

Somewhere Better Than Here

Luke 24:36b-48

By the Rev. Jenny Phillips

I recently read a story about a teenage boy, who, like so many teens, participated in virtual schooling. He lived in a mobile home community in a small trailer that housed a large, extended family. The community experienced common, difficult challenges rooted in systemic poverty and health problems exacerbated by pollution and environmental degradation.

The boy discovered an abandoned van on the outskirts of his town that became his own, cozy hideaway. He attended virtual school from the van. It gave him the chance to see other kids, connect with teachers, and absorb new ideas. The online experience was immersive, delivering him to other planets, landscapes and horizons. He could visit art museums, travel in space, go to the beach, talk with anyone in the world. School was an escape from the mundane struggles of his life, and he loved it.

This story wasn't a news story about how one teen was coping amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, it was the beginning of a science fiction novel published ten years ago called *Ready Player One* in which spending time in virtual worlds became the de facto strategy to cope with the suffering of the real world.

While the virtual worlds in the book were perhaps more immersive than ours, the basic premise felt all too familiar, particularly in the context of our current virtual lives. With activities limited by COVID restrictions, with challenging news all around, it is a normal, human response to look for a way out, an escape, another world on which to set one's sights.

Humans have actually been trying to escape the suffering of this world, for a very long time. Indeed, yearning for escape from suffering seems to be tied to a primal awareness that there is something better out there. It connects with the Eden of our creation story--the lush garden where all our needs and most of our wants were met. But then, like now, the humans wanted to consume beyond the limits God set for creation. The story teaches that in breaching the boundaries of the garden, the humans set the stage for the struggle and suffering we've been trying to escape ever since.

Bible stories also offer a vision for long-term release from this world--a vision of heaven. It is described as God's house, a place of joy, shelter and sustenance. It's hard to get there, but oh, when you do, a glorious feast and heavenly host await, not to mention a lifetime in the presence of the Lord. These visions speak to the human yearning to leave suffering, sadness and pain behind, and to go somewhere better than here.

This longing is part of who we are. The Bible is filled with stories of migrations and dreams. Throughout history, religious traditions and movements have pointed us away from this life and toward visions of other lives in this world and the next. Dreams of departure can be as patriotic as a moon landing or as deadly as an attempt to catch a ride on the Hale-Bopp comet. Many real estate agents would be happy to lead you toward a better life locked in the nearest gated community.

And for better or worse, some forms of escape are easier than ever--just a click away and calling to you right now from the screen on which you're watching this sermon.

Perhaps you've used that screen to escape from your current reality. From your boredom? From your frustration? From your suffering? From your powerlessness?

I have. I do it almost every day. My devices are portals to the people I love who I can't hug during COVID. They are my connection to my now-closed office, and my kids' connection to their schools. They are my primary source of entertainment, delivering books and magazines and television shows and movies and games. They provide information and news. They enable me to engage in commerce and pay my bills and talk with my doctor--all without the risks of exposure to COVID.

They also, sometimes, stimulate my brain in which my real life doesn't. Those hits of dopamine I feel when I hear a message notification are by design. Yet my constant toggling between my present and the imagined potential of the next incoming message contributes to an ever-growing sense of loneliness, of emptiness, of powerlessness. For all my points of connection, there are lots of times when my devices leave me feeling disconnected and dissociated. It can feel like my life online is a wholly different existence from my life in the physical world--sometimes in a good way, but sometimes in a not-so-good way. Sometimes I want and need the escape, but sometimes I get distracted from the things that need my attention. My work. My family. My faith. My community. God's creation.

Today's scripture reading is a story about attention. The disciples think Jesus is dead and gone, body broken by the powers of this broken world. When he shows up and greets them, they are understandably alarmed, thinking they are seeing some sort of Ghost. Jesus implores them to pay attention, to look carefully at his real hands, his real feet. To touch his real body. His real wounds. And then he asks them for help. He's hungry. Might they have a bite to eat? And so the real body of the real Jesus eats some real fish. Tasting and chewing and swallowing. These details matter--they are meant to draw your ear to the physicality of this interaction with the once-dead-now-alive Christ.

In doing so, the story calls us to deep presence in the here and the now. It calls us to the reality that God is among us in this physical, material world. That the material world matters to God. That as much as we want to look for God in the heavens, far, far away, God wants us to keep our attention here. Episcopal priest and author Robert Farrar Capon puts it like this:

There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds: they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape from the world of matter into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm... In fact, it was God who invented dirt, onions, and turnip greens... God who, at the end of each day of creation, pronounced a resounding "Good!" at the end of his concoctions. And it is God's unrelenting love of all the stuff of this world that keeps it in being at every moment. So, if we are fascinated, even intoxicated, by matter, it is no surprise: we are made in the image of the Ultimate Materialist.¹

The image of the Ultimate Materialist. God loves the material world, so much so that God gave God's only child to join the world in its deepest suffering and show that another way is possible. That despite our yearning to get out, God calls us to steward the earth, to focus on the wounded ones in our midst, to offer what we have to help.

This is not really news--the idea that God calls us to attend to the needs of the world. But what is new is the extent to which our attention has been commanded and commodified for the purpose of generating profit. For millennia, people have extracted the resources of the earth and the labor of our bodies to consolidate wealth. Now, corporations have realized the real money is in our minds. And the more clicks and views and streams that draw our attention, the less capacity we have to meaningfully engage with the matter of this world.

God's first job description for humans is to care for the matter of this world, the same earthly matter from which God formed us. The more we disengage from the physical realities of this world, the more we disengage from core activities of discipleship--feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, healing the sick and freeing the oppressed. We can't feed the sick if we can't grow food due to arid, depleted soil. We can't quench thirst with polluted water. Disease is spreading in new, faster ways as ecosystems break down. And the loss of environmental resources of all kinds is depleting resilience and increasing vulnerability, particularly in low-income populations and communities of color.

Even as more and more of us seek escape from the present reality, the climate crisis is accelerating. We see this daily in Global Ministries' work in humanitarian response, as we walk alongside the church in an uphill struggle against the mass suffering created by climate-

¹ Robert Farrar, Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (New York: Random House, 2002), xxvi.

exacerbated disasters, crop failure, disease, and forced migration. When we engage in missions and ministries and lifestyles that pay little attention to their environmental impact, we perpetuate that suffering.

That deliverance of people who are exploited and oppressed necessarily requires a deep engagement with the relationships between God, people, and creation. The sanctity and integrity of God's creation are central.

If we are to reclaim the centrality of the sanctity and integrity of creation--if we are to act on the idea that this material world really does matter, both to us and to God--then we need to begin by reclaiming our attention from the things that seek to colonize our minds with little regard for our souls.

Writer and artist Jenny Odell is the author of a great book called *How to Do Nothing*. Odell recommends civil disobedience in the attention economy--a reclaiming of the value of our attention and a refusal to simply give it away. She speaks to the ways in which our attention is bought and sold as we passively consume, drawing us away from the realities of the world. She invites us to train our minds to withdraw from those attention sucks and to direct our attention toward the world we want.

Just think of the potential in a mass shifting of attention from the virtual world to the physical world--a great act of resistance of the things that would pull us from this present. A collective commitment to deep engagement with the matter of matter. A life in which we are mindful of the ways in which we use the resources of our minds.

Odell notes that different people have different levels of agency over their own attention, and that agency over one's attention is commensurate with one's power in the world. She says, "There is a significant portion of people for whom the project of day-to-day survival leaves little room for anything else...This is why it's even more important for anyone who *does* have a margin--even the tiniest one--to put it to use in opening up margins further down the line. Tiny spaces can open up small spaces. Small spaces can open up bigger spaces. If you can afford to pay a different kind of attention, you should."²

This is what Jesus calls us to as well. To pay a different kind of attention to Christ's presence in our midst. To see and feel the suffering. To respond to requests for sustenance. To resist the colonization of our minds at the expense of a world that needs our stewardship now. And in doing so, to open up margins for others to do the same. To seek the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so.

² Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Random House, 2020), loc 1797.

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