the God who loves us like no other, who longs to restore us, who forgives us and remembers our sins no more.

In sum, the prophet looked forward to a time when we would know God. What else but this could be the point of this whole beautiful and bewildering story that God has placed us in?

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The days are surely coming, Paul said to Timothy, when people will only listen to what they want to hear. Those days are here, and we know them well. This is low anthropology in action.

In these days, our task is to humbly acknowledge our brokenness and cling to Christ amidst the cacophony of voices that want to tell us easier and more flattering truths about who we are.

They days are surely coming, Jeremiah said to a people in exile, a people with few illusions about their limitations and their brokenness, when God will write his law upon your hearts, when we will truly and finally know God, when our wills and our very lives will align with the purposes for which he created us.

This is the great hope of Christianity.

And our task is to pray for its coming, to let it fire our hope, and to inspire lives of grace, and mercy, and love for one another in the meantime.

Amen.

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