

This is Not TV

Rev. Chandler Stokes

On Exodus 20:1-6

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Barbara Brown Taylor wrote recently, “We need the practice..., by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, [and] who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more *about* God. *More God.*”

In 1986—just about 25 years ago—media theorist Neil Postman wrote a book called, Amusing Ourselves to Death. His is a chilling description of our seduction by other gods, by the idols of our age, the idols in particular of entertainment and infotainment. Since its writing, I don’t think the situation that he described has been assuaged.

Postman discusses two major works of futurism from the 20th century: George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. Postman wrote, “When the year 1984 came and went without Orwell’s bleak prophecies coming true, maybe we were relieved to think we had escaped Orwell’s nightmares.

“But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another vision—a slightly older, slightly less well known, but equally chilling vision.” In the book 1984 George Orwell warned that we would be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Aldous Huxley’s vision, Brave New World, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people would come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much [information] that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.” In 1984, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. In Amusing Ourselves to Death, Postman writes of the possibility that Aldous Huxley, not George Orwell, was right.

Huxley himself remarked that those who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account [our] almost infinite appetite for distractions.”¹

¹ Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, Penguin Books, New York, 1986.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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And when Postman wrote (in 1986), the pleasures, distractions, and potential ocean of irrelevance of the internet were barely in motion. And, amazingly, when Huxley wrote in 1931 there were only a few experimental televisions in use. This “infinite capacity for distraction” is something deeper in us and older in us than the particular technologies that work on us right now. The commandment against idolatry was recorded some three thousand years ago.

Modern technologies are but the most recent means by which we distract ourselves. As I have quoted before, John Calvin said that the mind is a machine for the manufacture of idols. We are constantly rolling out distractions, idols, in this case entertainments, anything to cover over or divert us from or to try to fill that God-shaped space inside of us that only God can truly fill—to quench our dusty thirst, our deepest hungers. It is not technology per se that is the issue. Technology is a tool; it has both possible positive and negative effects. I wrote this sermon on my computer, in part using the internet. And technology is one of the primary means by which our perpetual tendency toward idolatry is being played out today. (Part of the reason I don’t have a television here in Grand Rapids is simply because my addiction to that distraction has at times been oppressive in my life. I know it viscerally as a danger.)

You might take your pulse a little bit about your exposure or addictive relationship to media. What is the longest that you have gone—awake—without looking at a glowing rectangular screen—TV or computer or little PDA screen or iPod or phone?

The New York Times is currently publishing a series of articles called, “Your Brain on Computers.” The series explores how a deluge of data can affect the way people think and behave. I commend the series to you. Among the problems of the deluge, they cite problems with patience, forgetfulness, one’s ability to focus.

Here’s a telling snippet from the most recent article. One researcher writes:

“There’s something that’s so engrossing about the kind of interactions people do with screens that they wall out the world,” she said. “I’ve talked to children who try to get their parents to stop texting while driving and they get resistance, ‘Oh, just one, just one more quick one, honey.’ It’s like ‘one more drink.’” Laura Scott Wade, the director of ethics for a national medical organization in Chicago, said that six months ago her son, Lincoln, then 3 1/2, got so tired of her promises to get off the computer in “just one more minute” that he resorted to the kind of tactic parents typically use.

“He makes me set the timer on the microwave,” Ms. Wade said. “And when it dings he’ll say, ‘Come on,’ and he’ll say, ‘Don’t bring your phone.’”

That’s some of the effect on parenting, and I’m curious about some of the other things that might be affected by the constant bombardment of input. There’s one place I want to focus today. It’s something I’ve touched upon in the past: it is the way that entertainment begins to affect our understanding and even sometimes the practice of worship.

There are a number of people who have written intelligently on this subject. One I find particularly compelling is Marva Dawn—she has a wonderful title for one of her books on worship: Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down. She is a professor of Christian ethics at Notre Dame. She’s written extensively on worship. And this is part of her reflection on the effect of the entertainment glut on children.

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“...the media deluge us all with images of violence and sexual immorality and materialism, all of which draw us, as easy alternatives to our boredom. ... Lacking genuine intimacy, many people are desperate to ‘experience’ real life but don’t know how to go about it. They have not learned to appreciate the intricacies of symphonic or chamber music, the profundity of genuine works of art, the complexity of classical literature, dramatic mysteries, poetic sublimities, simple and deep delights in nature, scientific wonders, the careful workmanship of crafts, the discipline of playing an instrument, the exquisite pleasure of learning. When I was a child all these things fascinated me, captivated me, filled my hours with vast enjoyment. Now the students in my husband’s fifth grade class are cynical and bored. Most of them have no desire to learn. They spend their recesses fighting with each other, and they cannot treat each other with common civility. Television has made them passive about learning and aggressive about relationships; it has taught them to be rude, to demand their ‘right’ to be constantly entertained without any effort on their part.”²

Let me suggest just a glimpse of an alternative that I witnessed here. A couple of weeks ago I told a story about meeting Karen at the airport. At the end of that service one of our young people, seven years old at the time, handed me a picture of my meeting Karen at the airport. That’s a small thing, but it is engaging the service, not passive, not boredom; it’s listening, responding, processing. The Sound people who monitor our microphones, they participate in the service by singing hymns and responding, as you do. We have no choir today, but I heard some of you in the congregation singing the descant to the hymn!

I suspect that you have experienced these forces and their effects. Here’s where it leads.

If I understand this social force properly, part of its power is in the old adage by Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message—that is, that the medium of the communication overwhelms the content of the message. There are lots of messages in the entertainment, but they’re all distractions, all passive entertainments. Younger folks, I want you to have a shot at what I mean here. The medium is the message. Let’s say I’m upset with you. So, I talk to you; I explain that I’m upset that you didn’t do your homework. Part of what I communicate is the content of what I say, which is: “Please do your homework” or “please call when you’re going to be late.” But another, perhaps more powerful piece that I communicate is the means: I talk. Clearly, one great truth is: when I’m upset with you, I talk to you, and that may be translated as, “I get an earful when I disappoint my mother.” Talk is the consequence of not doing my work. That is why parents often ground you instead—or give little children a time out. The medium is the message.

What Marva Dawn is saying about the constant flow of entertainment is that it makes us passive. In all of it, it just happens to us; we only have to sit there. And we can begin to think that our being entertained without any effort is the way it’s supposed to be. It’s enjoyable... immediately—and it covers up other feelings, longings.

² Marva J. Dawn, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 48.

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The worship wars (styles of worship) are in part about the medium as the message. She says, "...style must be determined by faithful answers to the necessary question, 'What kind of people are we forming [in our worship of God]?' Worship that merely entertains an audience instead of directing their praise to God is certainly inimical [contrary] to this substantive purpose. Entertaining worship is deadly to the formation of character, for, as the Bible shows, forms of media favor particular kinds of content." That's why worship looks different from the theater, different from the sports arena, different from the movies.

That doesn't mean that worship shouldn't be engaging or interactive—it just shouldn't be passive. The Word of God is engaging. Praise is engaging. Worship with pizzazz is inherent to the gospel. But it is not entertainment.

But maybe this helps us understand why we don't serve popcorn in worship here or why we don't have cup holders on the pews. Now, this is a little unfair, because I've never been to worship where they serve popcorn or coffee in the sanctuary, and I know some churches do. We are, I believe, appropriately cautious about turning the worship of God into entertainment means.

Here's a glimpse: I heard a story once about a tragedy in a small town. A small plane had crashed. A family of four had died in the crash. The wreckage was in a field by the side of a road. The emergency personnel were sifting through the wreckage and getting the bodies into a vehicle to transport them away. It was tragic and horrible, and, if even for a moment one were to identify with what was really going on, I think we would remove our hats—do you know what I mean? If we allow ourselves just a fraction of empathy or respect, grasping the context, we would avert our eyes—or at least feel the impulse away from staring. One observer at this tragedy was so moved, and he stood at a respectful distance. Then, he noticed that there were people leaning on the nearby fence, casually eating apples and staring at the scene of wreckage and blood and salvage—as if watching TV. This observer asked, "Have they no shame?" The same observer mentioned that shame is not original equipment to the human soul, but is something that must be taught.

A sense of holiness also must be taught. In this sanctuary we hope to preserve something of the holy, a sense of the sacred—a sense that must be taught, and it is not a sense of being entertained. We don't eat and drink in here except in the most holy way—at Holy Communion. When we gather in this space, where you have buried your loved ones, where we have shared the most intimate stories of our lives, wept tears of joy over the birth of children and laughed with holy laughter at the foibles of our own lives, we "take off our hats," as it were—take off our shoes.

This is not the only holy place. Justice is holy. Compassion is holy—wherever and whenever they occur. We don't limit holiness to this place, but we do hope to preserve it here. No popcorn, no coffee, no cell phones or pagers—just boring old paying attention to what matters!

And maybe this helps us understand why we don't have stage lighting in the sanctuary. The RENEW money that was spent on lighting the sanctuary was a means for evening out the light in the sanctuary. It was theologically eloquent not to create a stage, where the performers entertain the audience. God is the audience of our worship. We are all the performers here. (We turn off

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lights under the balcony as a practical issue due to the glare.) When the lights are up front and everyone else is in darkness, there is a potentially false message about our role.

One of the wise old African-American women in the Oakland church, Louise, once said, “If I find that I didn’t get something edifying out of worship, if it didn’t happen for me, I ask myself, ‘Now, what’s wrong with you today, Louise? Where is your spirit?’ I ask what’s going on in my own heart.” Now, that’s worship. This is not entertainment. We are not here just to watch or merely to listen. This is not television. This is worship, which we offer to God. We bring ourselves to it.

And, as much as worship is directed to God, it still is a gift to us. That it connects us, that it gives us a sense of the holy, that it is not entertainment—all these are in fact a gift, an antidote to the entertainment culture that buffets and pacifies our souls.

Worship is not for our sake, but what it gives to us is amazing.

Mitch Albom’s gracious new book, Have a Little Faith, includes a description of an old rabbi’s life. He says, “I remember as a kid, the [rabbi] admonishing the congregation—gently, and sometimes not so gently—for letting rituals lapse or disappear, for eschewing traditional acts like lighting candles or saying blessings, even neglecting the ... prayer for loved ones who had died. ... [but the rabbi] didn’t merely practice his rituals; he carved his daily life from them. If he wasn’t praying, he was studying—a major part of his faith—or doing charity or visiting the sick. It made for a more predictable life, perhaps even a dull one by American standards. After all, we are conditioned to reject the ‘same old routine.’

“We’re supposed to keep things new, fresh. The [rabbi] wasn’t into fresh. He never took up fads. He didn’t do Pilates, didn’t golf... But there was something calming about his pious life, the way he pattered from one custom to the next; the way certain hours held certain acts; the way every autumn he built a [tent] with its roof open to the stars; the way every week he embraced Sabbath, breaking the world down to six days and one day, six days and one.

“The rabbi said, ‘My grandparents did these things. My parents, too. If I take the pattern and throw it out, what does that say about their lives? Or mine? From generation to generation, these rituals are how we remain... connected. Connected.’”³

Those are the gifts to us: connection to one another, to the generations and to our living, transcendent God. So, Mom, don’t bring your phone. Let’s keep our minds where our bodies are...

The entertainment mind-set is evidenced when people attend worship for “what I will get out of it.” In such an approach, God is not the center of worship; we are. Such worship does not create a special time and place for God to confront us, for us to be with God in a set-apart and faithful way.

³ Hyperion, New York, 2009

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But the result of true worship will be that God will change us, transform us, fashion our character after God's holiness—but only if we worship God and not ourselves, if we attend worship services for the love of God. ⁴

Worship connects us. Worship engages us and stirs us from our passivity. Engages our concentration and requires our participation. Worship alerts us to holiness and forms us in holiness, such that we would not only worship God here but everywhere.

This is how Barbara Brown Taylor put it. “Why... did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone... ‘Do this,’ he said—not believe this, but do this—‘in remembrance of me.’ ...Christianity is to have one's body shaped, one habits determined, in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable.”

This is the great gift of worship. That God-shaped place in our lives can be filled by the one whom we worship—and only by that one. We need this practice—not just for Sunday but for every day. Worship calls us forth and connects us and forms us. We need this practice not that we would be entertained or even informed—but that our lives might be saved, our lives sometimes turned dry as dust, low on the bread of life, [and] dying to know more God in our bodies, saved not by more about God, but more God. Amen.

⁴ Marva Dawn, *Ibid*, p.124