

Christmas Eve, 2020

“Altar-ed Proximity”

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

I came across a quote from one of the books I’m reading for my online course focused on Racial Justice with World Vision. For some reason I didn’t write down the author, but it goes like this:

“Information alone doesn’t bring transformation and change. Proximity does!”

We don’t just need more information. We need transformation . . . and it typically doesn’t come because we simply ‘know more’ or ‘know better.’ Information may help us creep along toward change, but it’s amazing how slowly change comes when we rely on information alone. In fact, just knowing the data, facts, information can often be a barrier to actual life change. It’s almost like we think knowing stuff means we’ve changed.

For example:

– Raise your hand if you know eating too many sweets and greasy foods is bad for your health. You’ve read the research, right? You have the data?

Have you altered your eating habits? (Some yes and some not so much.)

But what if you have a cardiac episode, or someone you know does and needs to change their diet? What if you find out your diet is impacting your kidneys or raising the odds of diabetes?

Are you then more likely to change the way you eat?

– Raise your hand if you know that the flourishing of your primary relationships (parents, siblings, spouse, kids) requires intentionality and empathy, active listening and less screen time, boundaries that keep work and other distractions/temptations at bay? You have all that information, right?

So have you been as much of an empathetic and intentional listener as you need to be? Are you someone who regularly looks up from your device or screen (or lays them aside) to invest and listen to your loved one(s) so they know and feel your unconditional, uninterrupted love?

But what if an affair or the threat of one, what if a fractured relationship with a son/daughter, what if the emotional struggle of a teenager appears right in the middle of your family life?

Would you be more intentional then? Would you watch less TV, talk more, engage more?

The same can be said about Discipleship and Apprenticing ourselves to Jesus.

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The angels give out some great information; it’s accurate and specific – geographically, biblically and theologically. The angel even reduces the anxiety and fear of the shepherds before communicating any of the facts so they could digest the data using the best parts of their brain. ‘Don’t be afraid, this is all good stuff you’re about to hear.’ (Building SLIDE) “To you is born

this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord . . . [and here's some more facts] . . . you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger (feeding trough)." (Luke 2:11-12) Apparently, the angel has even learned to implement an educational approach that recognizes communicating to more than one of the senses is a more effective way to transfer knowledge from the teacher to learner. This guy uses sound, light and music to communicate geography and biography!

Those are the facts, right? They are accurate and clear, yes? They are communicated creatively in a way that sticks.

So do we read next that the shepherds go back to their flocks while saying, "I'm so glad we learned all that. I believe that little lesson will be enough to change me inside and out. I'll be a better shepherd and citizen now that I have the data about Messiah. I believe I've been altered adequately"?

That's not what we read! And that's because the shepherds know proximity – which comes through relationships and experience – is the real game changer. "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us. So they went with HASTE." (Luke 2:15b-16a) They went as quickly as they could, to get as close as they could to Messiah, SO THAT their lives and world would be altered for good.

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But you and I are products of Western civilization. We have been blessed, to be sure, as well as cursed by an Enlightenment approach to learning and knowledge. We've been indoctrinated by the Information Age; saturated in an environment where we “know” too much and have detached knowledge from transformation. We've had the luxury of learning all sorts of things – sacred and secular – and then saying, “That's really interesting!” but not changing; not changing our habits and patterns, our perspectives and practices, our investments and purchases. We have the luxury of taking in information and doing nothing with it.

It's why going abroad to an under-resourced country, or to the inner-city, or to the Appalachians, or finding ourselves out of financial resources, [it's why that] helps us understand poverty in a way that a book on poverty never can. It's why being in relationship with someone who suffers with depression or cancer helps us change our perspectives and platitudes – and prayer life. It's why – if we are Caucasian – personally knowing a person of color whose life is actually affected by racism or immigration policy is more likely to help us understand another person's reality than reading an editorial in the newspaper or online. Proximity can change so much.

Getting close to people and things we don't understand is the best way to understand. But sometimes we don't know how to get close to the people and things we don't understand. Or we don't want to. And sometimes, like RIGHT NOW, getting close to people is – literally – off limits.

So sometimes the person, situation, dose of reality has to come to us. I was just thinking the other day that one of the great gifts of technology is that it can bring us closer to actual people with actual STORIES; and they even come in living color, on huge screens with HD and surround-sound. Think about how far we've come because of technology in the Church alone: from missionaries with slideshows that come by every four years, to "Minute for Mission" reports when teams return back from their week away, to IJM stories in living color like the one we saw on Freedom Sunday when Foli was rescued from slavery on Lake Volta in Ghana.

The angel comes to the shepherds with information about a life-altering event, and THEY WENT with haste – as if their lives depended on it. And they got VERY close to Jesus. And that changed everything! "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." (Luke 2:20)

I don't imagine they did a lot of glorifying and praising God before that. They didn't have much to praise God about up to that point as they eeked out a living as shepherds on the night shift. The economy was terrible; the Romans were oppressive; King Herod was a fraud; the leaders of their faith were hypocritical. What did they have to rejoice about? Even the promises of their scriptures seemed to have fallen by the wayside, making it hard to find any kind of good news to rejoice about.

So the Good News had to come and find them out in the middle of the field of their lives. "Then an angel (NOT in slide, messenger) of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them . . ." (Luke 2:9) The Gospel has been and is fully and finally initiated by God, because God knows that **"Information alone doesn't bring transformation and change. Proximity does!"**

The Old Testament has more than enough data and description about the nature of God, the beauty and brokenness of being human, and God's plan for living a life that is redeemed, free and blessed. The Old Testament even makes it clear that forgiveness and mercy are plentiful from God's gracious hand. And, yet, He still had to come to us. Apparently, His words weren't enough, so "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us . . . full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

And we're not just talking about grown up Jesus on the Cross. This also includes baby Jesus in the Cradle. He came that near. Near enough that we could see Him, touch Him, hear Him. Near enough that in the silence of that starry night in Bethlehem, we could actually hear the writhing of a young mother and the wailing of a baby boy – signifying the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us. God in proximity to us.

From beginning to end, from His birth all the way through His death, God's "proximity" to our human reality is palpable. And that, my friends – this Christmas – should change . . . should transform . . . and should ALTAR/ALTER everything.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. For you, what is the connection between information and transformation?
2. Would you say you are an information ‘junkie’ or not? Can you identify your primary motivation for getting most forms of information?
3. Is it interesting to you that the angel doesn’t tell the shepherds to go? What does that tell you about God? [Notice that the angel Gabriel doesn’t tell Mary to go see Elizabeth either.]
4. What are some situations and who are some people you have gotten close to that, by being close, have changed you in tangible ways?
5. Do you have much to praise God about these days? How does being close to Jesus change your ability to rejoice and the amount of praising you do?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?