

Coronavirus

Relationships

How Should We Use Digital Technology under Quarantine?

By Grace Claus

Quarantine: [etymologically](#), it means “40 days”—the length of time [ships were kept off the coast of Venice](#) to protect the port city from the plague in the 14th century. Forty days is also the length of Lent, the season in which, for centuries, Christians have spiritually replicated Jesus’s experience of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. Right now, at the end of Lent, half the world is quarantined to slow the spread of the coronavirus. But neither the medieval sailors nor Christ himself had what we have now: digital technology. It’s possible for us to connect with people we have no physical access to. And this year’s Lenten social distancing has me wondering: How much should we rely on digital technology to connect us?

The blessing—and the challenge

In some ways, digital technologies are an enormous gift during this time. In the face of a pandemic that’s forcing us to keep physical distance between ourselves and fellow humans, we’re suddenly dependent upon digital technology to connect to others at a fundamental level. With the exception of the people living in your household (and your neighbors, who are perhaps out for walks more often than usual), you cannot talk with people you love except in a mediated way: by letter, text message, phone, or video call. All but our most intimate relationships no longer involve in-person interactions.

And we desperately need to connect with others for our wellbeing. Social isolation wears on us. Introverts may be able to tolerate it better than extroverts, but even they’re not immune to the accompanying loneliness and anxiety. A connection of any kind, even mediated by a screen, is good for the soul.

Because of that, we can embrace technology as a way to connect us to others during a time of social distancing. This is true of us both individually and as the church—but with some qualifications.

I'll put my cards on the table: I'm a [digital minimalist](#). Skeptical of technology's promises to [make us smarter](#) and [connect us to others](#), I try to give priority to in-person relationships and analog ways of living.

I do use digital technologies; for two years, I have worked remotely and lived 2,000 miles from my family. Phone and video calls are part and parcel of my daily life. But I try to use technology as a tool in service to the things I really value.

Under normal circumstances, I'd prefer to catch up with a friend on a weekly jog rather than text her. I've tried to invest in nearby relationships in our new city instead of simply maintaining cross-country relationships with old friends. And, as a Christian, I'm an advocate of the local church. There's wisdom in the late Eugene Peterson's suggestion that people [pick a church by going to the closest and smallest one](#). Ordinarily, I'd say that listening to sermons at home by yourself isn't the church, though it might be spiritually edifying. (I acknowledge that this is the everyday situation for many who are homebound or hospitalized and don't mean to diminish their experience.)

So my digital choices were pretty much on autopilot until about three weeks ago, when I was thrown for a loop. Now I can't jog with a buddy. I have no physical access to any friends, near or far. And holding a church service has been banned completely. Suddenly, technology is mighty tempting.

So what is this digital minimalist to do? What are all of us, regardless of our technological persuasion, to do? Is there a theological framework for using digital technologies to mediate our relationships?

I believe there is. Here are a few theological truths and corresponding practices for us

to consider in a season of physical distancing. (The practices are examples to inspire you. Use your own imagination and pay attention to the place God has put you!)

Truth: We are wired to be in relationship with other people.

It is not good that the man should be alone,” God says while creating a fellow human being for Adam (Genesis 2:18). It’s not good for us to be alone. In one sense, digital technologies are no different than other, simpler technologies, like paper and pen or telephones. Just as handwritten letters mediate our relationship with other people, so can platforms like [Zoom](#), [FaceTime](#), and [Marco Polo](#).

We shouldn’t spurn these technologies just because they’re not as good as the real thing. As long as we can’t have the “real thing,” let’s meet each other’s (and our own!) need for companionship by staying connected in whatever ways we can. In fact, I’d argue that interactions over phone or video *can be* the real thing. Physical proximity isn’t required for a meaningful relationship, although it helps.

Practice: Coordinate a virtual game night.

Use Zoom to play charades or Pictionary with your friends or siblings or coworkers. You could also set up something more technologically sophisticated, like [Jackbox Games](#). Sure, your kids might self-consciously goof off in front of the camera, but it brings their grandparents inexpressible joy to interact with them.

Practice: Host a virtual happy hour.

Or whatever hour. Just make time for people. If you normally get together with friends in the evening, share dessert over Zoom. If you and a friend go for a weekly walk, FaceTime each other and walk around your own neighborhoods. And don’t limit

yourself to your usual circle of friends; be sure to include folks who might be especially lonely and overlooked.

Practice: Prioritize meaningful digital connections.

You don't need me to tell you that binge-watching Netflix and mindlessly scrolling through Twitter don't count as using technology to meaningfully connect with others. But I'll further encourage you to up your go-to level of connection with people. Rather than squandering hours texting back and forth with your mom, just pick up the phone and call her. Swear off merely "liking" anything on social media and instead drop a personal note in response to a post that moves you. Maybe these things will even become a habit and carry over into your post-isolation life!

Truth: It matters that the church gathers.

We've established that gathering as the church matters. But what exactly, should that look like? The words of the writer of Hebrews take on new meaning in light of a pandemic that's forcing us to stay apart: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

How, without being able to meet physically or make visits to vulnerable members, are we to provoke one another to love and good deeds? There's no playbook for this situation.

I'm persuaded that we should meet virtually, using an online platform like Zoom to connect with the rest of the congregation. But I'm *not* persuaded that the form of that meeting should be identical to a typical worship service. In fact, I'm convinced it shouldn't.

Here's what I mean: many churches' first instinct under stay-at-home orders has been to livestream their worship services. Before the pandemic, livestreaming was already common practice, especially among larger churches. But my conviction that folks should prioritize the closest, smallest church means that I personally don't endorse that model. I won't rule it out entirely because it does have its merits (which I'll leave to others to detail), but I want to push churches to consider a different format, which leads me to a second practice.

Practice: Simplify the worship service.

Rather than trying to replicate a standard in-person worship service, I encourage church leaders to think differently. (And I encourage church members to welcome a temporary change-up!)

Perhaps this season of fear and grief is inviting us to pare down. I don't want to sing along to a full band by myself in my living room. My two-year-old can't sit through a half-hour sermon, and neither can I because I have to pop up every ten minutes to make sure she's not destroying something in the other room.

I'd love to see churches simplify their orders of worship, lean heavily into familiar music that can be easily sung a capella or with a guitar, and provide liturgies that are hospitable to all ages and abilities. This is true whether your church is holding a church-wide service or inviting church members to worship separately with the people in their household. Simpler is better.

Practice: Make church gatherings interactive.

If simpler is better, so is more interactive. If you've ever sat through a webinar or a video conference, you know how easy it is to zone out. Staying engaged takes herculean effort, even if you resist the temptation to click over to another browser

tab.

Worship, of all things, should definitely not be passive. This is true when we're meeting in person. But there's a greater hurdle when you're meeting virtually, since many technologies are designed literally to minimize human effort.

Consider how you can actively engage people in your virtual church gatherings. This may mean that various people participate in leading the liturgy. More meaningful might be to devote a portion of your virtual time together to interacting with fellow members. Maybe everyone can offer prayer requests during the prayers of the people. Maybe you get into small groups to reflect on the Scripture passage or pray for each other or just check in. (Platforms like Zoom support "break-out rooms," which make smaller conversations like this possible.)

Whatever you do, find a way to include the least tech-savvy people in your congregation. Some online platforms like Zoom offer the option for people to join by phone.

Practice: Meet in small, in-person groups.

Over the coming year, there may be times in which we're able to gather in larger groups. In some areas, that may be the case now. When that happens, consider meeting in person in homes, keeping the group sizes small enough to be safe. Of course, abide by the most up-to-date recommendations for physical distance and disinfecting procedures.

Even when social distancing restrictions are loosened, it would be wise for larger congregations not to immediately gather as a full group. Get creative about scaling back up as the pandemic draws to a close.

Practice: Don't forget the church's mission.

The church is called to care for people on the margins: people who are lost, vulnerable, sick, or alone. Naturally, the coronavirus pandemic has stumped us. For most of us right now, loving our neighbor means keeping our distance. And social distancing means the usual ways that we act as the body of Christ are off limits. No volunteering to babysit your grandchildren. No visiting elderly, homebound church members. Even sending mail seems iffy.

Figuring out how to love our neighbor is testing churches' capacity to innovate. As [Brewer Eberly, Ben Frush, and Emmy Yang](#) put it: "Amid Christianity's longstanding tradition of communion and attention to the outcast, we should expect discomfort with the idea of intentionally avoiding those in need." So how might you continue to serve people in need? I encourage your church and your household to listen to the Holy Spirit's particular prompting to follow Christ in your context.

Loving our neighbor may in fact require us to put ourselves at risk. I think of the new layers of meaning in [the parable of the Good Samaritan](#). Jesus tells the story to elaborate on his command to love "your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). In the midst of this pandemic, safety precautions mean that we literally cross to the other side of the road when we pass others. We keep the greatest distance from those who are already infected. But let's not start rationalizing the actions of the priest and the Levite. Using digital technologies allows us to keep a safe distance, but that is no comfort to a patient dying alone. How might the church, like the Samaritan man, be the presence of Christ to people who are sick or dying of COVID-19?

Truth: Isolation can be a gift from God.

Isolation is not a punishment. Extended isolation is trying and often painful, but God

often uses it to strip away those things that don't matter. In his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, Jesus found himself sustained by God. When our creature comforts are taken away, we too are driven to rely on God.

This is where the “quarantine” of Lent speaks into our literal quarantines. Lent reminds us of our mortality: *from dust you have come, and to dust you shall return*. But reminders of our mortality should not end there, in hopelessness. Instead, our mortality points us to a greater truth, so beautifully expressed in the [Heidelberg Catechism](#): “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (Q&A 1).

Digital technologies are a gift, yes, but so is the wilderness of isolation. We shouldn't use video calls and social media to escape the wilderness. This is where we are. What is God's Spirit inviting us to while we're here?

Practice: Embrace the wilderness.

There's a story from the desert mothers and fathers—the early monastics who took up residence in the Egyptian desert in the third and fourth centuries—that has come to mind in the past few weeks. One monk asks Abba Moses, an older monk, for a word of wisdom. In response, Abba Moses says, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

I've taken that as a word of wisdom to myself in this season of isolation. Rather than trying to alleviate the discomfort of loneliness and the boredom of an empty social calendar, I've been aiming to pay attention to what my “cell” has to teach me.

Connecting with other people out of habit has a way of drowning out the voice of God, even under normal circumstances. It's when we embrace the loneliness of our cell that we can really encounter God.

So don't fill up every minute with virtual versions of your usual activities. If you've found yourself without work during this season, take that as an opportunity to make space in your life to listen to God. If you're able to work remotely and can join the other members of your house for lunch, do! Receive the gift of the tiny community you are already a part of. Commit yourself to the place where you are.

Take walks. Talk to your neighbors. In the Seattle area, we've had more than our share of sunshine for the first few weeks of our collective stay-at-home order, which means that my neighbors have begun taking walks like nobody's business. (Ours is not a social neighborhood.) Kids have come out of the woodwork and are zipping up and down our street all day. I'm holding out hope that this shift in neighborhood culture will outlast the quarantine period and draw us closer together.

Take to the outdoors. Heed the wisdom of the agrarian writer Wendell Berry and, "when despair for the world grows in [you] ...go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds" ([from "The Peace of Wild Things"](#)). To the extent that you can, leave the cramped quarters of your house and receive the grace of God's creation.

Use your hands. If you have a garden, tend it. If you have a sourdough starter, make a loaf of bread. Build a shelf. Sew a shirt. Play the piano. Write letters. Embrace a vision of this season that's almost Sabbath-like. The minister and poet Lynn Ungar puts it this way [in her poem "Pandemic"](#):

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,

on trying to make the world

different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those

to whom you commit your life.

Center down.

Remember, quarantines—of the biblical wilderness kind and of the medical precaution kind—are intended to lead to life. So embrace the wilderness.

Practice: Turn to God.

My deepest prayer is that this season drives us toward God.

It's no secret that when life is running smoothly, we're tempted to fall into [practical atheism](#). We forget that God exists and that God's [providential hand is upholding everything](#) (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27). Sometimes we even forget that we need other people. We judge ourselves to be largely self-sufficient.

In times of crisis, though, our dependence on others becomes clear. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it obvious that our world is interconnected and that we're all mighty lonely without other people's physical presence. That's an important thing to remember.

My concern is that, to survive this emotionally and psychologically trying time (not to mention the physical distress of the disease itself), we'll turn to digital technologies.

Will we think that seeing a virtual counselor, having Zoom church, and FaceTiming with our friends is enough? Or will we remember that God is the source of our life?

Connecting to other people apart from God is like bunches of grapes trying to survive by twining themselves together without remaining in the vine.

What if, instead of texting a friend to alleviate a pang of loneliness, we turned to God? What if, as we disinfected our door knobs and washed our hands for a full 20 seconds, we prayed? We could use these daily activities to offer our fears to God, to pray for the sick and the people who care for them, or to give God thanks.

What if pastors didn't feel obligated to provide a full menu of religious services to their congregations, but acted instead like spiritual directors, encouraging people to attend to God's presence in their daily lives? What if we turned to our cell, to the eerie silence of our homes, and noticed God's presence with us? (Your home may be loud and feel claustrophobic, depending on how many people in how little space, but the point is the same.)

No matter how little we interact with others, we are not, in fact, alone. God is with us, whether we "settle at the farthest limits of the sea" (Psalm 139:9) or retreat to our homes.

I called my grandma earlier this week to check in. As a widow in her 80s who finds it difficult to participate in the life of the church, she already lives an isolated life. Now her isolation is even more acute. Her TV is often on, tuned to the news channels, so she could easily be a bundle of anxiety. I have no doubt that she's lonely.

But instead of despairing, she said this to me: "Grace, Jesus is my best friend. I talk to him all day long. He's here in this house with me."

That right there is my prayer for each of us. May the wilderness draw us closer to God. May Jesus be your best friend. May he who is well acquainted with the

wilderness, who has already died and also overcome the power of death, be your closest companion.

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