

## The WAY Forward: Unplugging

**Big Idea:** Most things work better after you unplug them. (Even you.)

**Purpose:** To encourage people to pause and be in the uninterrupted presence of God.

**Passage:** Matthew 1:35-39

**Verse:** Matthew 11:28

### Opening

-Author Anne Lamott once wrote, “**almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes – even you.** There have been numerous times when I have struggled to **get some technological device to work properly.** I sometimes get so frustrated that I will finally call the tech support line where I sit on hold for 30 minutes. When I finally get a real human on the line, I explain the problem. Inevitably, the first thing they ask is, “*Did you unplug it?*” I assume that is the first instruction written in their help manual – **tell them to unplug it.**

-Occasionally, I get that dreaded spinning wheel on my laptop. When the wheel is spinning, the computer is frozen. **When it persists, I have learned that there is only one remedy – to power down.** I hold down the power button until the whole machine does an emergency shutdown.

- Personally, I think that I am about at that point. A few weeks ago, while on a family vacation, I had several days of excessive grumpiness. I was kind of a jerk to my family. It was a warning sign that something isn't right internally. When I discussed it with my spiritual director, we were able to determine it was a symptom of a soul that was running on empty. I wasn't operating correctly. If I was able to get a picture of my heart, I would see a spinning wheel.

-I bet I am not alone in this experience. **There has been a staggering increase in anxiety, depression and other emotional challenges since the beginning of COVID.** Most of our souls are a bit restless, frazzled and chaotic. Today we launch a new series for frazzled people like me.

-Our new series is called ***The WAY Forward: Following Jesus in a Chaotic World.*** As we pondered how best to describe the world and our hearts; we landed on the world **chaotic.** Chaos means *a state of confusion and disorder.* I don't think I have ever experienced a greater sense of chaos. If you would have told me last year what awaited in 2020, I would not have believed you.

We are in the midst of the largest global pandemic in a century. Over 900,000 people have died from COVID worldwide, 190,000 of those are Americans. And there is no end in sight. Many people are out of work or furloughed. Kids are not in school. Very important conversations about racial injustice are being hijacked by violence. We are having armed conflicts in our city streets. This election year feels more divisive than ever. Hurricanes are pounding our coasts. And when we didn't think things could get worse, thousands of Oregonians are evacuating due to numerous wildfires. And the Black Panther died. And we

have to contend with murder hornets. Look at those things. It's like someone dropped us in the middle of an apocalyptic end-of-the-world movie.

-But our hope is that we follow Jesus the risen King. **He will eventually make all things right.** Followers of Jesus have flourished during far worse times than these. Just read anything about life in the first century. I love the conversation between Frodo and Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: *"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."* No one would have chosen 2020 to be what 2020 has become. But it is what it is. What will we do with the time given to us? As followers of Jesus, how will we not only survive but thrive in these chaotic times?

-Our hope is to follow *the way of Jesus*. We must practice His way of life. The very earliest followers of Jesus were not called Christians. They were called *people of the way*. Our series **The WAY Forward** will provide us with tried and true practices that will equip us to survive and thrive in our chaotic world. We will be diving into topics like – simplicity, beauty, gentleness, empathy, doing anger well and peace-making. We will also have a conversation with celebrated author, podcaster, and pastor Skye Jethani about how we should best engage in politics.

-The etymology of the word **chaos** is a Greek word which means **empty and void**. The foundation of chaos is a sense of emptiness. What should we do when our souls aren't operating correctly, when our lives are a spinning wheel? We should **unplug**. *Most things work better when you unplug them. Even you. Even Jesus.* Alex Miller will be reading our Scripture today. Take it away.

### **Public Reading**

*-Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Mark 1:35-39)*

### **Jesus Unplugs**

#### **Context**

-**This scene is from Mark's gospel, or eyewitness account, of the life of Jesus.** Jesus has been baptized and tested in the wilderness by the evil one. Jesus has called His first disciples – the fishermen brothers Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus is teaching and healing in Galilee near the home of the brothers. Word is starting to spread of this amazing teacher who also heals. Crowds are starting to surround Jesus wherever He goes. Lines are forming filled with the blind, the lame, lepers and the demon possessed waiting to be healed. He was serving non-stop. Jesus was fully God. But Jesus was also fully human. **His world was chaos. What did He do? He unplugged.**

## Color Commentary

-Here are the words that preceded the passage that was read: *That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons...*(Mark 1:32-34a) The previous evening, Jesus had healed many and had driven out many demons. The people must have been in a frenzy. Word was spreading out further and further into surrounding communities. The four young fisherman-disciples must have been excited. Simon Peter was the leader, and he was already starting to dream of what this could become. **But Jesus knew He needed to unplug.** This was a critical practice that allowed Him to remain in a life-giving relationship with His Father.

-**Jesus needed space to unplug.** He was likely sleeping on the floor in the home of one of His disciples. They were packed in. Crowds camped outside the door and even before dawn others were arriving wanting to be healed. **Jesus got up, stepped quietly around His disciples, snuck out the back door and went into the wilderness.** The wilderness was a place of solitude. No one else was around.

-I can picture Simon Peter getting up early as well, thinking he would be the first one up, thinking he would get a jump on the day and be ready for all the people Jesus would heal. He must have been perplexed to find Jesus gone. Jesus was a central component to Peter's business plan. Simon Peter woke up Andrew, James, and John and they started a **desperate manhunt for Jesus.** The NIV says **they looked for him** but the Greek is stronger than that. It essentially says that **they hunted him down.** It is probably what most of you moms feel like when you think you have a few moments to yourself and then your kids start looking for you.

We don't know how long they look, but we can assume it was for a while. By the time they find Him they are flustered. **The awaiting crowds have grown large. The line of people to be healed spans out as far as the eye can see. Someone in the crowd starts a chant - Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!** Peter forces a smile and says to Andrew, *where is He?* Finally, they find Him. The four of them crowd around Him. Peter points to the crowd and exclaims - **everybody is waiting for you.** Have you been there? Have you experienced a moment of overwhelming demands?

-And then the unexpected happens. Jesus looks at His disciples and He looks at the crowd. He looks back to His disciples and says - **let's go somewhere else.** It's like those Southwest commercials where someone is put in a really uncomfortable spot and a voice says, "Wanna get away?" **Jesus wanted to get away.** Peter must have flipped out. All his dreams of a big ministry were going up in smoke. The hopes of the crowd, especially the blind, the lame, the lepers and the demon possessed were crushed. Jesus just left them standing in line. **This is how Jesus consistently responded to chaos - He unplugged, He powered down, He got away.**

## **Big Idea**

-**Jesus knew most things work best after you unplug them.** We see Jesus practice get away several times in Mark's gospel:

*-That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind...(Mark 4:35-36a)*

*-Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. (Mark 6:31-32)*

*-Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.<sup>[9]</sup> He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; (Mark 7:24)*

*-They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." (Mark 14:32)*

**-Unplugging is the practice of taking a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God.**

Unplugging was a pattern for Jesus. Jesus regularly and intentionally got away and powered down. Why? Jesus knew things work best after you unplug them. We power down so we can power up and operate the way we were designed to operate. This was true of Jesus. This is true of me. This is true of you. **Unplugging is not an optional practice in following Jesus, it is a necessary one.**

## **The Necessity of Unplugging**

### **Unplugging allows us to give God our full attention**

-Unplugging is necessary because **unplugging allows us to give God our full attention.** We live in an unprecedented age of distraction. When I was a kid, people still had to get in touch with you on a land line. I even remember phones with rotary dialing! Or people would write you a letter. There were no smart phones - there weren't even dumb mobile phones; there was no texting, there was no email, there was no social media clamoring for our attention. There was no internet. If I wanted news I had to read the newspaper. When people came home from work, they were done with work. **Distractions were minimal.**

-Now, as I sit in my home office working on a sermon, I see a new email has arrived. I wonder who might have emailed me. Oh, it's someone who didn't like last week's sermon. I had better reply. After replying, I return to this week's sermon. But then I feel my phone buzz in my pocket letting me know I got a text. It's from a pastor friend in town who has been having a tough go of it. He needs to talk. That sounds important. I give him a call and chat for a while. I return to the sermon.

But then I notice a bunch of notifications on Facebook. A bunch of people liked my picture of our dog Elvis in a tie. Someone else wants to debate about whether or not the 80s had any good music. Duh. I then get an email notification that the Cowboys signed a key free agent. I excitedly read the article. As I am midway through the article, I notice an ad from REI about their upcoming sale. I have to check that out. Then my dogs start frantically barking at a package delivery, as my girls ask if I am done with work for the day. But it's only 9 AM.

We live in an unprecedented age of distraction. We are plugged in and available to anyone and everyone one from morning to night.

-Our attention has been taken hostage by constant stimuli. We are naturally wired to turn our face and eyes towards new visual stimuli. Cognitive psychologists call it an **orienting response** – like when an animal turns its head towards a movement in the bushes. **Look, bird!** The people who run tech companies and marketing agencies know all about this. They are experts at distracting us. A new thing typically appears **every second** on our TVs. Americans consume something like 10 hours of media a day, over 100,000 words and 34 gigabytes. **That would crash a laptop in a week!**

This unending stream and constant barrage of distraction is **literally rewiring our brains**. We are becoming unable to focus on one thing for long without distraction. **We are becoming addicted to the frenzied chaos I described earlier.** Marketing guru Seth Godin compares it to snow blindness. Snow blindness happens when there is too much ultra-violet attacking our eyes from snow. It leads to a state of temporary blindness. Seth says we are suffering from blindness **due to the tsunami of distractions vying for our attention.**

**-It is hard to give anything or anyone our full attention.** It used to be that only certain people struggled with ADD. Now it is a struggle for almost everyone. This tsunami of daily distractions is incredibly addictive. Each social media *like*, each news *alert*, each new *buzz* in our pocket from our phones **releases a little dopamine, which makes us feel great.** Until we need our next fix – cat videos on You Tube. **The scary thing is that we don't even know it is happening to us.**

**-Jesus knew all about distractions.** Jesus also knew God demanded His full attention. Jesus knew that to give God His full attention, He had to remove himself from distractions. So, Jesus unplugged. Jesus got up early. Jesus went into the wilderness. Jesus saw the growing crowd and said *let's go somewhere else*. Jesus knew He needed to unplug so He could give God His full attention.

-Many of us experienced a significant power outage on Monday night and Tuesday morning. Huge thanks to everyone at PGE for all the hard work in restoring our power! The power in our home was out for about 7-8 hours. When the power went out, I was sitting on the couch and had the TV on, my laptop in front of me, and my phone by my side. I had a long list of things I needed to accomplish before bed. I was anxious and stressed. Then everything went dark.

At first, I waited for the power to come back on. When darkness persisted, I got angry. *What was I supposed to do now? How was I supposed to spend my evening? What would I do without my 3 devices and internet access?* It felt vital to my survival. How was I supposed to feed my addiction? But then I remembered I was in the midst of preparing a message about unplugging. How ironic! I took a few deep breaths. I prayed. I sang some songs to my daughter Jubi who was struggling to go to sleep. I read some Scripture. I talked and listened to God. I took a hot shower. I fell asleep reading a great book.

**-Does it really take a power outage to get us to unplug?** Or could we actually choose to do so because it is vital to our health? Maybe we could start by turning off our notifications and sounds on our devices. Or maybe we could not look at our devices for **an**

hour before bed or an hour after we get up. Or maybe we just put our devices away, out of reach. Studies have shown that having our phones nearby, even if they are off, reduces our focus.

-My spiritual director is continually challenging me with the question: **Am I living compulsively or am I living contemplatively?** Compulsive living is reactionary, distracted, shallow, and wearisome living. We aren't meant to live that way. Contemplative living is proactive, focused, deep and restful living. That is the way we are meant to live. **When we unplug, when we take a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God, we begin to reclaim our humanity.** We power down so that when we power up again, we are operating correctly. ***Most things work better after you unplug them. Even you.***

### **Unplugging helps put us in our place**

-Unplugging is necessary because *unplugging helps put us in our place*. A few weeks ago, I was up late and watching news on a 24-hour news channel. The anchors were discussing one of the national conventions, which was big news in and of itself. But they couldn't stay on topic, because every few minutes, a more important news update would take precedence. Next, they had an update on the uptick in COVID deaths in some areas of the country and fears of a bigger outbreak in the fall. Next, they went to footage of a young man who killed two people in Kenosha as the city burned from riots. And then they said, "We have breaking news: as a category 4 hurricane is about to make landfall!"

I remember that I had trouble falling asleep that night. The sleep I did get was restless. I felt like I was watching the world come apart. I had a sense I should do something about it, but I felt helpless to know what to do. The way I was feeling was appropriate - because we aren't created with the ability to bear the weight of the world!

-The needs of our world and the people in our world are endless. But until recently, we have not had to confront them on a daily basis. Because of technology, travel, and globalism, we are confronted with way too many people and way too many problems. We simply aren't equipped to handle it.

*Dunbar's number* is a famous theory by anthropologist Robin Dunbar. Dunbar believed our brain capacity was only able to handle stable social relationships with 150 people. He defined a stable social relationship as people you could bump into and have a drink or meal with naturally and easily. Dunbar's theory is persuasive. Regardless of whether or not his theory is correct, I think we can all agree that we know far more people with far more problems we can adequately care for.

A recent study suggested the average person now knows 600 people. Some of us know more. Some know less. For most of human history, people have lived their entire lives in small communities knowing probably 150 or fewer people. I have lived substantial parts of my life on the east coast, in the Midwest, and now in the Pacific North West. I have over 3,300 Facebook friends spread out all over the country. **I can barely keep up with caring for the needs of my little tribe of immediate friends and family.** I can't possibly care for over 3,000 people, yet I am aware of many of their intimate needs. I now have the capacity to know when their kids are sick, when they have lost jobs, when their marriages are coming apart, when they are upset about something. It is overwhelming because, in most cases, I can do little about it.

-Just like I can do little about the hurricanes in Texas, the riots in Kenosha, the COVID outbreaks down south, the wildfires, the explosion in Beirut and the refugee crisis in Syria. And yet I get the notifications the minute the Black Panther dies, or Putin allegedly poisons a rival, or the stock market dips. If we don't remember our place, then our souls will be in continual disarray.

-*Unplugging helps put us in our place.* When we unplug, when we take a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God, **we remember we aren't God.** I think most of us are prone to having a 'god complex'. Not to suggest we think we created the world and we want people to worship us. That would be weird. Our god complex manifests itself in our thinking that we need to bear the weight of all the people in our world. That's simply not possible. When we hold all these things in our hearts, our hearts become weary and burdened. We actually begin to experience compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is feeling so overwhelmed by everything that we don't care about anything. We need to remember that we are not God. *Be still & know that He is God.*

-Jesus understood this. Jesus was God but He was also human. Because Jesus was human, He faced limitations of time, space and energy. Jesus couldn't heal or save everyone. Jesus got hungry and tired and distracted. **So, Jesus made unplugging a priority.** Jesus regularly took breaks to be in the uninterrupted presence of God. He powered down so He could power up and operate like He was meant to operate.

-It is interesting to note that after Jesus unplugged, when He got uninterrupted time with God, He gained clarity on how He could best use His limited time and energy. He said *let's get away from here, so that He could go somewhere else to preach the gospel.* Jesus didn't want to be tethered to the whim of the crowds. He wanted to be tethered to the will of His Father.

Unplugging gives us insight into how to best use our limited time and energy. If I said yes to every speaking engagement, every wedding, every funeral, every pastoral counseling opportunity, then I would be a wreck. I would have no time for my family and no time for my own health. Most importantly, I would have no time for God. Unplugging helps us say *no* proactively so that we can say *yes* to the right things.

-Unplugging helps put us in our place. As the Psalmist said - *be still and know He is God.* I am not god. You are not god. Unplugging helps us recognize what we can control and what we cannot control. It acknowledges our limitations. Unplugging provides the opportunity to give everything and everyone to God. *Most things work better when you unplug them. Even you.*

### **Unplugging gives us rest**

-Finally, *unplugging is necessary because unplugging gives us rest.* The foundational passage for this series is Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

-I used to take groups of high school students backpacking every summer in CO. When we had mouthy dudes on that trip, I would mess with them by adding rocks to their

backpacks when they weren't looking. Backpacking up a mountain with full pack is exhausting. Backpacking up a mountain with a full pack and some added rocks is even more exhausting. That is often how life feels – like someone is adding big rocks to our already-heavy backpack.

-Jesus offers the very opposite. We carry burdens we were never meant to carry. Jesus wants to lighten our load. Jesus wants us to live freely and lightly. When we unplug, Jesus takes our burdens and we can experience His rest. As we give Jesus our burdens, we make even more space for God. I highly encourage you to memorize this passage.

## **Closing**

### **Unplugging Prayer Practice**

-Unplugging, the practice of taking a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God, is just another way of describing Sabbath. The Hebrew word for *Sabbath* means *to stop working*. God demonstrated taking Sabbath rest in the original creation story. God worked for 6 days and rested for the 7<sup>th</sup>. If the Creator of Heaven and Earth sought Sabbath rest, we should do so as well. We were created to need rest. **We were created with the need to take a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God.** The concept of Sabbath is so important that it was one of the 10 commandments. Taking a break is not optional. It is commanded. It is the only one of the 10 commandments that I can break regularly and not get fired. Not only will I not get fired, I might get a raise.

-I think we should all seek to take one day a week to unplug. This is the Biblical model that Jesus followed. But I feel it is just as important to take *micro-Sabbaths* throughout each day. The story in Mark was preceded by the Sabbath. Jesus had just had His day off prior to all the healing. And He still needed the daily unplugging. We simply are not created to go, go, go all day without taking a break. We were created to take breaks, to unplug, to be in the uninterrupted presence of God. Then we can operate the way we are supposed to operate.

-Taking regular breaks throughout the day is a wise and healthy way to live. Studies have shown that taking regular breaks reduces and prevents stress. Taking regular breaks also increases creativity, motivation, memory and productivity. Even a 30 second break increases productivity up to 13%. A 15 second break from staring at a screen every 10 minutes reduces fatigue by 50%. If you run any type of organization, you should not just suggest regular breaks, you should insist upon them.

-We want to equip you with a practice that will help you unplug. It is designed to help you take a break to be in the uninterrupted presence of God. It is a simple prayer we designed to help us give God our full attention; to help us remember our place. I want us to do it together. Find a quiet space if possible, a space where you will hopefully be uninterrupted for 5 minutes. Maybe it's the bathroom. Leave your phone behind. Turn off any notifications. Get away from screens and any distractions.

Posture is really important in prayer. We are embodied creatures. We should pray with our whole bodies. Hold your hands open and out. This is a posture of release. We are not holding onto anything or anyone. It is also a posture of receiving.

-I love how our friends at Lectio 365 prep us for prayer. *As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breath slowly; to re-center my scattered senses upon the presence of God...*

(Lectio 365) Let's pray this simple prayer together:

*Loving and faithful God,  
I entrust everything and everyone to you,  
Bring order to my chaos,  
Calm my stormy heart,  
Transform my fear into faith,  
That I may enter your rest. Amen.*

**-I challenge you to stop twice a day and do what we just did and pray what we just prayed.** Take a break twice a day to unplug and be in the uninterrupted presence of God. And see what happens. If you sign up for our app, we will send out this prayer via push notifications each Monday to remind you to unplug and reset.

-If you won't take my advice listen that ancient sage Winnie the Pooh: *Don't underestimate the power of Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering.* (Winnie the Pooh)