“Spiritual Practices: Unplugged”

Genesis 2:1-3

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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When John and I looked at the different spiritual disciplines for this sermon series and decided which ones John should preach on and which I should preach on, we joked that it would be hilarious if John preached on this week’s discipline: unplugging.

John, the man who received a round of applause when he admitted in a sermon only a few years ago that he’d finally upgraded from a flip phone to a smart phone and who has no clue how many anecdotes I share about him on Facebook because he refuses to be on it…. quickly decided that I should be the one to preach on this topic.

He has also promised me that he wouldn’t sit in the back of the sanctuary and shout, “Amen!” Every time that I mention the need for us to unplug as a society.

“Unplugging” is a really interesting discipline to preach on as…. unplugging from technology isn’t exactly mentioned in the Bible.

The other disciplines we’ve studied during Lent? Praying? Fasting? Listening? They’re all in there. All over the place. Tons of passages from which to choose.

But unplugging? There’s not a lot there at first glance. There’s no extra verse in Exodus that explains that the reason the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years was because Moses left his GPS device in Egypt. There’s no Gospel passage where Jesus says to the crowds gathered, “Let the children and their iPads come to me” or “The kingdom of heaven is like an always fully-charged cell phone.”

So we *do*have to dig deeper and ask — what is at the heart of this discipline?

I want to start by saying — that technology isn’t inherently bad.  It can be a source of knowledge and connection. It can be used to free up our lives so that we can spend more time outdoors, with our families, or in creative pursuits.

I also can’t help but think about how much more difficult this pandemic would have been had we not had technology to help us. When we began offering live-streamed worship, one of our congregants, a member who had been home-bound prior to the pandemic, said to us, “I couldn’t come to Covenant, so Covenant came to me.” It was in that moment that I knew that live-streaming for Covenant would be here to stay even beyond this pandemic.  Because of technology, our Covenant family has grown to include folks in other states and even folks in other countries.

From virtual schooling, to Zoomed Session, committee meetings, and Bible studies; to trivia teams having Friday night trivia sessions via Zoom, technology has helped us greatly over the past two+ years.

In fact, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 90% of respondents said that the internet was essential or important for them during the pandemic. 81% said they used video calls to communicate with others at least once. 40% said they used digital technology or the internet in a new or different way during the pandemic. And 93% of parents surveyed reported their children using technology in some way for their schoolwork during the pandemic.[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTAC5LWfa2Efp1L4afsOI48pjE7L7iZvsOlthmB6cHscY9V5d2DTzRhh0QV-hFz1-lJnt_mZhZZgCjf/pub#ftnt1)

But as with most things in life, too much of one thing can be a bad thing.

In that same Pew survey, they also found that of the 81% of respondents who said they used video call technology during the pandemic,  40% said that they often or sometimes felt worn out or fatigued from spending too much time on video calls and 33% of US adults said that they have tried to cut back on the amount of time they spend on the internet or their smart phone at some point during the pandemic. 72% of parents say their children spend more time in front of screens now than they did pre-pandemic.

And probably one of the most important reasons why we need to unplug from time to time: Two-thirds of respondents said that digital interactions have been useful, but not a replacement for in-person contact.

We are a digital society, but that technology will never be able to replace the value that we find in in-person relationships. It is necessary to unplug from time to time so that we can spend some intentional face-to-face time to fill that void in our lives.

And, for anyone listening to this sermon thinking they don’t have a problem with unplugging because they aren’t on Facebook or Twitter or they don’t use the internet or Zoom much, you’re not off the hook.

Unplugging as a spiritual practice is also for anyone who uses something mindlessly. It could be watching episode after episode of your favorite sitcom, or keeping a news channel on all day, or even, John Peterson, watching hours upon hours of basketball or...definitely golf.

My guess is that many of us have *some* activity that we consider to be mindless, that we use as a place filler for other mind*ful* activities.

So what *does* the Bible say about such things?

While there definitely isn’t anything in there about Instagram or TikTok, there’s definitely passages about how we choose to spend our time.

From the very beginnings of the human story, we learn that God built rest into the week. On the seventh day, God rested. We don’t know how exactly God spent the day...whether it was taking a nap, doing a yet-to-be-invented crossword puzzle, digging in the new, fresh soil in the Garden, or simply sitting back and marveling at all God had managed to create in six days. We don’t know what God \*did\* that day.  But maybe that’s intentional. Maybe God leaves the way we rest up to us.

Whatever offers us a break from the day-to-day that we experience the rest of the week, whatever that is, and it might look different for each of us, God invites us to spend at least one day in our week taking a break, unplugging from the demands of the world.

Because the world is designed to keep us busy, keep us plugged in, sometimes in ways that we might not even be aware of.

There’s a term that you may have heard of — doomscrolling, which describes what happens when someone keeps scrolling and scrolling on their smart phones or media devices, consuming negative story after negative story. It’s not necessarily a conscious decision, to keep reading terrifying article after terrifying article.  In fact, the technology is designed that way — to keep folks glued to their devices through something called “infinite scroll” which is designed so that there’s no end to the information. Whichever page you’re on just keeps loading new information at the bottom of the page so that you just keep scrolling, keep consuming.

We saw an uptick in “doomscrolling” during the pandemic. I know I found myself sucked into it, especially towards the early days.  Every morning, I would wake up and grab my phone, before I even got out of bed, to read the latest news stories coming out about Covid...where it was, how close it was getting to Staunton, how many folks were dying around the world and around our nation, etc. I would read article after article, and before I knew it, I’d been lying in bed for way longer than I intended and with an impending sense of doom.  What a great way to start my day!

It was only after I began adjusting my habits during those early days of the pandemic, that I managed to escape the doomscrolling. I had to make a conscious decision to step away. I decided that I would set a timer for how long I could look at the news in the morning and then I needed to step away.  It took some intentionality and self-control, but as the weeks went on and I found myself spending less and less time doomscrolling, the more in control of my world I felt.

Living lives in which we are always plugged in to something or other, is never how God intended us to be. God never intended for us to spend all of our time in mindless pursuits, glued to screens in our hands, on our desks, or on our entertainment centers.

Time is important to God and how we fill our time is especially important to God.

We see this especially in the passage from Ecclesiastes.  The writer tells us that there is a time for everything — A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance and so on and so forth.

Our lives are divided into seasons, with a time mentioned for just about every moment of human life. The writer doesn’t tell us which season we will spend the most time in — mourning or dancing, tearing, or sewing, keeping silence or speaking. But the writer does tell us that for every one of us, there is a time for everything.

Unplugging as a spiritual discipline honors God’s desire from the beginnings of creation, that we will take time to set aside those things which distract us and to spend time in pursuits of real pleasure instead — whatever those might be. In fact, as the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, it is not only God’s desire, but God’s *gift* that we should eat and drink and take pleasure in all of our toils.

We won’t find passages in the Bible about the evils of technology in a digital age, but we *do* find passages that speak to us about finding balance in our lives.  And no matter what our levels of technological engagement might be, I think we can all agree that finding balance in our lives is always a good thing. Because if God knew that rest was needed after those busy days of creation, who are we to think we don’t need to find that kind of balance as well?

Friends, how might you unplug this week? What mind*ful* activities might you replace your mindless ones with?

Whatever you choose to do — whether it’s walking through the park, reading a book, taking a nap, or digging in your gardens, or simply being still for a few moments, know that the time spent unplugged from the more harmful aspects of technology is a gift from God and that when you’re ready to plug back in, that will be okay, for there’s a time for that, too.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTAC5LWfa2Efp1L4afsOI48pjE7L7iZvsOlthmB6cHscY9V5d2DTzRhh0QV-hFz1-lJnt_mZhZZgCjf/pub#ftnt_ref1) https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/the-internet-and-the-pandemic/