

Lenten Whole40, Week 5 - Stories and Sources

Fasting from TV, Streaming, and Podcasts

Feasting on Silence, Music, and Spiritual Reading

Romans 12:1-2

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

This week as part of our Whole40 practice, we are fasting from streaming media, television, video games, and podcasts. We are feasting--filling up--on silence, music, and spiritual reading. Our Scripture is from Romans 12, and in it we find the evocative phrase, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” which is, of course, the reason we always have when we go to Netflix. Here’s the apostle Paul speaking to the Romans.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ²Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Not all streaming content is bad. There’s wonderful, powerful, incredible “content” out there. I’m not a big movie or TV show guy; I do regularly subscribe to about 10 podcasts. But streaming as a delivery system is pretty amazing. There used to be a time when, if you wanted to watch a movie, you had to leave your house, and we used to joke about the sticky floors and whatever the “butter stuff” they put on the popcorn was. There used to be a time, if you wanted to play a video game, you had to go to an arcade and you had to have quarters. And there used to be a time when, if you wanted to watch a TV program, you had to be in front of the TV on a particular day at a particular time. Now, all of this stuff is available to us, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Streaming content can be a great gift to have all this at our finger tips. Why are we asking you to stop this week? What we’re doing is inviting you to change up your rhythm. Take a look at your diet of sources--where do the stories that enter your life come from? Do you have a variety of sources that engage your brain in different ways? If your default is to make a beeline to Netflix every time you need to unwind, stop.

During this coming week, ask yourself: *what stories am I inviting into my life?*

We have more choice when it comes to entertainment and information than any human beings who have ever lived on this planet. I love sports--and on any night of the week, I can pull out my phone and watch one of 15 college basketball games, 10 NBA games, 10 college baseball games, Cricket matches in South Asia. I’m sure I can find cornhole contests somewhere if I look hard enough.

Having a zillion entertainment options feels good--it makes us feel like we’re in control when we have so much choice. But when content is so readily available, we end up consuming a lot of it. We sit down and put something on--a game or movie or series--and it

never turns off--one episode slides into another. Netflix users watch 3.2 hours a day--on average. That's a lot of time every day. Why do we watch? Most people report that the reason we binge-watch is as a stress-reliever. The programs act like a steel door that keep our brains from thinking about the things that stress us.

It doesn't feel like a healthy cycle does it? We're stressed, overworked, underappreciated, overwhelmed; so we hide under a blanket for 3 hours of escapism, which often cuts into our need for sleep.

I don't have all the answers for how we break our unhealthy habits. It's what this Whole40 season is all about. But today I think it might be helpful, in the context of this conversation about streaming content, to think about the role of stories in the human life.

Stories are one of the oldest, most fundamental parts of being a human being. For thousands of years, human beings have been story-tellers and story-listeners. Remember, "words make worlds," and worlds are made of stories. Stories are how we talk ourselves into being.

Storytelling occurs in every culture and from every age. Epic poems, chants, rhymes, songs, myths, legends, fables, prayers, proverbs, and instructions. Native Hawaiian storytelling is sung and danced. West African griots educate as they entertain. Jews tell the story of their salvation over a meal called the Seder. We human beings tell stories around fires, in simple shelters, in homes, in theaters. We tell stories about where we came from, how the world was made, what life is for, what pain and heartache are for, where to find happiness, what happens when we die, is there a God and if so, where, and what is that God like? There is no way to be human without story.

You are a story, too. You know that, right?

There has been a great pursuit, of late, in the sciences to discover what "the Self" is. We all perceive that the self exists, that there is something that is uniquely "you." But when scientists have looked for this "self," they can't find it in the brain. If I ask you who you are, what makes you "You," what will you do? You will tell me a story. You will tell me a story of how your particular body has moved through space over time. You will tell me a story about your relationships and your experiences. You will construct your own story about you and the universe and that story will have meaning to you.

You are the story about yourself that you tell to yourself.

Maybe some people find this reductive--all I am is a story? I think just the opposite--you mean, I'm a story?! How amazing is that? I'm a story--stories are powerful, stories are moving, stories are persuasive, stories are inspirational, stories make us feel things, stories bring people together, stories change over time as we change.

Whenever describe who we are as a church the first thing I say is, “we’re a storytelling community.” At the heart of who we are is that we are a people who gather around a story. We didn’t write it. It was given to us, written and collected and edited over thousands of years, transmitted and taught over thousands more years. Hundreds of millions--of people have been shaped by this story. It belongs to everyone and to each of us.

Our story talks about how the world was created--not to describe the facts but to imagine its purpose. Our stories offers ideas about what human beings are for. It’s a story about human dreams and conflicts. It’s a story about brokenness and healing. It’s a story story about a human being who uniquely embodies the love of God--who wanted to re-write the story about the world and the Empire, fearing their story would be subverted, killed this person... and our story says that even death couldn’t hold back this love-in-the flesh. Our story that says that human beings aren’t the only thing that is real. It says there is some One else. A great, wonderful, mysterious holy Other. And our lives, this story says, are inextricably tied into this Other who we call “God.”

This story is ours. To read. And wonder at. And dissect. And critique. And weep over. And laugh at. And pray over. And here’s the thing: we learn to tell our stories in response to this story. And over time, this story helps us write our story. It helps us know who we are. How can you be a good story unless you know you come from a good story?

Every week, we read a little portion from the Great Story. Today’s is from a letter that a man named Paul wrote around 55CE to a community of Jesus followers in the capitol of the empire, Rome. He wrote to them, to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Which means he was encouraging them make their whole lives matter. Everything you say, everything you do, your whole life matters--it’s all worship. Then he says this really wonderful evocative thing that has resonated down the centuries: “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

God’s love, Paul wanted us to know, transforms the world--all of it. But nowhere is that transformation more evident than in our minds. Love changes our consciousness. When the story of God’s love gets inside of us, it becomes us. It re-writes our story.

Please, pay attention to what kind of stories you let in. Don’t just binge watch to take the edge off. Choose stories that vibrate with meaning. Choose stories that allow you to talk with others about our place in the world. And turn off the TV. Listen to music that requires something of you. And sometimes, turn it all off. Sit. Be quiet. Let your own story be present to you.

God is writing a great story. It is your story, too.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.