

Doomscrolling

Hespeler, 28 November, 2021 © Scott McAndless – Advent 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, [Luke 21:25-36](#)

Over the past couple of years, a new word has entered into the common vocabulary. But more than that, it has entered into the common experience. That word is *doomscrolling*. The word is new enough that it doesn't yet have an entry in the dictionary, but it is generally defined as "the act of spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to the absorption of negative news." (Wikipedia) It has become a common term because we seem to be living in times when it is so easy to pull out your phone and open up a news feed and jump from one extremely depressing piece of news to the next.

An Endless Diet of Bad News

You jump from a story on the latest Covid numbers to a story about police killing an indigenous woman. You jump from the latest dire prediction about global warming to a story of devastating flooding on the West Coast. You jump from a story of the latest protest in Wisconsin to pictures of men giving Nazi salutes and shouting "Jews will not replace us."

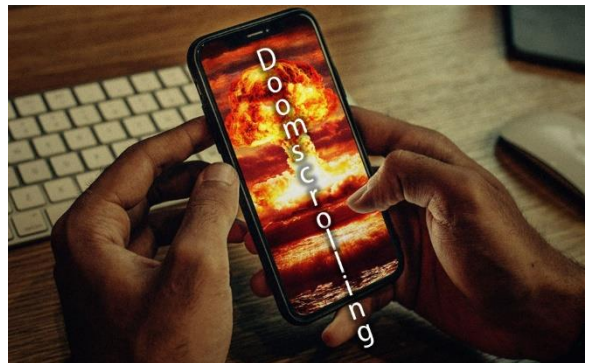
It has become all too easy to get locked into an endless loop of bad news and I think that many of us have found ourselves in exactly that loop too often over the last couple of years. And even as we approach the festive season, it doesn't seem to be letting up as news feeds are dominated by reports of how supply chain issues are going to spoil everyone's Christmas, that is if we even have Christmas what with all the Covid fears. In fact, that all seems to be ramping up with all the anxiety over a new variant.

Not All the Media's Fault

I know that some will blame the media for all of this – saying that they should show us more good news than bad. There is something to that, of course. It is true that the media has been privileging the news that stirs the most negative emotions because they know that will get the greatest engagement which means money for them. It is also true that social media companies have been using algorithms that intentionally present us with the news articles that are going to get us all riled up. But I don't think we can only blame it on the media. The reality is that there are many signs in the world today that things are not well and that they could all be getting a whole lot worse.

Not Good for us

I don't think that I need to tell you that all of this doomscrolling isn't particularly good for us. This endless cycle has been like a great weight on the hearts of many people. It is a cause of depression and anxiety. And we have certainly seen how many have attempted to treat their weighed down hearts in destructive ways by resorting to addictive behaviour and substance abuse. Others seek to distract themselves from what they are feeling by living in indulgent ways that only end up hurting themselves and the people they love. Of course, there are also some people who have sought to defend themselves from all of this by completely



cutting themselves off from the news so they don't have to deal with it. They just scroll from one cute cat video to another. But that doesn't seem to be a particularly healthy response either.

We might well hope for people to not feel so bad, but I hardly want to blame people for their emotions. The truth of the matter is that we are living in disturbing times. And, if that is true, the question is how should we deal with it? In particular, as people of faith, what is a proper response?

A Gospel for Doomscrollers

In many ways, the passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke is a Gospel for doomscrollers. Jesus lays out before his disciples a series of signs, and they are signs of doom. **“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”**

And, yes, I kind of feel as if I have read all of those things on my news feed in the last couple of months – especially the parts about confusion and distress among the nations and people fainting from fear. Jesus is saying that these things are not just bad news, they are signs. They are signs that indicate something important about the fate of the world.

Jesus Warns Us

And what Jesus is saying in this passage is not that we need to just put away our phones and pretend that all of this stuff isn't happening, as tempting as that might be. He encourages his disciples and us to be aware of what the signs of our time are. But he does say something that is very important for the kind of times that we find ourselves living in today. **“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”**

Jesus is literally warning us against the very dangerous effects of doomscrolling. He is recognizing how easy it is to have your heart weighed down by an unrelenting stream of bad news. He even speaks of the ways in which people can respond to the resulting depression and anxiety **“with dissipation and drunkenness.”** That is to say that people self-medicate with addictive lifestyles and self-destructive behaviour.

But it is one thing to be warned of the dangers of doomscrolling. I think we're all aware of that on some level. But the question remains, how do we do that? How do we stop our hearts from being weighed down? Well, I would like to share a few pieces of advice for you today that might help you to do that, some directly from this passage in the Gospel of Luke and some from other places.

It is Hard for Us to Avoid

One of the problems we are dealing with is definitely something that was not a feature of the life for people in Jesus' time. They were living in a world where the average person often did not even have the means to be aware of some of the terrible things that were going on in the world. They didn't get reports on the latest earthquake in Turkey or atrocity committed by the emperor in Rome. It took some effort for them to get the news, which is why Jesus makes the point of telling them to be aware of the signs that are taking place in the world around them.

But we live in a very different world where obtaining news and information is so easy that it almost happens without us being aware of it. I mean, you just sit down for a few minutes and take out your phone and open some social media app and the news feed on that thing has been specifically designed to

present you with a news report that's going to hook you in and then an algorithm is going to kick in but make sure that you then swipe to the another story and then another until, before you know it, you have wasted maybe hours in a day doomscrolling. It takes almost no effort on our part to be totally aware of all of the bad things that are happening.

Being Careful about Our Consumption

So, for us today, we actually have to put in the effort to make sure that our hearts are not weighed down by all of that. So it helps for us to be very intentional about how and when we consume the news. It helps us to be aware of how Facebook and Twitter and other apps are feeding that news to us.

That doesn't mean that you have to just turn it off, but maybe you should schedule your own consumption of the news. Maybe don't do it just before bed, for example, because that may not be conducive to a good night's sleep. There are also steps that you can take to take control of your newsfeed, by choosing to read stories from what you consider to be reliable sources. And don't be afraid to engage your critical mind and apply it to whatever you hear or read.

That is part of the answer, but another part is that you also need to work time into your day when you do focus on other things. There is a passage in the letter to the Philippians that I believe every one of us needs to memorize or put it up on our wall where we're going to see it at the beginning of every day. It is Philippians 4:8: **"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."**

I definitely feel that one of the ways in which we can prevent the news of the dire events of our times from weighing down our hearts is by intentionally building into our days opportunities to do exactly what it says in Philippians. Make the time to think on such things. Journal about what is true and honourable. Meditate on what is pure and pleasing. Contemplate things that are commendable, excellent and worthy of praise.

Having the Right Perspective

So that is part of what we must do to make sure our hearts are not weighed down. But there is another part of the answer to the problem in this passage that we read from the Gospel of Luke. It invites us to adopt a certain perspective on the disturbing events that may be taking place in the world around us. Jesus invites us to consider something that everyone would have been familiar with in that world. **"Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near."**

You see, in the Mediterranean climate, the fig tree is one of the last trees to bud and put out leaves in the spring. We actually have a tree like that in our backyard. I've been told it's called a Russian Laurel, but whatever it is, it is very slow to put out leaves in the spring. So much so that every year I get worried. I watch all of the other trees in the neighborhood put out all their leaves and I look at our tree and its branches are still bare and I start to think, well, it's finally happened, the tree has finally died. And then, finally, only when I am past despair, the buds form and the tree creates this beautiful canopy that shelters our backyard all through the summer.

Leaves as Signs

So Jesus is actually inviting us to consider that emotional roller coaster of waiting for the last tree to bud. He's saying that, as we look around at the world we are often tempted to despair at all the things

that are happening and to think that this is finally it and the tree is going to die because the leaves haven't come out. I will admit that it has been tempting to feel that way looking at events of late.

But Jesus is actually saying that the leaves are coming and that promise is that summer is coming. The leaves are actually all of these terrible signs that he is talking about – the signs of the times. They are the disasters, the wars and rumours of wars, the apocalyptic fires and floods. But Jesus is actually inviting us to look at them as the late budding leaves, the sign that summer is coming. **“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”**

Turn your Expectations Upside Down

And I know that that doesn't seem to make much sense. It seems like the logical thing to do is to look at these events and see them only as signs that everything is about to get a whole lot worse. But Jesus, as he often did, is inviting us to turn our expectations upside down. And what is the reason why we can look at all of the things that are happening and still find hope? Only one thing. Only our faith that God has a handle on what is going on in this world and that God has a plan to bring about the fullness of God's kingdom. That faith and that perspective is the only thing that can make us look at some of the troubling things that are happening in our world and understand that our God is allowing them to happen because they are like those late leaves on a fig tree, they are the sign that we are almost there, and that God will faithfully fulfill the plan.

It is troubling to look around at the events of our times and realize that they are signs about the state of our world. And, of course, when we see these things, they need to stir us to action, prompt us to make changes and renew our commitment to a just and better world. What we must not let them do, however, is weigh our hearts down. We are the followers of the Prince of Peace and the King of Hope and as we cling to that truth, our hearts will be enabled to soar above the trouble of these difficult times.