

January 8, 2017; Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 3:1-17
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Epiphany

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

In Western Christian traditions epiphany is generally celebrated with the story of the magi. In Eastern traditions, the focus is on the story of Jesus' baptism. In both stories Jesus is being revealed, which is what Epiphany means.

SERMON

We received gifts at our house this season that have me pondering the tension between technological development and human adaptation. A couple of those gifts were a wireless speaker and a book of essays by Mary Oliver. Let's start with the speaker.

With the wireless speaker, we can now download music on the smartphone or iPad and listen to it through the speaker. I like it. The quality of sound is definitely better. I like it, except....there is a digital female voice that tells us that the "speakers are connected" or "speakers are disconnected." That I definitely do not like.

It's not surprising that I don't like this voice because I also don't like Siri or Alexa or any of the automated voices that talk with you when you call certain companies. I recognize that I have a high resistance to digital voices. I wonder if that's because so much of my work over the years has been to learn to listen to what real people are saying.

This wireless speaker and my resistance is a sign of our times. The exponential growth of our technological capabilities is exceeding our human capacity for adaptation. Thomas Friedman explores this dilemma in his new book, *Thanks for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in an Age of Accelerations*. To thrive we have to have a sense of what is happening and the choices that confront us.

We can now be technologically connected 24/7. This has given us incredible flexibility in work settings. Some of you can work from your homes, often at great physical distance from the home base of your company. It is a futuristic world that some of us didn't imagine would really happen in our lifetimes.

However, this same capacity has created a culture of expectation that people are available 24/7. That may be good for business, but it's not good for people. The human body/psyche has developed over the millennia to need "unplugged" time – generally we call it sleep, or even time for reflection. We are not made to be plugged in 24/7.

Just because we can do something doesn't mean we necessarily should do it. Not surprisingly, the constantly plugged in culture turns out to be bad for our individual and collective mental and spiritual health.

Some companies are now finding they need to change their culture to allow employees to have “unplugged” time, if they want their employees to be well. It turns out that unwell employees also are not good for business.

Increasingly, we are facing challenges between what we can do technologically and what is good for us as people. The ethical dilemmas are significant. I’ll just comment briefly on three areas – government, work, medicine.

Some people have suggested that one of the things facilitating gridlock in our national congress is our technological capacity to know what they are doing every minute. Congress was set up to have people come together, live together in the capital, talk and argue with one another and then compromise for the common good.

Today they have little time/energy to get to know one another and engage in the hard work of conversation and compromise. Many of them no longer really live in Washington because they can fly back and forth. Also we, their constituencies, are always watching. If they want to be reelected they have to pay more attention to us than to one another.

With our president elect’s propensity to lead by tweet rather than by direct conversation with people, it appears this trend is moving to warp speed. Our capacity to make good decisions about our common life is severely compromised if we don’t really talk with one another.

Technology is also continuing to change our perception and experience of work. I mentioned earlier the tension of being plugged and unplugged. There is also the question of work itself. Will there be work? For how many of us will there be work?

On the one hand, it’s nice that machines have replaced us in the drudgery of certain work, but what is life without work? What meaningful engagement do we offer to people whom we no longer need to do certain work for us? What will we do when people have 3-D printers in their homes to just make what they want?

Then there is medicine, which impacts us all. New advances in medicine have allowed many of us to continue to live – a lot longer than we would have 100 years ago. On the other hand, we find it harder and harder to deal with the ethical decisions about what medical interventions to accept and not accept in the final years of our lives.

With new development in genetic coding we can change species. For example, they are experimenting with mosquitoes to make genetic changes in mosquitoes that would eliminate malaria. Sounds good but what are the unintended consequences?

If it feels like the world is moving faster and faster, it is. If it makes you feel disoriented, that’s not surprising. The exponential development of technology even has some of the developers stunned.

Just because we can move faster doesn’t mean we always should. In one way or another we are all struggling with the question of what is meaningful about

human life and how will we live together for the next 100 years?

This brings me to the other gift I mentioned – a collection of essays by Mary Oliver called *Upstream*. Mary Oliver is a contemporary poet who has a particular affinity for nature. She calls us away from the glitter of technology to the awesomeness of the world of which we are a part.

Early in the book, she tells a story that startled me.

When the high school I went to experienced a crisis of delinquent student behavior, my response was to start out for school every morning but to turn most mornings into the woods instead, with a knapsack of books . Always Whitman's was among them. My truancy was extreme, and my parents were warned that I might not graduate. For whatever reason, they let me continue to go my own way. It was an odd blessing, but it was a blessing all the same. (Pg. 10)

I think this story stopped me in my reading because I realized that I was not so brave or bold as either Mary Oliver or her parents. I suspect I would have just stayed in school and suffered. And if I had been her parents I would have succumbed to cultural pressure and tried to force Mary to go back to school.

I don't know enough about her parents to know if maybe in fact they were just negligent or if they were indeed wise but either way I am grateful. We know in retrospect that the woods were much better for Mary Oliver than school was. If her parents had put pressure on her to conform to our cultural expectations would

she still be the Mary Oliver who calls us to attention? Who provokes us questions like her famous one: *Tell me what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

That question comes to people in every age and every time. Today's reading reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth was at a moment of decision in his life's journey when he was about 30. The Spirit was stirring just this kind of question for him. I'm struck that he didn't conform to his own culture. He didn't go to the temple for confirmation of his calling. Instead he went into the wilderness. He went to the wild man, John the Baptist, to receive the waters of baptism. Then, marked by those waters and refreshed by the Spirit, Jesus set off on the Way.