

*Living the Dream: Pay Attention*  
Jeremiah 2:1-7, 13

I wonder what your Sunday morning rituals are, *before* church. For me, Sundays start early. No matter how finished I thought the sermon was on Saturday night, I still need a couple of hours to tinker with it on Sunday morning. And then, when the sermon is done at home, ready for one last edit at my desk, then—only then—do I pick up the Sunday *New York Times* from the driveway. Or at least I used to.

Even though it sometimes overwhelmed me, I loved getting that heavy newspaper once a week. I'd scan the front page first, hope to read the whole front section by the end of the day. And then it would take me all week to get through the longer pieces that ask me to think harder. Some weeks I didn't get through much of the paper at all, and I'd have to face a tiny dilemma. Do I throw the rest of the paper away, or do I save it for my next vacation or airplane trip?

That conversation with myself started happening more and more frequently. I wondered more often whether I was being irresponsible accumulating all that paper in my house. So finally, about a year ago, I changed my subscription. Now I read the newspaper only online. Which I can do, just as completely as I read the paper version.

But you know what's happened? Gradually, I realize, I'm reading less and less. Most days it's only headlines—just enough to make me think I know what's going on in the world. Rarely do I sit and scroll through an entire lengthy article. I take in information in little bursts. They come often, but there's not much depth or detail to them.

Other people have noticed the same thing. I went back this last week to an article that Nicholas Carr wrote in 2008, called *Is Google Making Us Stupid?* In his article he said, "Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose... Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text." Yes! Me too.

Online searches, Carr argued, have made us think differently. We've gotten used to scanning short excerpts from many resources, rather than digging in deeply to any one of them. If a new email message announces its arrival while we're reading something else, we're immediately drawn to that. Our concentration is easily broken; our attention scatters. Here's what he concluded: our minds have begun to process information like search engines. We organize the most useful thing on top, scan the rest of it.

Think about the clutter of information our brains have gotten used to. There are pop-up ads on almost every Internet page. They drive us crazy, but all those un-asked-for intrusions of information now seem normal. When we watch the news on television, we see not only the main story, but a parade of other headlines running along the bottom of the screen, so you're not missing anything by paying slightly more attention to the top story. We used to think only the

Sesame Street generation would watch anything that moved that fast. Now it's the expectation for all of us.

This isn't the first time in human history that technology has changed the way people think. Clocks came into common use sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. For the first time, people began to see time, divided into measurable hours and minutes, as something outside of themselves, separate from their internal sense of time passing. People stopped listening to their bodies to tell them when to eat and sleep and get up; they started obeying the clock.

Hundreds of years before that, Socrates worried that writing would soften the human mind. He thought that if people relied on the written word instead of the knowledge they used to carry inside their heads, they would become forgetful. They'd receive information, but they'd still be ignorant.

When the printing press was invented in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, making books almost universally available, human thinking shifted again. People no longer depended on wise authorities—priests, professors, kings—to tell them what is true, or what other people think, even what's in the Bible; they could read it for themselves.

And of course, the pace and the influence of technological change have only quickened since then. Did you know that the *Like* button on Facebook and Instagram was invented with particular attention to how your brain works? When you see that someone 'likes' what you post, you get a little rush of dopamine--the same chemical that makes you smile when you see a baby or a puppy. It's a good feeling, that dopamine rush. So somebody (who no doubt lives and works not too far from here) figured out that if they could set up a regular loop between social media posts and the infusion of dopamine you get when you see that someone likes what you posted, you'll stay close to your phone longer, waiting for your next dopamine hit. In the meantime, you'll keep consuming more social media. See how that works?

The point here isn't that technological development is a negative thing. It's that we're distractable. Our attention can be molded, even manipulated. It's so easy *not* to pay attention in the way a *contemplative stance* suggests to us. How intentional we have to be about reclaiming it.

A summons to 'pay attention' in a contemplative way is an invitation to see what's visible when you rest your eyes on one thing for longer than a few seconds. But it's more than that. It also invites you to see and hear something else: what's not immediately apparent. To look for what's underneath the surface of things. To listen for what's happening below a story of broken relationship or persistent sadness or systems that work for some people and oppress others. Only when we pay attention can we see the almost-hidden traces that say, 'maybe there's more happening here than what's immediately visible.'

Let's go back to Jeremiah's story for a minute. Jeremiah was a prophet—someone who saw the world the way God sees it. He was brave enough to tell the truth, to say out loud that 'what is' is not always right, or even good. (That's what a prophet is.) Jeremiah lived in ancient Israel, a country that had been founded with a particular identity. These were God's chosen people, a nation set apart for holiness. Now, Jeremiah saw, things were going off the rails. No one was surprised when public officials misused their power. The rich had grown indifferent to the fact

that some of the people around them would *never* be able to live well. Most of the Israelites—this people whose ancestors made the journey from slavery to freedom—were busy just living their lives. Their heads were down; their attention was elsewhere.

Even if they saw things were broken, people couldn't imagine how to make them any different. But mostly they were numb. Like us, they moved through their days without looking up. But Jeremiah saw, and what he felt was grief. God's grief for the people God loved. What we heard in Jeremiah's words a few minutes ago is lament—a poem that speaks the betrayal, the anguish, Jeremiah imagined God felt at what had happened to this nation set apart for holiness, all the ways they'd settled for a life that was less than flourishing.

Jeremiah imagines God's words of sorrow to the people he had led out of slavery in Egypt:

*I brought you into a land of plenty, to enjoy its gifts and goodness.  
But you've forsaken the ways I hoped you would live.  
You've ruined the picture I imagined for you.*

There's no cynicism here; that's straight-on, un-smoothed-over disappointment Jeremiah expresses. Lament. And maybe lament is a necessary part of paying attention, a room you have to spend some time in once you see what is true around you.

And once you've seen, once you've entered that space of lament, what if you can't get out? Is it possible to pay attention and still be hopeful?

Yes. It is. That's what people of faith believe. It's what we claim as truth. That the God who sees everything, the God of creation, is the God who makes life begin *again*. That God has not given up on a dream for creation. That even the deepest cracks can be filled. That even before the truth of our brokenness is seen and spoken, even before words of lament are on our lips, God has been moving silently among us. That already, the work of healing and restoration has begun.

The contemplative stance says, 'Pay attention.' Not only so you can see what's wrong, but so you can see what's right. Our work, even we who think of ourselves as changemakers, is not to go out fix the world ourselves; it's to see the ways God is doing that ahead of us. All around us, there are traces, signs, that say God's Spirit is already moving, weaving goodness into the brokenness. When we pay attention, we will see those signs too.

We'll see it

- in flashes of vulnerability that remind us of our common humanity;
- In tiny acts of kindness or hospitality sharp enough to puncture conflict, mistrust, even long-term hatred;
- In small openings into a room of forgiveness that once was tightly locked.

Pay attention to those too, this posture of the contemplative stance says.

Maybe it's curiosity that will get us where we need to go. So even before you try to be helpful, be curious. Because curiosity will lead you into paying attention. And then you'll see: that even in the darkest reality, healing and hope—*goodness*—aren't gone. They are there, just waiting for you to notice.