

“The Real and the Artificial—Part IV: Artificial Intelligence and Real Life”
September 6, 2026

Jeremiah 12:1-5

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

A recent article in *Forbes* said that “Labor Day 2026 might be termed the ‘Labor Day of AI.’”

It seems appropriate, then, that my final sermon in this series on the real and the artificial falls on Labor Day weekend and that it should offer some thoughts on artificial intelligence. After all, that is the “artificial” that we are most concerned about in these days—how *artificial* intelligence is affecting our *real* lives and our *real* work.

I am, of course, in way over my head—and maybe that’s when sermons become worth listening to.

I take some encouragement from DZ Kalman, a Jewish scholar who works at Harvard on issues of religion and technology, studying how religious traditions can provide moral framework for fast-moving technological developments. Kalman suggests that when religious people write—or preach—about AI, we should just take it one step at a time.

He says:

“Religious responses to AI need to stop trying to be so nuanced. Stop trying to say one amazing thing for eternity; just try to say something that helps people for the next month. Tech companies succeed because they iterate. Religions are allowed to iterate too; they cannot keep up if they are afraid of being wrong. The clichéd AI defense of janky new products is ‘this is the worst it will ever be.’ Religions,” Kalman concludes, “could learn from that.”ⁱ

For this morning, I will set aside my usual fear of being wrong, forget about nuance, and try to give you my *best* worst thoughts, in the hope that I will proclaim some good news that will help you for, oh, the next month so—or at least for the coming week.

Let me start by discussing something I *do* know about on this Labor Sunday: work.

From Genesis on, scripture points to both the dignity and the difficulty of work.

Paul’s words in II Thessalonians speak to the early Christian understanding that work is essential to life—and even to the life of faith. Remember that the Christians in Thessalonica were convinced that the end of the age was coming soon. In only a short while, the risen Christ would return to earth and take away the faithful.

With the end at hand, many there were inclined to take it easy. Some members of that small Christian community were refusing to work.

Nonsense! Paul writes. Remember when I was there with you, he says. I was working. I worked night and day to pay for what I ate. Imitate me. Some of you are no longer supporting themselves with their work. Here’s an idea: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat! That will show those idle busybodies!

Texts such as this informed our ideas about work for millennia: Get to work. Sure, it's exhausting. That's why it's called *work*. Now, get back to work.

Certainly, our thinking about all of this has evolved. Over time people would realize that it was wrong—*evil*—to enslave people for their labor. It was wrong to send children to the mills and into the mines. It was wrong to deny workers a living wage. It was right to honor the work—paid and unpaid—that people did.

Through all of this, scripture has sustained and challenged us—until now.

Now the horizon of a new world can be seen. It promises—or threatens—to reshape not only work but much of life.

Nearly a decade ago, Kai-Fu Lee, the president of the Artificial Intelligence Institute, worried that “Unlike the Industrial Revolution and the computer revolution, the artificial intelligence revolution is not taking certain jobs (artisans, personal assistants who use paper and typewriters) and replacing them with other jobs (assembly-line workers, personal assistants conversant with computers). Instead, it is poised to bring about a wide-scale decimation of jobs—mostly lower-paying jobs, but some higher-paying ones, too.”

While many businesses hope that this will result in great profits, such profits will mean, as we are beginning to see, “enormous wealth concentrated in relatively few hands and enormous numbers of people out of work.”

Lee suggested that the solution to the problem of mass unemployment might entail preparing people for jobs involving creativity, planning, and what Lee calls “cross domain thinking”—he mentions trial lawyers, social workers, and bartenders as examples. I like to think that ministers might be in this category of the still-employable.

But when Lee asks, “How many bartenders does a society really need?” I realize one could easily substitute “ministers” for “bartenders.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are those who think that some form of universal basic income would be required for the many who could be displaced. Some of the vast wealth of the few would need to be given to the vast numbers of the unemployed. Such an economic transfer on a global—or even national—scale would be staggeringly difficult. And the few with vast wealth do not seem ready to let go of some of it.

We're still in the process of seeing how all of this will play out. Nothing is certain. Nothing is certain at all.

Still, I read the headlines: “AI Is Outsmarting It's Creators,” “Silicon Valley's Big Money Is About to Get a Lot Bigger,” “Nvidia Extends AI Spending Spree with \$12.9 Billion Dollar Deal to Buy Hugging Face,” “Why the Hugging Face Hack Should Make You Worry More About A.I.” I read the headlines and I want to cry out with the Psalmist: “I have no peace, because of my cares. I am shaken by the noise...and by the pressure; My heart quakes within me, and the terrors...have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling have come over me, and horror overwhelms me.”

We watch as a handful of tech billionaires pave the way for upheaval simply because they can and ask with Jeremiah: “Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”

Jeremiah is convinced—as many people today are convinced—that God is blind to the ways of those who do wrong. As the prophet sees it, not only the people but all of creation—the land, the grass, the animals and birds—are being destroyed by perfidious people.

How does God respond? Not so much with assurance as with challenge.

“If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?” If what has happened already has upset you, you will soon have even greater reasons to be upset. You think things are unraveling now? Wait.

What will we do?

What will we do when the horses come?

What will we do now that the horses are here?

People are catching up, but in general, our theology, our worship, and our action have left us unprepared for what is coming, for what is here. These days I need to listen closely to hear a word of hope, a word of grace, for those who work and for the growing number of those whose labor might no longer be needed.

I need to listen closely to hear a word of hope, a word of grace, as the artificial encroaches even further on our real lives.

Bill Gates—Bill Gates!—recently warned that artificial intelligence poses a grave threat to jobs and human life, and that urgently addressing the risks should be “the world’s top priority.”

Then just yesterday, Cal Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown, asked: “How Scared Should We Be of A.I. Right Now?”

He was more positive than many, writing: “It’s not surprising that so many Americans feel negatively about A.I. at the moment, but these sentiments aren’t inevitable. Our current crop of Large Language Model-powered tools are exciting—and worrisome, and promising, and frustrating, all at the same time. With proper direction, they’ll hopefully make our lives better. But they don’t have to be terrifying.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Did you catch the way Professor Newport hedged his bets saying: “With *proper direction*, they’ll *hopefully* make our lives better.” It reminded me of that old *Beyond the Fringe* skit in which the British comedian, Peter Cook, talks about a book he is reading that envisions a disastrous end for the earth. “But,” Cook says, the author “ends the book on a note of hope. He says, ‘I hope this will not happen.’”

How then do we as people of faith respond to the challenges to real life posed by artificial intelligence—for at least, say, the coming month?

If there is a way forward, it might be to return to that affirmation early in Genesis that human beings are created “in the image of God.” That phrase suggests all sorts of possibilities, among them that we ourselves have the ability to create, to bring something new into existence.

And let us remember the good news that in Christ God brings hope out of despair and life out of death.

Ours is a faith of new possibility. What the new reality will be depends on us.

Let us, then, continue to value the good things that we are able to make, the things that make life better or more delightful for others. And let us value the labor that brings those things into being. Our work—and the work of others—are ways of bringing about human flourishing. Seeing work in this way will itself be a revolution, introducing new possibilities into the workplace and the world.

And remember, as we face the perils and possibilities of the artificial, that real life is *relational*—it connects us with family and friends, with those we know and those we don’t know. It keeps us connected in times of happiness as well as in times of difficulty when the way forward is anything but clear.

Stay connected.

Stay real.

ⁱ DZ Kalman, “Fourteen Mostly Jewish Thoughts on the Pope’s AI Encyclical,” May 26, 2026, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. <https://cyber.harvard.edu/story/2026-05/14-mostly-jewish-thoughts-popes-ai-encyclical>.

ⁱⁱ Kai-Fu Lee, “**The Real Threat of Artificial Intelligence**,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/opinion/sunday/artificial-intelligence-economic-inequality.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cal Newport, “**How Scared Should We Be of A.I. Right Now?**” *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/05/opinion/ai-silicon-valley.html>