

Rev. Julie Woodson and the Year of the 'TV Evangelist'

Rev. Julie Woodson had really hoped that this Christmas Eve she wouldn't have to be a TV evangelist – or, what was probably more accurate these days – an online evangelist.

When Rev. Julie Woodson was studying at theological college, she had sometimes imagined herself as a TV evangelist.

She had imagined millions of people tuning in to watch her, tuning in to see her smile her perfect smile, tuning in to hang on her every word about the love of God, tuning in order to get tuned into God's Spirit in their lives.

But, of course, Rev. Julie had only been imagining. She had never really wanted to be a TV evangelist.

What she had wanted to serve in a congregation, in a community, where she would get to know people, get to know faces and names and life stories, get to baptize babies and bless marriages, get to sit with people as they grieved, get to visit people in hospitals, get to lead worship on a Sunday morning when she could look out and see faces she knew, look out on a Sunday morning knowing that she would see familiar faces of familiar people sitting in their familiar pews.

But then the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived.

For long, long months, they had not been able to visit or even to gather in the sanctuary for worship...and so Rev. Julie, like so many of her colleagues in ministry, had become a TV evangelist.

Okay, not really a TV evangelist, but Rev. Julie, like other ministers, had accepted that the internet, not the sanctuary, had to be, at least temporarily, the 'place' for people to meet.

So, she had begun to record sermons. She had preached to a camera located above her laptop screen. She had recorded her weekly reflection, then watched it, wondering if she had smiled enough, frowning when she realized that she had stood too close to the camera and cut off the top of her head; or she had reached the end of the recording time and her finger had not found the stop button as quickly as she had wanted, so for what was only a few second but what seemed to be as long as a boring meeting, the camera caught her staring into it as her fingers began to more and more emphatically push at the wrong screen icon.

Not really a TV evangelist, she thought.

During this pandemic Rev. Julie had learned about programs and platforms she hadn't previously known existed. She had learned how to download and upload videos, how to share screens, how to schedule an online meeting, and other skills that she was sure that Jesus' original disciples had never learned; but then again, Rev. Julie had never learned how to turn water into wine.

Rev. Julie knew that her pandemic experience of technology was not unique. She constantly marveled and offered prayers of thanksgiving for the community's music team, who seemed to maintain enthusiasm and humour and devotion while weekly creating videos – playing, singing the hymns, recording and editing and – again- 'downloading' - when did that word become part of everyday language?

And then there were all the people who would never have watched a TV evangelist, but who had embraced the needed adjustments, who actually, inexplicably, looked forward to opening a weekly email, to reading about the life of the church, to clicking on links to Youtube videos of music and Rev. Julie's recorded reflections.

There were all the people who used to think Zoom was the sound a fancy sports car made and now they were Zoomers, worshipping and meeting as community online.

Oh, there were glitches – occasionally someone's finger accidentally brushed against the screen in the wrong place and ended up unsubscribing themselves from receiving the church's weekly emails. Then would come the phone call or the email and process of resubscribing – Rev. Julie smiled as she thought that 'resubscribing' was a contemporary example of what John the Baptizer called 'repentance' – undoing actions taken and turning again to a practice of God's presence in the world.

Rev. Julie realized that was probably a stretch, but she had been preaching to her own image on a laptop for over a year, so she figured she could cut herself some theological slack.

About two months ago, they had begun gathering again in-person for Sunday morning worship.

They had planned to gather this evening, this Christmas Eve – some would have gathered in the sanctuary and some would watch the service via a ZOOM link.

But that wasn't happening now. Just hours ago, the Council Executive had met via conference call to make the difficult decision to cancel the in-person service due to the Omicron variant that was rapidly spreading. Rev. Julie had received emails from several other congregations saying that they had also just decided to cancel their Christmas Eve in-person services.

So once again, Rev. Julie would be Rev. Julie, the online, the TV evangelist, trying to say something about this birth, this life of Jesus, this good news of God in the world that had a hold on their hearts and their imaginations and their hopes for this world; something of the gift of this holy night, the gift of God's love for all creation.

Once again, the online evangelist.

Although Rev. Julie did not consider herself to be technologically sophisticated, this week she had experienced a moment of technological victory.

It had occurred on the day she had been in the church office to receive donations being

dropped off for the community Christmas hampers.

Rev. Julie had been sitting at the office desk when the door opened and one of the staff from the upstairs nursery had looked in and asked, “Is your phone working? Our phone upstairs isn’t working?”

Rev. Julie glanced at the display window of the phone on the desk – the display window that should be illuminated and displaying digits and words.

Should be! But now it was a blank screen!

“Our phone doesn’t appear to be working either,” Rev. Julie replied.

Rev. Julie sat there for a few moments, looking at the phone, praying – well, praying if thinking, “What do I do? What do I do?” over and over again, could be considered praying.

Then it came to her. She could use her cell phone to phone Maurice. Maurice was a member of their Building and Property Team and he had been the one to set-up their current phone and internet system – a thought that led Rev. Julie to try accessing the internet on her phone. Her worst fear was realized – there was no internet service (she was aware that this was not actually her worst fear, but she suspected that in this day-and-age it might rate in her top 20!)

Maurice assured Rev. Julie that he would walk her through what needed to be done to fix the situation. He told her to go to the basement, into the mechanical/storage room near the kitchen, the room usually referred to as the ‘old elevator room’ because it was the room that had been accessed to service the old elevator, but the old elevator no longer existed, having been replaced in the church renovations with what was known as the new elevator. Rev. Julie thought that someday no one would even remember that there had been an old elevator.

The room was narrow and felt cramped. Maurice directed Rev. Julie to a series of shelves near the back of what was known as the old elevator room. He asked if she could see what looked like a computer tower sitting on the lower shelf. Rev. Julie looked. There was a computer tower sitting on the lower shelf. She figured that must be the thing that looked like a computer tower.

Maurice told her to look at the black box sitting on top of the tower and see if there was a light on. There wasn’t. Maurice directed Rev. Julie to press a button on the black box. The button was black. It was a black button on a black box. Rev. Julie was momentarily thankful for having recently upgraded her glasses prescription. She pressed the black button. No light appeared.

“Okay,” said Maurice. “Do you see a black box sitting on the shelf next to the tower and the black-box-that-is-on-top-of-the-tower?”

Rev. Julie thought, “Why are all these boxes black? Wouldn’t it be more aesthetically pleasing if they came in a variety of colours – and wouldn’t it be easier to distinguish

one black box from another black box if one black box was yellow?”

Maurice asked Rev. Julie to press a button on the front of the second black box. Not unexpectedly, the button was black.

Rev. Julie pressed the button. Suddenly, a small screen lit up on this black box. Rev. Julie felt a wave of exultation.

“Hold the button for a couple of seconds and then release it,” Maurice’s voice instructed.

Rev. Julie released the button, looked at the beautifully lit screen, and then saw the lit screen go blank and unlit.

When she told Maurice what had happened, he commented, “Obviously something isn’t working.”

“Obviously,” Rev. Julie thought to herself.

Maurice explained that Rev. Julie would have to get a power bar and then unplug every cord going into the back of the second black box and then plug all those cords into the new power source.

“Phone me back if that doesn’t work,” Maurice said.

Rev. Julie contorted her body to attempt looking at the back of the black box. There appeared to be about six black cords plugged into the back of the black box which had about six inches of clearance from the wall.

Rev. Julie became aware of the cramped space. She became aware that she had to perform a technical feat of rewiring based on verbal instructions received from afar. Suddenly, Rev. Julie thought of the scene in the movie “Apollo 13, when the CO2 filter in the space cabin malfunctioned, and Tom Hanks and Kevin Bacon and Bill Paxton had to use duct tape and the covers ripped off technical manuals to create a new filter by following voice instructions relayed from some technical person on earth.

“Okay,” thought Rev. Julie, “this is my Tom Hanks moment.”

She went upstairs to the office supply room, returning moments later with a power bar and long extension cord – which she was pleased to note was orange, not black.

Feeling her pulse slightly increase, Rev. Julie reached behind the black box, and, by touch, began pulling black cords out of the black box. She hoped the space capsule she was in didn’t go spinning into space. She briefly imagined people on the international space station looking out a portal and saying, “That looks like an old elevator room floating around out there.”

Rev. Julie plugged the cords into the power bar. She then looked around the old elevator room for a wall socket, only to discover that any wall sockets in the room were already in use.

“No problem,” she thought. “This is why I brought the orange extension cord.”

Rev. Julie plugged the power cord into the extension cord, then unwound the cord, left the old elevator room into the lower hall, and plugged the extension cord into an outlet in the hall.

She looked at the orange cord now trailing along the floor of the hall and under the door of the old elevator room.

‘What happens if someone unplugs this cord from the socket in the hall,’ she wondered. Rev. Julie suddenly experienced a moment of irrational concern – if someone unplugs this cord, then disaster will follow – the phones will go down, the internet will be lost, the church roof will begin to leak, Tom Hanks and crew will be lost in space, the second coming of Christ may begin....’

“Breathe,” Rev. Julie told herself. “All I have to do is attach a note to the cord saying Do not unplug’.”

She returned to the elevator room. This was the moment of truth. She turned on the power bar. She looked at the black box on top of the computer tower. The black box now displayed an illuminated green light.

Rev. Julie heard the whir of something mechanical coming to life. She raised her eyes to the top shelf, where she now saw several little green lights shining amidst a conglomerate of cords and wires. She pushed the power button on the computer tower. It also came alive!

Rev. Julie hurried back to the office. She looked at the phone. Its screen was now illuminated. She lifted the receiver to hear the welcome sound of a dial tone. She opened her laptop and pressed a few keys. Her laptop was again connected to the internet!

She had done it!! She texted Maurice. She was tempted to say, “Tom Hanks and crew can breathe again,” but she settled for, “It worked.”

Later in the day, as Rev. Julie thought about a message for Christmas Eve, she thought about those cords being unplugged and then plugged into an alternate power source.

We just had to change the power source, she thought. That’s what we’ve been doing for worship during COVID, she thought. We were used to gathering in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, but when we couldn’t do that, when we had to unplug from sanctuary worship, we had to connect in a different way – with emails, and recorded postings, and phone calls, and ZOOM gatherings, and mailed newsletters.

Maybe that’s what the story of the birth of Jesus is. Maybe that’s why we return to it every year, to return to an alternate source of power, an alternate story of this world.

We return to this story in order to unplug from the story of powerful weapons systems, unplug from economic systems and practices that leave millions hungry and desperate, unplug from indifference, unplug from despair....

And plug into an alternate story, a story with angels, and shepherds, and a manger, and a baby...

Plug into a story about God, about God who created this world, about God who loves this world, about God who reminds us that every child of God is to be loved; a story about God who in this Jesus will break bread and share food so that all can be fed; a story about this Jesus who will welcome the poor, those who limp, who can't see, those bound by fear and anxiety, Jesus who welcomes those whom no one else will welcome or even notice, Jesus who reminds us that we are loved and that God is still creating God's world to be a home of peace and compassion.

That is the story of this Christmas Eve, the story of the world realigning itself with the power of God's love, with the source of all life.

It's a story that assures us that, even in difficult times, even in these difficult times, we live in God's love.

It's a story, thought Rev. Julie, for TV evangelists and technological novices, it's a story for all the world..

...A story for all the world on this silent, this holy night...