Remember The Luddites!

Considering the Price of Advancing Technology
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Given 07-Nov-20; Sermon #1569c

What do you think of when I say the word, "technology"? For some of us, it's all about computers, smart phones, and electric, self-driving cars. For others, it's about artificial intelligence and robotics. For my children, it's all about space travel. They have fallen in love with the 24th century as depicted on *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. Bill Onisick recently discussed digital currency, which, of course, depends upon advancing technology to implement.

All of us have been, are, and will be greatly impacted by advancing technology. Some people eagerly await each and every technological advancement, virtually worshipping at the altar of invention, while some would prefer we head back a couple hundred years or so to simpler times. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle.

And that leads me to my title today: Remember the Luddites!

Let me repeat that: Remember the Luddites!

Now, most of you are staring back at me with a puzzled look, so, let me explain.

From the website historic-uk.com, we learn that Luddites refers to a group of British weavers, clothiers, and textile workers, loosely organized in a secretive fashion beginning in 1811, around the idea that their industry was becoming over-mechanized—relying too much on technology rather than skilled manpower—which was a common theme throughout the Industrial Revolution. As highly trained artisans working mostly by hand, they saw the machinery used in the giant textile factories, often owned by unscrupulous and greedy men, as a threat to their livelihood.

For centuries, each generation of these skilled weavers and workers passed their special knowledge to the next, creating a secure lifestyle and a lasting legacy based upon a tradition of quality and hard work. As was far-too-common in this era—quoting from historic-uk.com—"the introduction of machinery not only superseded the need for handcrafted garments but also initiated the use of low skilled and poorly payed labourers in larger factories."

So, after unsuccessful attempts at negotiating more reasonable working conditions and terms with ownership, and after receiving no sympathy or support from the British government to redress their complaints, these frustrated and fearful workers took matters into their own hands.

About 30 years earlier, in 1779, the story goes that a young, disgruntled apprentice worker named Ned Ludd lost his temper in a dispute with management and destroyed a machine called a stocking frame while working in a textile mill in the city of Leicester. However, according to *Smithsonian Magazine*, no such person ever existed. Nevertheless, his legend was born and began to spread.

Fast-forwarding back up to 1811, we find ourselves in a time of great economic distress throughout England due to the Napoleonic Wars. It was then and there that the story (or perhaps the myth) of young Ned Ludd's "textile temper tantrum" found its way into Nottingham, where the aforementioned group of unhappy workers decided to turn the fictional Mr. Ludd into their symbolic leader. They proudly became the Luddites and convinced the world that old Ned was a real man. And they expressed their discomfort by secretly organizing late night raids in his name on the giant textile plants to destroy the great machines that were threatening the status quo and their way of life. In 1811 alone, hundreds of these modern machines were destroyed to protest what they believed were underhanded means to bypass the acceptable labor standards of the day.

The Luddite movement spread rapidly amidst the unhappy laborers of this distraught era, where mechanization increased the standard of living for owners and management, while wiping out the once-secure lifestyles of the hard-working artisan.

Soon, however, the Luddites were confronted with the full force of an unsympathetic government that was controlled by the wealthy owners of industry. Legislation was passed making machine destruction a capital offense, therefore punishable by death. Around 14,000 soldiers were strategically deployed, forcing the Luddites into a military battle they were not prepared for. Though the unrest intensified in the short term, many of the angry artisans were shot, captured, imprisoned, deported to Australia, or hanged. By 1816, the movement had essentially dissolved.

Though they failed to transform the garment industry of the early 19th century, they are credited with contributing to the eventual establishment of trade and labor unions, and ultimately improving worker conditions and pay for all laborers in the West.

What is peculiar is how their most lasting legacy is the modern usage of the word Luddite. Today, it is sort of a pejorative term for one who is totally opposed to any and all modern technology. But in fact, that is far from the truth. The Luddites were simply trying to prevent modernization from swallowing up and eliminating their way of life. Despite their inaccurate, modern reputation, the original Luddites were neither opposed to technology nor inept at using it. Many were highly skilled machine operators in the textile industry. Nor was the technology they attacked particularly new. Most of it, by 1811, had been around for decades. Moreover, the idea of smashing machines as a form of industrial protest did not begin or end with them.

From Kevin Binfield, editor of the 2004 collection, *Writings of the Luddites,*

> They just wanted machines that made high-quality goods, and they wanted these machines to be run by workers who had gone through an apprenticeship and got paid decent wages. Those were their only concerns.

So, it wasn't just the technology, but also the ideas behind its use.

Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle wrote extensively on the Industrial Age of the 18th and 19th centuries, which he referred to as the "Mechanical Age." He, like most of the people of that time, recognized the amazing potential

unleashed by the arrival and proper use of modern technology, but also feared that the great new mechanisms of the time were forcing society to change the way it thought and felt about the world at large. "Men," he said, "are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand."

The original Luddites, I think, would have agreed with Carlyle. And while we can't condone their violent methods, we can appreciate their very legitimate concerns. They weren't trying to halt the march of technology, but they were trying to hold onto a way of life, much like we are trying to do today in the face of rapid and overwhelming change, brought about not only by advancing technology, but also by the new social, political, and economic ideas—the modern philosophies that often surround new technology. The apostle Paul warns us to "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men."

When we take the time to study the Luddites' history, I believe we learn that it is possible to live happily with technology, but only if we are vigilant in recognizing—and insistent upon questioning— the manner in which we are willing to submit to it, and whether or not we should. I'm reminded of I John 2:17, where we learn not to "love the world or the things in the world."

Nor should we forget those among us, particularly the elderly, who naturally struggle with change. In this day and age, we should make it a priority to watch out for those who are more vulnerable to change, and easily intimidated by what we call "progress," or just feeling overwhelmed and left behind.

For the young, the savvy, and the strong, technology can—and often does—help, but as the Luddites were aware then, and so should we always be today, that help comes with a price. At times, that price can be very dear. Maybe not for you, maybe not for me—but someone, somewhere always has to pay. How can we always be certain that it's worth it?

Before you answer that question, perhaps you should take a moment to remember the Luddites.