

**May 11, 2025**

**Your Voice Is Important To Us. Please Stay On The Line.**

**Scripture:** John 10:23-30, *Revelation 7:9-17* with an oblique reference to *Acts 9:36-43*

Things change, whether we like it or not (How's that for easing into a sermon?) We may like the rising of the sun, but maybe not its setting. We may like the heat, but not the cold. We may like the changes we make, but not the changes Toronto, Ottawa, or others make.

The speed at which things change also varies. When you pull back the curtains on your front window to see what all the noise is about, and "lo and behold" discover an excavator across the street with its bucket in the ground, you know your panoramic view will quickly become a lot less scenic. When you're driving down Highbury Avenue and see that it's still down to one lane, or when you see the KFC on Dundas still boarded up, you realize that change also happens more slowly.

Changes in the weather or changes to the landscape are physical and, so, generally quite noticeable. Let me turn now to a change that may have, for various reasons, escaped our attention, despite its magnitude; a change similar in scale to the air we breathe and, to borrow the title of Naomi Klein's 2014 book, a change that "changes everything".

A vital part of any culture is communication. The printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, the television all significantly altered the way people communicate, and, in so doing, changed (or rewired) the culture. You could call the increasing attention we've given to speed, efficiency, and market share in our culture a part of the "trickle down effect". I say "a part" because these gains in the field of production have meant losses elsewhere in our lives.

About forty years ago, our eyes started to turn from the TV screen to another screen, and we were again rewired. About forty years ago, we changed the channel of communication from channel-surfing to browsing. Today, in other words, the buzz is on browsing. Remember that old saying about "When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail"? Here's a possible refresh of that old saying: To a browser - and most of us are - it's all data, taken or received as information. We gather input; our output to that input is not generally required. By becoming increasingly informed, we face the likelihood of becoming increasingly passive. Use a cursor or your finger long enough and you'll know what I mean by passive. Eventually, you "Click out".

People who brood over these revolutionary changes in communication and their effects on society and culture - people who in the old days might have been called prophets - have formed the view that we are now living in a post-truth era. If the truth is, in fact, passe; if truth has ceased to be the target; has ceased to matter, where does that leave us? Fortunately, we still have information to shepherd us through the wilderness. Welcome to the Information Age.

FYI (for your information), you can find loads of information if you go online. You can even find information you weren't looking for. You could nibble on the blades of information the internet provides until the cows come home, and forget to do the same, the information being so dense and juicy; so dense and juicy, in fact, that you often find yourself inside a rabbit hole before you can say "world wide web".

On the internet, you discover how slippery information can be. For example, you might begin by searching for a pair of furry slippers, and before you can say "algorithm," you're invited to take a look at combat boots. The manufacturers of these combat boots claim these combat boots have been "Tested," but I don't think they mean in the same way a vacuum cleaner being sold at Canadian Tire has been tested.

Promotions like "Tested" may succeed in capturing our attention, but not necessarily the money in our wallets. When it comes to determining the quality of a product, most of us would prefer to have "Tested" confirmed by customers who actually bought the combat boots, but double-check: Make sure the customer has not been paid by the company to lend their endorsement. To reach this additional layer of certainty, all you need to do is scroll down until you see stars. (Just to be clear, "scroll" here has nothing to do with the scroll mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The "scroll" mentioned there is a roll of papyrus or parchment that is unrolled. "Scroll down" is an action you perform on your keyboard.) Back to the stars. Normally, there's five of them, and customers use them to rate a product. If 2021 customers give the combat boots an average rating of 4%, you can bet your boots, that's a decent boot. Note that a customer's rating is often followed by a comment or testimonial. In the case of the combat boot, you might read something like "Great boots! Took me through tactical training and beyond lol".

The internet doesn't just provide shoppers with information about products they may wish to purchase. Just as most people no longer shop in stores to get the goods they need, so people no longer read newspapers to get the news.

Traditional newspapers have always had their subtle and not so subtle biases. A more conservative paper favoured the interests of the business community and promoted ideals like individual freedom and free enterprise. In their papers, society was in a mess because it was too regulated on the one hand, and too lenient on the other hand. Businesses were getting squeezed while criminals

were getting away with a slap on the hand; many others were getting away with a free meal. The more progressive papers were more democratic. They slanted more toward ideals like equality and inclusivity. In their pages, society was in a mess because the billionaires were getting away with billions more through tax evasion, and thus possessed an outsized influence on government policy. For these more progressive newspapers, the problem was the anti-social concentration of wealth.

The labels “conservative” and “progressive” barely describe all the news you can now find online. Suffice it to say, there’s news for every appetite.

Hearing again about this easy access to more information than we could possibly imagine and news for every appetite, we might feel the urge to pour out our words of praise:

“Psalm 23” updated.

**The internet is my provider; I shall not want.**

**It informs me, which comforts me.**

**It restores my confidence.**

**If I have a question, it has the answers.**

**Even in the toughest of times, I’m not worried.**

**It’s there.**

**No rod, no staff awaits me. Just FYI, DIY videos, chatrooms, and folks who give it to me straight. Oh, and the entertainment I like to watch.**

**And that’s all I want..**

**Even in the presence of my enemies, I have, if not support, an escape.**

**My head overflows.**

**Surely being online will be my first choice, will be my default,**

Before we let our “likes” for the internet get away from us, give the internet a 5-star rating, and end this ode to the internet, we should call to mind the old adage: “There’s two sides to every story.”

The internet does, in fact, have a shadier side. For people who have a deep understanding of the internet, even “shady” may still be too bright, too charitable. Some believe there are layers to the internet that are much darker than just shady. By walking us through a few of these deeper layers, my purpose is not to arouse fear, but to help all of us from going astray.

First of all, it's important to understand that the internet, the digital world most of us now visit to get our news and information, is nothing like a greasy shop manual that can be relied upon to guide your repair every step of the way. Nor is the internet anything like the multi-volume Encyclopædia Britannica many of us consulted back in the day for information on A-Z. The internet, which originally formed the foundation of our Information Age, is now the sophisticated engine of the Attention Economy. Attention. Economy. Welcome to the Misinformation Age. Whereas the internet used to be largely a neutral, democratic space, it is now used by many platforms, especially social media, to deliberately and strategically gather more of our attention. Why has the emphasis shifted from information to attention? Exploitation. Here's the equation: Attention equals power. The more attention we give, the more power we give. And so power and wealth concentrate. That's how the net works. That's dark.

The net uses a myriad of ways to capture our attention. The better-funded social media platforms are better at getting our attention, and that's often because they huff and puff about stuff others don't. They talk about the threats nobody else is talking about. They give it to us straight. The real enemy is. The real danger lies. Arousing stuff. Extreme stuff. Rocks your boat. Fans the flames. People get caught up in the gears of fear, anger, and distrust. People of faith can become near-sighted, get caught up in the moment. Lose interest in the real world. As long as our eyes are fixated on the screen, they are not eyes lifted to the hills. Without a vision, people perish. That's dark.

Books can be page-turners, but they come to an end. Not the internet. It's aimless. It's a hamster wheel. It has no end in sight, apart from extracting money. Getting our attention, manipulating our emotions, and possibly putting an edge on our attitudes are the means to that end. That's dark. As dark, is becoming as aimless as the internet.

Let that be the end of our brief descent into the underworld of the digital domain. Before I bring the good news to you this morning, I want to tell you a story:

A man visits his doctor and says, “Doctor, I’m half deaf.” The doctor asks, “What do you mean half deaf?” “Well,” the man says, “I hear half of what people say.” “I’ve never heard of that,” says the doctor. “Let’s try this. You go and stand in the corner, with your back to me. Then I’ll stand in the

other corner, and you repeat everything I say.” So the man stands in the corner, with his back to the doctor. The doctor says, “Eighty-eight.” The man says, “Forty-four.” Forty-four. Half of eighty-eight.

A little humour to raise a serious question: Have we, as Christians, become half-deaf? Are we within hearing distance? Is the voice of Jesus getting through to us? Are we on ground still near enough to hear his voice above the spin and clamor generated by our current culture? In short, does the True Shepherd still have his sheep’s attention?

What I’m about to say will initially strike you as absurd, but I believe it needs to be said in order to highlight a fundamental truth about the gospel.

Brothers and sisters in faith, our God is not a remote IT technician, who works to repair our screens from behind his own screen. God is not a screen-saver. God did not send his Son to save digital life, the world-wide web, alternate realities, or our own little worlds.

God is not remote. God sent his Son into his Creation, the living world, the material world, the real world, the world in which we live, move, and have our being. The world in which we breathe, the world in which so many of God’s creatures find it difficult to breathe; who struggle to live, move, and have their full being because of hunger, homelessness, racism, militarism, and climate change. Brothers and sisters in faith, it is our groaning world, not the malfunctions of our insentient screen, that Jesus came to save.

I now want to digress a moment in order to press home the fact that words, ideas, concepts have, with perhaps a few exceptions, a corresponding reality. That’s just a fancy way of saying, for example, that the word or concept of “car” is the thing you drove to church, but that you may not be able to drive home because your starter is now toast, and so you’ll need to drive home in someone else’s car. “Injustice” is also a word, a concept, and we hear it a lot. Might that be because we have forgotten - information can do that to you - that the concept of “injustice” has, like the word “car” a corresponding reality?

Now let me repeat: Brothers and sisters in faith, it is our groaning world, not the malfunctions of our insentient screen, that Jesus came to save.

It’s good, even important, to be informed - as long as we’re not being misinformed or disinformed - but following the action is not the same as following Jesus, which is to say, there’s more to discipleship than being in the know and being troubled by what we know. We also need to take the trouble to do our bit to heal the brokenness in the real world. It might be good to begin that bit with

some self-examination. Through the exercise, we may learn the ways we play into the reality of injustice.

God did not come among us to polarize the world, to engage in a battle of wits. Jesus came into the world not to inform the world, but to transform the world by his Word and Spirit.

So, what are you hearing? Are you hearing the voice of Jesus pray, who earnestly prayed, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”

“On earth, as it is in heaven.” Without a vision, the people perish. Here are a few glimpses of heaven from John in Revelation 7:

**After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,**

**‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’**

.....

**the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.**

**They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;**

**the sun will not strike them,**

**nor any scorching heat;**

**for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,**

**and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,**

**and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’**

God, not information, without end. A multitude of people untouched by racism, sexism, nationalism, or militarism in continuity with Christ. That’s our glimpse of heaven from the Book of Revelation. You can get another glimpse by looking to the left >> colour, culture, conviviality galore.

The kingdom of heaven, the future we long for, where God reigns, will not be realized by hammering it home, by strongmen, by iron fists, by detention centres, or by purging the enemy. On the contrary, we are called to love our enemy. As startling, as otherworldly as that, given our success-oriented, profit-driven culture, is the call to attend to those in our world who are being ploughed under by a destructive mix of greed, insecurity, and resentment.

The realm of righteousness will have a great multitude of people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. All will be standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. Love, here, moves freely. The cups of our imagination overflow.

As one calling in the wilderness, the Good Shepherd is calling us to “green pastures and still waters”. In the midst of our Attention Economy, he is calling our attention, not to “a fortress to be guarded,” but to his table. On it rests the Bread of Life. Jesus invites us and the world to approach this table and to eat, so that all life may flourish, so that there may be heaven on earth.

So let us worship the True Shepherd, the Lamb that was slain, let that worship overflow our worship services to create a whole new reality: one that includes all people, every tribe, and every last language spoken, one that is diverse, equal, and inclusive. Let us worship by seeking distributive justice, by forgiving seventy times seven, by walking humbly, by loving freely.

People of faith, of far-sightedness, I hope that what you have heard this morning, will not be heard as information, but as gospel, good news, forever written on your hearts, minds, and hands. May this gospel give you hope in hard times, and may it help you, in the words of Wendell Berry, to practise resurrection wherever real people groan, wherever the real world struggles to breathe.