

The good news is embodied

A sermon on creation, incarnation, and technology

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My younger daughter, Hannah, prefers the status quo. She is open to change only if the new thing catches her attention right away. About when Hannah was learning to read, she preferred to watch videos rather than do activities that took some effort. One day, after repeated requests to watch Franklin, or The Magic School Bus, or Veggie Tales (all good children’s videos), and repeated dismissals of my suggestions to read, craft, play piano, or play with a friend instead, I decided to do a little bit of subversive “field research” with her.¹

For the next month, whenever she said she wanted to watch a video, I would ask her how she was feeling at that moment. Her responses invariably included phrases such as, “I’m bored,”

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“There’s nothing to do,” or “I’m tired.” Sometimes I would allow her to watch a video, and when it was finished I would again ask her how she was feeling. Without fail, her responses were the same. She was bored, tired, uninspired, and just wanted to watch another video.

Other times I would say, “Let’s go for a walk in the neighbourhood. I need a break from what I’m doing.” We would observe the flowers and the birds, or discuss friendships and school and church. When we returned home from a thirty-minute walk, I would again ask her how she was feeling. Now she would reply, “I’m feeling better. I think I’ll go read” (or craft, or play outside . . .).

At the end of the month’s experiment I asked Hannah if she noticed that after watching a video she still felt crappy but that after going for a walk she felt more alive and inspired. She said she

hadn't noticed but reflected that it was true. This experiment did not change her preference for the status quo, but it did increase her receptivity to suggestions that she try more embodied activities.

There is something deceptively alluring about the use of electronic technology. Electronic media temporarily abstract us from time, place, and bodies, whereas—as Hannah discovered—embodied activities such as walking and talking together engage our bodies in time and place in a way that is emotionally, socially, and physically grounding and orienting. For psychological and sociological reasons, and also for spiritual and theological ones, we—like Hannah—can benefit from paying attention to the effects of using electronic media.

Creation: Time, place, and bodies are gifts of the garden

The Bible is an indispensable resource for Christians who are asking questions about what it means to be human, one of God's creatures, and about what difference it makes in our daily lives when we acknowledge and embrace God as our Creator. The psalmist frames the question to God this way: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Then the psalmist observes:

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God
[or than the divine beings or angels],
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet, . . .
O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
(Ps. 8:4–6, 9, NRSV)*

God created humans between heavenly beings and the rest of the created order. This is indeed a place of privilege for humanity, but more importantly, it is a place of responsibility and accountability. We are accountable to God, "our Sovereign," for the well-being of creation. The works of God's hands are important to God and therefore must be important to humans.

The opening chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1–3, also provide key insights for our questions. First, we observe that God created

the entire world, humans included, in and through *time* (Gen. 1:3–5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2:2–3). God creates time, and then each of the first six days represents an act of creation. Time is not an obstacle to God; it is, on the contrary, a central means by which God forms the world and humanity.

Second, God creates the entire world, humans included, in *place*. The garden of Eden is not a generic place; it represents a particular place (Gen. 2:8–9, 18–19), the ground from which God begins creating and fostering relationships between Creator, human and nonhuman creatures, and creation.

Third, God creates woman and man with *bodies*. Being physical is part of what distinguishes humans from God (we were made in the *image* of God), while some of our physical capacities distinguish us from other creatures (Gen. 1:20–27).

Being created in time, in place, and in bodies is an essential aspect of the gift of creation. As human creatures, our God-given limits—our being bound by time, place, and bodies—are not presented in the Bible as a result of the fall or of leaving the garden; in no way are they a problem to be overcome. But one might argue that when we human creatures treat time, place, and

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bodies as limitations to be overcome, we are being rebellious and arrogant. Our use of technology is often in rebellion against these God-gifted limits. The Internet is appealing precisely because when we are on it, time, place, and bodies are largely irrelevant: information is instantaneous, place is inconsequential, and bodies are immaterial.

An example from the Bible that illustrates a human tendency to express rebellion through technology is the story of the construction of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11).

Using new technologies of brick making and sophisticated language, the people sought to build a tower that would overcome their limitedness in place by giving them a perch near the heavens, so they could see and be seen from places far and wide. It would overcome their limitedness in time by memorializing themselves for all time. And this super-body, a tower with imposing physical presence, would overcome their bodily limits.

Incarnation: God's chosen medium for sharing good news

Why can't we just see technology as a natural expression of our being human? We were given minds and language and the ability to make and use tools. We are social creatures, and technology can be used to strengthen social bonds. Many technologies are based on and simply extend human capacities: glasses extend the function of our eyes, bicycles and cars are an extension of our legs, phones are an extension of our mouths and ears, computers are an extension of our brains, etc. Certainly this logic makes sense now, when we associate technology almost exclusively with progress and efficiency.

But the incarnation takes us back to the logic of creation. In Jesus Christ, God reaffirms the goodness of time, place, and bodies. It is neither accidental nor incidental that Jesus was born at the end of the Second Temple period, during the proliferation of Jewish sects and preceding the destruction of the temple under Roman occupation. God's timing is intentional for spreading the good news of peace and reconciliation during this time of division and oppression. It is neither accidental nor incidental that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a town representing kingship in the line of David, and that he was raised in Nazareth, a two-bit village in Galilee far from the religious center at Jerusalem. It is neither accidental nor incidental that Jesus was born to Mary, an unmarried peasant girl chosen by God to be the *theotokos*—the God-bearer—and the bearer of the good news (Luke 1:26–38, 46–56; 2:1–7). That Jesus was born with a body and lived in a particular place for a particular time is of great consequence.

But God takes it one step further. In the incarnation we find not only that God reaffirms the goodness of being created in time, in place, and in bodies; we also find that these are God's chosen form of communication. Marshall McLuhan famously insisted that “the medium is message.” The message or content of communication cannot be isolated from the medium or form by which it is communicated. The medium significantly alters the reception of the message, and the medium itself worthy of study.² In this view, Jesus is both the good news (the message) and the bearer of the good news (the medium). In Jesus, the message of the good news cannot be separated from the medium of the incarnate, embodied person.

The necessary coherence of medium and message in the good news and in Jesus Christ is at odds with the assertion made by Rick Warren, author of the “purpose driven church” books, that the message and the method (medium) are distinct: “Our message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation.”³ In Warren’s view, it does not matter that one generation prefers to read the Bible as a book, and another prefers to read it on a Kindle.

But Christians such as Shane Hipps, following McLuhan, observe that when you change the medium, you change the

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message. When you change the *way* the good news is shared, you change the good news *itself*. While the invention of the printing press made the Bible more accessible, it also changed the kind of faith people sought and found: it became radically individualistic, objective, abstract, and rational.⁴ Digital media give people easier and quicker access to the Bible, but these media fragment individual passages from the larger narrative, they disembody the Word, and they showcase

the medium itself as spectacle, to the point that we may cease to reflect either the medium or the message behind it.

Consider the difference of meaning in the word *friend* in Jesus’s statement “I have called you friends” (John 15:15), and in the act of friending someone on Facebook. Consider the difference of meaning in the word *follow* in Jesus’s call to “follow me” (Luke 5:27; 18:22; John 8:12; 21:19), and in the act of following someone on Twitter. When we friend and follow people on the Internet, time and place and bodies are rendered irrelevant, but Jesus’s invitation to be his friend and follow him must be lived out in particular times, particular places, and with our whole bodies.

To proclaim that Jesus is the “Word [who] became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) is not simply to claim a historical fact that allows us to embrace the “progress” of more efficient and effective means today. The Word made flesh is an ontological reality (the way things are), and an eschatological reality (the way things will be), and the one and only missional strategy. The incarnation is God’s intentional and enduring plan for the salva-

tion of all people, 2000 years ago, today, and until the return of the Messiah.

The church: Embodying the good news today, in this place

If Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and if we take seriously the incarnation as ontological, eschatological, missional reality, an attempt to use *virtual reality* will be revealed as an insufficient and de-formative medium or method to communicate the deeply embodied, time- and place-bound work of God in and through Jesus to bring hope, peace, and reconciliation to this world that is God's. One only need consult a dictionary to be reminded that the word *virtual* means "artificial," "near enough," "imitation," and "efficient."

The problem is not simply that the *virtual* is not real. The problem is that virtual reality *changes* what constitutes reality.

There is no virtual or efficient way to live and communicate the good news of peace in this world, justice for all, and reconciliation between humans and their Creator, between humans and their fellow creatures, or between humans and the earth.

Online communities may in fact constitute community, but when our relationships are primarily digitally mediated, what counts as community becomes disconnected from time, place, and bodies. Facebook changes the reality of friendship. Twitter changes what it means to follow. There is nothing virtual about Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection, and there is nothing virtual about Jesus's invitation to follow him. Virtual relationships distort and denigrate, turning a gift from God into a cheap, commodified experience with a disembodied other.

To be a member of the church as the body of Christ is to commit oneself to a community of believers who together witness to those who have not yet fully encountered Christ in their lives and who participate in God's reconciling work in this world. This is difficult work. There is no virtual or efficient way to live and communicate the good news of peace in this world, justice for all, and reconciliation between humans and their Creator, between humans and their fellow creatures, or between humans and the earth. This work requires patience, kindness, self-control, strength, and forbearance (among other fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23), Christian

virtues that are eroded by the medium of virtual reality, which fosters impatience, snap decision making, choosing the path of least resistance, and suspicion.

“I hate people less and I sleep better”

Let's return to Hannah. Fast-forward six or seven years. Hannah was “relieved” of the privilege of using her iPod for six weeks this past fall when she broke one of our family's household expectations regarding social media. Three weeks after her iPod was returned to her, her parents noticed that she was not using it again. When asked why not, she replied, “Because I hate people less and I sleep better without it.” Out of the mouths of babes!

In the intervening years, many conversations at home about technology and relationships have given Hannah a framework and language for processing her use of technology. She was able to apply these lessons when she had disengaged from the nonstop social, emotional, and physical demands digital technology placed on her. Her parents also noticed that during her iPod vacation she read more, played piano more, and generally liked herself more. Hannah has now resumed connecting with friends on a device, but she spends much less time on it, does not bring it into her bedroom, values times spent physically with friends, and continues to read and play piano more.

Prayer

In the Gospel of John, just before Jesus is arrested and crucified, he prays to his Father for the disciples:

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the

truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. (John 17:6–8, 15–19)

This prayer is for all who accept Jesus's call to friendship and to follow him, that we may obey God's word and be sanctified by the truth that was incarnated in Jesus, as we reveal the good news in particular times and places through our embodied presence. Amen.

Notes

¹ I use this story with Hannah's permission.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), vii–xi, 23–35.

³ Rick Warren, "Reaching a Changing World with God's Unchanging Word," April 1, 2015, <http://churchleadergazette.com/reaching-a-changing-world-with-gods-unchanging-word-by-rick-warren/>.

⁴ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 53–60.

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