

Sunday, June 14, 2026

Sermon: "EPOCH Apostles"

Matthew 9:35-38 NRSV/UE

Where we're heading in today's message: Is there a way to protect jobs from artificial intelligence.

The rise of artificial intelligence known as AI for short, is causing anxiety about the future of the workforce. Software developers are being affected because AI can solve problems and write programs. Three-quarters of software developers are currently using AI assistants.

"AI is the intern that never sleeps," said one CEO; "just feed it electricity instead of pizza."

Customer service is also vulnerable, according to the World Economic Forum. AI is good at using call, email and ticket data to help with responses and cut costs. A customer service center that employs 500 people might suddenly transform into one with 50 people working as AI oversight specialists.

Finance workers are also in the hotseat. AI is heavily involved in high-frequency trading, as it taps into vast amounts of data. In addition, many people worry that AI will eventually replace knowledge workers such as lawyers, writers and physicists.

If you want to find a safe haven, consider working in health care, education or construction. AI has not yet figured out how to give a shot or build a house.

But even if you fear AI, know that you have special power as a human being. Isabella Loaiza, a researcher at MIT, has found that there are many things that humans do very well, even better than machines. She grades these abilities by giving them an "EPOCH" score. "It's an acronym," reports NPR, that stands for "empathy, presence, opinion, [also known as ethical judgment] creativity, and a silent H, hope, the ability to plan and execute a vision."

Loaiza's belief is this: "High EPOCH jobs, ones that require more human skills, might be more resilient to AI."

Being a disciple of Jesus is a high EPOCH job, and these qualities protect us from anything that can hurt or destroy us. No AI existed when Jesus called his first followers, but there was plenty of opposition and persecution. Jesus gave his disciples the ability to survive and even thrive in the face of all kinds of difficulties.

He equipped them to be EPOCH apostles.

The gospel of Matthew says that Jesus traveled through all the cities and villages of Galilee, teaching in "synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness" (9:35). Two thousand years before the rise of AI, Jesus knew that the health care sector was a good one to be in!

As he prepared to send out laborers, he began to show his followers the power of a high EPOCH score. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless” (9:36). The E in EPOCH is empathy, and Jesus showed it in abundance. He had the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, and when he saw the distress of the crowds, he had compassion for them.

Compassion is such an important quality, according to Jesus. It comes from the Latin word *passio*, meaning “suffering,” and *com*, meaning “with.” Put the two together and you get “suffering with.” Jesus shows compassion towards the people around him, which means that he “suffers with” them.

Jesus had a sympathetic awareness of the distress of the crowds, combined with a strong desire to alleviate it. The same is true for anyone who wants to be a disciple. We need to show empathy and compassion, understand the feelings of others, and have a strong desire to ease their pain.

No machine can do this. Only a human being can earn an E for empathy.

Jesus summoned his 12 disciples and sent them out with the instructions, “Do not take a road leading to Gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6). The P in EPOCH is presence, and Jesus expected his followers to show this quality.

Jesus was clear that he wanted them to be present with a particular group of people - not with the Gentiles and not with the Samaritans, but with “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6). Jesus told them to “go,” which is why we call them apostles. The word apostle means “messenger” or “one who is sent forth.”

Jesus knew that the apostles could not be all things to all people. They had to focus on particular groups and particular individuals, if they were going to have an impact. The Gentiles and the Samaritans would receive ministry eventually, but not at this point.

To be present is to be up close and personal. To deliver care face to face, not from a distance. One of the great tragedies of the pandemic was that we were prevented from gathering in person, in some cases for over a year. Many churches turned to online worship and Zoom Bible studies, a move necessary for the short term but not a long-term solution.

We need to be part of a ministry of presence, up close and personal, if we are going to grow in faith and do the work of Christ in the world. The word church is defined quite simply as “assembly” or “gathering,” which reminds us that we need to gather to be effective. In the New Testament, the Greek for church is *ekklesia*, which literally means “the called-out ones” — a group of people who have been called out to a meeting. When you say you are going to church, you are really saying that you are going to an assembly, gathering and meeting.

Jesus commanded the apostles to perform a ministry of presence when he said, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons" (10:7-8). Good news and healing were delivered face to face, not from a distance. The apostles all earned a P for presence, and so should we.

Next comes O, which stands for opinion or ethical judgment. Humans are much better at this than machines, and they always will be. "Whatever town or village you enter," said Jesus, "find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town" (10:11-14).

Every follower of Christ must discern where to invest time and energy. We are constantly challenged to figure out what is worth doing and what is not, and to figure out where our efforts will be welcomed and where they will not.

Jesus knew that discipleship is relational, not transactional. The currency of ministry is not money; it is deep-spirited friendship. This is why Jesus said, "You received without payment; give without payment" (10:8). We need to enter trust-filled relationships with people in order to have an impact. We are challenged to make ethical judgments and have opinions, to demonstrate the O at the center of EPOCH discipleship.

We also need C, for creativity. "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts," said Jesus, "no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff" (10:9-10). Moving from town to town required faith and creativity, as the apostles trusted the people they met to give them food and whatever else they needed for life.

"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves," said Jesus, "so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16). The apostles had no plan except for the words of Jesus and no protection except for their wisdom and innocence. They were making it up as they went along, in an act of supreme faith and improvisation. They were EPOCH apostles who showed a big C for creativity.

Finally, they had H for hope. They shared the vision of Jesus and were focused on the coming of the kingdom of God, which had come near and was constantly leading them forward. The disciples were full of hope that the sick would be cured, and the dead would be raised. And they believed they had nothing to worry about when they were dragged in front of governors and kings because of Jesus. Do not be concerned about "what you are to say," promised Jesus, "for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it

is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (10:19-20).

EPOCH apostles always have an H for hope. They do not have to worry about the future, because they know that God is always working for good in their lives, even in times of opposition and persecution. They "will be hated by all because of my name," predicts Jesus. "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (10:22)

AI is certainly causing anxiety in the workforce. Upheaval will happen as jobs are lost or transformed. But our security as followers of Christ cannot be shaken, and the ones who endure will be saved. In every time and place, Jesus needs disciples who show empathy, presence, opinion, creativity and hope.

Our work as followers of Jesus can never be replaced, as long as we maintain our high EPOCH scores. Alleluia, Amen.