

THE PORTICO OF SOLOMON

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton NB
April 25, 2010

It's been a busy week for all of us since we last gathered. I've been hearing stories in our congregation - great stories - of people helping each other. Not loudly, but just enough that the kindness of these actions have made their way to me. I've been motoring along, visiting a few people and catching up on those whom I need to see. Not always easy but I'm appreciative of people's patience as I slowly make my way around.

After the funeral yesterday, I came back to the church. I love the sounds of this church when it's busy, like it has been lately. I like the footsteps, the laughter, the shouts from one end of the hall to another, the steady stream of people who use our building, and the chaos that comes with it.

Yesterday, our UCW prepared 719 meals for delivery to the people around Moncton. 719! A huge amount of work, and their most successful Take-Out Supper yet. Brenda noted that it was the first time she had to tell people not to sell any more tickets, and the first time she saw so many people volunteer to help, that she actually had to send one person home!

I love the new faces of people relatively new to our congregation, working side by side with those who've been here for years. I said to Valerie and April Roy, "What a way to be spending a Saturday afternoon, eh?" and they both

replied that this was great. I have to say that when I was sitting in my office later on, we received a call from a woman who had called earlier looking for an extra meal that she didn't order. She said, "You must be getting complaints about the carrot cake? My daughter and I are extremely disappointed in it! It's too dry!" I said, "No, you're the first person to complain." After a week of dealing with life and death, and pastoral counselling, I wasn't feeling the most understanding of the carrot cake issue. I simply said, "Let me solve the problem for you: Don't order it next year."

By the way, the carrot cake was wonderful. I should know, I had two pieces. Wonderful, moist cake layered with icing on the top. I've spoken before about the many layers of scripture that are so important in the telling of the story. Isn't that the greatest segue you've ever heard in a sermon?

In many cases, the location of Jesus is just as important as the other written parts of the story. For the weeks before Easter, Jesus was teaching and healing around the countryside. He's outside of the spectrum of power - Jerusalem. He doesn't hold the attention of the authorities just yet, even though what he is doing is causing concern. He sets his face toward Jerusalem, and knows that when he goes there, he will die because of his acts towards those who had no power, no dignity, no kindness, or especially respect.

In each of these stories, we are told of signs that point towards who Jesus is, as opposed to what Jesus does. It is in John's Gospel that Jesus states, "I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the good shepherd." In other stories in the Gospel, Jesus takes

a child on his knee, indicating that children are at the heart of the kingdom of God.

In this story, Jesus is walking in the Portico of Solomon. It was basically a kind of porch, but not quite that because it wasn't the entrance to a building, but rather a long roof supported by many large beams made of stone. It was very deep, and rose very high. It is referred to three times in the New Testament, and in this moment Jesus is walking through it, seeking shelter in the winter, as people gathered around him. He is still outside the inner sanctum. He is not yet truly welcomed to the centre, where authority and truth lie. Jesus is never comfortable in that place. He is most comfortable with people who are specifically on the outside. He is most comfortable in the homes of people who have been unwelcomed, with people who have been judged, and with people who are by their very nature, excluded from God's love, not by God, but by the powers that be.

Sometimes I feel like I too am walking around the centre. Sometimes I feel that because I can't and won't accept the creeds and platitudes of a faith that means so much to so many, that I don't have a spiritual home. Sometimes I am scared that if you knew what I really believed on any given Sunday, or how much I really doubted, you wouldn't want me to be your minister any more. Since coming to Moncton, my ministry has been extended beyond all of you and into the neighbourhoods in which you live. Lately, more often than not, I have found myself in the living rooms, not of the faithful of St. John's, but of the unfaithful of the city who have long since let go of the church - the people who walk in

the portico of Solomon. I've listened to their stories of incidents that happened years ago. I've heard stories of people disliking ministers because of how they were once treated by such a person. I've heard of the broken hearts and broken faith of people who could never believe in a God that would let something happen to them as bad as that. I had a humorous experience yesterday as I presided at the funeral of a woman who wanted very little religion at her service when she died. At the end of the funeral, we were supposed to hear a song by Rod Stewart over the speakers called, "I Wish You Love." Instead, as we all stood there as the funeral home people rolled out the ashes, we heard Rod Stewart singing, "Darling You Send Me," which was rather appropriate, given the circumstances. The woman's husband found it particularly funny.

The church's goal in the year 2010 isn't to save the souls of those who aren't here, but rather we seem to be scrambling to save our own. "You do not believe, because you do not belong," says Jesus, rather matter of factly.

You do not believe, because you do not belong. That sentence haunts me. Why is it that people no longer belong? Let's be honest and forth coming. The church has failed. Have we ever. Even here at St. John's, we've known more than a few bust-ups over the year that had less to do with religion and more to do with people.

You do not believe, because you do not belong. Sometimes people no longer belong because they can't take the politics any more. They can't take the crankiness of church, nor can they abide by the little power struggles that are so

insignificant in the greater scheme of things. People can't swallow a God who is almighty, all knowing and all powerful anymore because, let's be honest, God hasn't been any of those things for a very long time.

There's the story from holocaust Elie Wiesel that I often think of and talk about to illustrate my point. In his book, "Night," he tells how, at 14, he was taken to the death camps in the spring of 1944. They traveled by train for 3 days, eighty people in each cattle truck. Arriving at Auschwitz, men and women were segregated. Elie never saw his mother or sister again. He wrote: "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget those flames which murdered my God and my soul, and turned my dreams to dust."

One day the guards made them watch as they hanged a boy among some men. Wiesel recalled just before the hanging someone behind him whispered, "Where is God? Where is he?" It took the boy half an hour to die.

Behind Elie the same voice asked, "Where is God now?" and a voice inside Elie said, "Where is he? Here, hanging on this gallows."

Wiesel was saying that God was dead, powerless to help. The Holocaust made him rebel against God for allowing people to be starved, tortured, butchered, gassed, burned.

Something changed the Professor of Humanities at Boston University, for Wiesel's speech included, "Rooted in our tradition, some of us (at Auschwitz) felt that to be abandoned by humanity was not the ultimate. We felt that to be

abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one. Man can live far from God, but not outside God. God is wherever we are."

The room filled with emotion. Elie then asked, "Even in suffering?" and quietly added, "Even in suffering."

He used the word "impudent" to describe his belief in God. "God is our judge, but we also judge God." He said God wants us to argue with him. He said we should pray to God, and pray for God, and said God needs our compassion. God is the most tragic and alone figure in the Bible.

Jesus challenged people's very notion of God when he walked this earth many years ago. And we're still trying to figure it out today. Yet, despite a kind of Christianity that is supposed to transform who we are and how we live, we still get upset about what colour the carpet should be in a church. Someone I don't know and have never met, wrote me an email a few days ago saying that he had read our website and was spiritually thirsty, but he was ready to give up on the church. He had been going to a church and had been enjoying a new group when two of its members were given an ultimatum. Get married, or get out. He was devastated by this because he thought it didn't matter – they were good people. I shared in his dismay.

This is where all of you fine people come in. I believe that people's image of church and faith can change. I have a firm, proven belief that if all of us can represent a different kind of church, and a different kind of belief, people will believe,

precisely because they feel like they belong. St. John's is becoming that place. St. John's is becoming that church.

When I meet you on the street, my hope is lifted. The energy within you reflects and echoes within me to remind me of the God I most often do love, and reminds me of the faith within me that is so pronounced when I am among all of you. Left on my own, I probably wouldn't have much faith. Yet when I am here among you, talking with these children, and sharing in all of our stories, I sense something greater at work. That is why this church is so important to me. Each week I am reminded of the people who have felt excluded by church, or by religion, and I am tempted to go sit with them in their unbelief, rather than find a place where everyone is expected to believe the exact same thing all the time. This place, for me, is very much like the Portico of Solomon. We don't have to be in the inner sanctum to walk with Christ here. But we do have to walk.

Each week, for some reason or another, I find myself walking through this impressive sanctuary. I am automatically drawn to the window behind me, the window of the shepherd. The one who holds a sheep; the one, who with a hook, can grab onto us and pull us back to the centre of our being. The sheep who just sits there and eats grass, like some of us; the sheep held in the arms of Christ, like some of us; and the ones who look up at him, not sure what to believe, like some of us. That shepherd's hook brings us to the place where we can realign ourselves.

“Psychologically, "sheep" refers to that aspect of a person that instinctively is able to hear the shepherd's voice and separate

the truth from falsehood. The early church father, Origen, said that sheep represent our irrational and instinctual nature. This aspect of our psyche needs guidance, but also has the ability to separate the "true shepherd" from the false one. The sheep not only hear the true shepherd's voice, but they also follow, as the true shepherd leads the way into eternal life in the future, and abundant life." (Via an online article)

Last night, I was stopped by a mountie on Ayer Avenue who told me that it was time to change my winter tires. My friends, it is time to change the tires of our faith.

I want to end with this because every so often Psalm 23 comes up in our readings, and I've truly lost the ability to think creatively about it anymore. The most powerful imagery I can draw from it is that about which Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book about this Psalm. He makes the point that in the original Greek, the word "follow" is more closely aligned with the word "pursue." "Surely goodness and love shall follow me/pursue me all the days of my life." It's a wonderful image. In today's world, we're given the impression that if you work hard enough, good things will come to you. Not so, says the psalmist. In God's way, goodness and love are coming for you, like a mountie in a way, and they will catch you.

This is our faith, our belief, and our hope.

Peace be with you all.