

The Four Horsemen of the Modern American Apocalypse

The 1st Horseman: The Loss of Attention

Mark 4:24-25

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The Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament is weird. It's the most misinterpreted book in the Bible, which is saying something. Revelation is an extended metaphor about what it takes to overcome our complete captivity to an evil empire. It's a dream, so Revelation is full of symbols. One of the most vivid symbols is that of the "4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse." The arrival of these 4 horsemen—conquest, war, famine, and death—begins a cosmic battle that finally breaks Rome's awful power.

I don't have much to do, so I was sitting around and wondering—what would the 4 horsemen look like here in the American empire? I'm a glass half-full guy, but press me and I'll acknowledge that our nation is not well. We're rich, powerful, and deeply unhappy. As brilliant and beautiful as America and its people are, something is "off" about us. I got to thinking about the roots of our collective disease—signs that that we as a people are not well. I've called them the 4 horsemen of the American apocalypse. They are:

- The loss of attention
- The triumph of the individual
- The erosion of truth
- The death of creation

This sounds like a downer. But it's not. There's surprising joy that comes from naming what might be wrong. Even more than that, our Christian tradition has extraordinary resources to help us and help our families and our communities retain or regain our humanity.

Let's talk together about things that matter. We begin today by asking "*where has our attention gone?*" I want you to first listen to the words of Jesus from Mark, chapter 4. Jesus just told a story about seeds scattered on different kinds of soil. These seeds are the good news of God's kin-dom of love and justice. Will they grow? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. What makes the difference? The soil. The receptivity of the soil. The soil is you. Jesus says:

²⁴ "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get. ²⁵ To those who have, more will be given, and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

This saying used to tick me off. It seems like Jesus is saying the more wealth and power you have, the more you'll get. Which is the opposite of everything Jesus ever said ever. But look again: Jesus is talking not about money or power, but about your attention. Pay attention, he says. The amount of attention you give corresponds to the amount of wisdom you get. Give your attention to wisdom and you'll get all you need and more. Squander your attention, de-value your attention, and what little you have dissipates into nothing.

Did Jesus know about cell phones? There is a war going on for your attention. Did you know that? Do you know that you and I are losing? Do you know that your attention is the occupied colony of a multinational corporation? You are paying them to own your brain.

- 91% of Americans own a smartphone; it's one of the most highly-adopted technologies ever. If you're under 50, it's 98%. If you're under 30, it's 99%.
- We spend 4-5 hours every day engaging our phone. What are we doing with our phones? Not calling people. Mostly, it's email, messaging, social media, and video streaming. We use phones for work, fun, commerce, relationships, health monitoring, even for meditation.

These devices are part of our bodies now.

Are they breaking us as human beings? Raise your hand if you think they are...

- They make our kids sick. Teenage mental health issues exploded when we put phones in their hands. 20% of teenagers had one or more major depressive episode in the past year. That's up 134% since 2010, which is when the iPhone with the front-facing camera came out. Kids are constantly performing, constantly comparing their lives to others'. Social media on phones is making kids—especially girls—sick.

Are phones breaking us?

- They are changing relationships. Parents complain that all their young people do is stare blankly at their phones; young people complain all their parents do is stare at their phone. You can have 4 people together in a room all looking at their phones instead of one another. We're present to our phones and absent to each other. We're "connected" but losing the ability to talk, to share, to empathize, to trust.
- We sleep less now—phones before bed are a nightmare for sleep.

Are phones breaking us?

- Phones change our brains. [Research](#) by psychologist Dr. Gloria Mark found that from 2004 to 2021, the average attention span dropped from 2 ½ minutes to 47 seconds.

Our brains now need novelty all the time. The phone activates all our dopamine pathways—which reward us for switching attention instead of holding it.

- That's why you sit down to relax and out of nowhere, your brain is "itchy" and the only way to scratch it is by picking up the damn device.

Are phones breaking us? Sherry Turkle, sociologist and one of the wonderful writers about the psychology of technology says, *"With every technology we need to ask is it serving our human purposes? What is the human need?"*

Take your phone out. What is your relationship to this device? Is it making you human or less? Why? Talk about it with a neighbor...

(congregational conversation...)

Are our phones making us human or less? Maybe that depends on what you think a human being is and what a human being is for. What is a human being for?

- According to a bunch of repressed 17th century British clergy who wrote the Westminster Confession, the purpose of humans is to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.” If that’s true, does doomscrolling help you do that?
- The ancient Jewish prophet Micah said that God made humans to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” How many hours a day on your phone does it take to do that?
- As I read the Scriptures, God made human beings by love for love. We are free from sin and death to live courageously in love. What app helps with that?
- Even if you aren’t religious, and you think that the purpose of the human being is to think and to act with virtue, how does a device that is eroding our capacity to think and act serve a higher purpose.

Listen, I’m not a fanatic about this. I have a phone. I use it. A lot. But Sherry Turkle is right—the data doesn’t lie. These phones are not serving our human purposes—they’re undermining them. But to put them in their place is a struggle—even a spiritual struggle. For me, it began with deleting Facebook. I just always felt weird about the algorithm and which posts kept coming up in my feed; as much as there are people on there who I care about, I didn’t like the experience. Twitter was harder; I loved getting my information there and participating in the conversation. But I began to realize that I didn’t like the person I was in 280 characters. It wasn’t me. I deleted the app several times, and re-installed it. Finally, that knucklehead bought it and deleting it became easy. I still spend several hours a day on my phone—but if you look at my screen time, it’s all things I’m directing—messages, email, newspapers, magazines, music. I didn’t quit those social apps because I’m strong. I quit them because I’m weak.

That’s one of the great insights that Sherry Turkle offers us. We think highly of ourselves. We think we’ll be strong enough to resist technology’s temptations. We’re mostly wrong. We’re powerless against these devices. They light up the same places in our brains that love lights up. These devices exploit our weaknesses.

In the same way that Christian theology put honesty about sin at the center of our appraisal of what it means to be human, you and I have to be honest about our vulnerabilities when it comes to decisions about how we use our phones. We desperately want to be connected to others. We want to be seen and heard and valued. We’re willing to accept technological substitutes for the real thing. I want to caution you against that. Ask yourself, to what extent do you think your desire for connection requires another human being to connect with? The day is coming when these devices will aim to be your doctor, your therapist, your pastor, your friend. Relationships with other living, breathing people are intrinsic to your humanity.

Just as powerful as our hunger for connection with other flesh-and-blood-and-spirit bodies is our hunger for knowledge. Our appetite for new ideas and information evolved to keep us

alert for danger and help us survive. We forage for information the same way that animals are forage for food. Now, we are “digital grazers.” TikTok videos. Tweets. News apps. We cannot hold or sustain a thought. We nibble, but never eat.

Our humanity is sacrificed. The human mind needs time to order to synthesize and integrate. To be human is to be able to resist distraction and to pay attention to what is important. Your attention is intrinsic to your humanity.

William James, the brilliant 19th century psychologist wrote that what you choose to pay attention to is how you become human. He said,

My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind — without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground intelligible perspective, in a word. Attention varies in every creature, but without it the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive.

To be a human, you must choose where and how to direct your attention.

This is a deeply religious project. Simone Weil, the 20th century mystical thinker, wrote that

“Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.

Mary Oliver, who modeled in her poetry what it is to pay attention, said that attention must be mixed with feeling. When we pay attention, we use not only our brain, but our heart as well. The fullness of the human being, heart and head, mix together in the act of paying attention. Oliver writes,

Attention without feeling... is only a report. Openness —empathy — is necessary if attention is to matter.

Maybe I would say it this way: love is paying attention.

Ask yourself: is this technology serving my human purposes? If you believe that your humanity requires you to pay attention with head and heart, it might be time to put the phone down.

“Pay attention,” Jesus says. The more attention you give, the more you get back. To those who pay attention, more will be given; and from those who have no attention, even what they have will be taken away.