

# ***THE SPIRITUAL BELL***

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard  
at St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB  
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Growing up in Sydney Mines, we still had the division between the Catholic school and the “other” school for the Protestants. My first introduction to Lent came by way of Sister Clarie, who one day came to class wearing a cross on her forehead. She explained that it was Ash Wednesday. I had never heard of it, but it initiated a life-long fascination with the Catholic Church. Sister Clarie had a unique way of imposing discipline on her class. For example, in a time when the Price is Right was on in the evening, she told us that we all had to be in bed by the first spin of the wheel. How awful to not know what people won in the end! She also carried with her a wooden spoon, kept safely in her purse. She said that if we didn't behave we would ‘get’ the wooden spoon, which had a hole in it so it would ‘go faster’!

In true Maritime style, Ash Wednesday was cancelled because of a snow storm. To be honest, I've always thought the Anglicans and the Catholics do a better job at Lent than we do in the United Church. They would always wear a cross of ashes on their forehead, whereas I was just as fine having it on my hand. There's something about having a cross on your forehead that seemed too pious and unnecessary for me, when it came to religion. But I knew it meant something to them. I knew that people gave up chocolate or alcohol, and then later someone told me that Lent wasn't about ‘giving something up,’ but that it should be about ‘taking something on,’ so some people started to eat more chocolate and drink more

alcohol! Some people really start to exercise, or do more volunteering.

It just so happened that this past Ash Wednesday, I found myself serving food. At point, I didn't get enough desserts out onto the table, which didn't go unnoticed by a young man who said, "You're supposed to put the desserts out here so we can see them." The politician beside me said, "He put you in your place..." to which I replied, "I'm used to it, I work in a church!"

There's not a lot of conversation in the soup line, I noticed. One man with whom I spoke was quiet. In a conversation with him, I learned that he drives in from Salisbury twice a week for a meal. I learned that some people there weren't really hungry at all, but liked the price tag, and others who were there were starving. I also noticed that, just like at our house, broccoli salad isn't a popular menu item!

The Kitchen has been using the term "Celebrity Chefs" in recent weeks to bring attention to the cause of the poor in our city. The Moncton Wildcats, local chefs, clergy, business people, and many more have shown up to scoop food onto plates and hand it to people in need. This past week, both the Mayor and the Premier were in this building advocating for the good work that happens here.

Poverty knows no limits. Being served in line were toothless old men who joked about salad dressing, and hopeless young people who, more often than not, chose not to make eye contact. There is no room for ego in that place where most people have very little. I smiled when one of the people looked at the Mayor and said, in reference to the celebrity

chefs, “Who are you supposed to be?” to which he smartly replied, “I’m George.”

People hunger for so many things, food being one of them, when one hasn’t eaten for a long time. The Biblical word is ‘famished.’ But there are other kinds of hunger. We also hunger for dignity and respect. We hunger for justice and peace and fulfilment of purpose. Yet, the power of hunger can be insidious. It goes deeper inside of us in a small voice that tells us we need something, which we really don’t need. I read somewhere this past week that if everyone on earth lived the way we do here in North America, it would take six planets to sustain us all.

There’s something about Lent that captures a part of my imagination. In many ways, I’m not ready to throw it out just yet as an antiquated concept that has no place in the modern church. If anything, it may speak louder to us than ever before through the beeps and clicks of our daily lives.

I was thrilled when we finally achieved a wireless internet connection so we could use technology in more ways at the church. I told one of our more technologically minded members that he could have the password when he was here on Sundays, and he said, “Aaron, I come to church to get away from that stuff!”

Somehow, the early Christians, and all of us, have found a way to combine the words ‘comfortable’ and ‘Christian,’ says Barbara Brown Taylor. We have purposely avoided the wilderness moments of life. She writes, “The wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus, for instance.

How did he end up there? The Spirit led him.

What was he full of? He was full of The Holy Spirit.

What else did he live on? Nothing.

How long was he there? Weeks and weeks.

How did he feel at the end? He was famished.

What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? It *freed* him - from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose - from hungry cravings for things with no power to give him life, from any illusion he might have had that God would make his choices for him.

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites, but he also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there, to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else.” (*From the sermon “Wilderness Exam,” 2010*)

Wilderness places are often very different from the sand-filled hot desert where Jesus walked. For some people, wilderness places look like a room filled with flowers and a casket; for others, it can be the time just after the end of a relationship or the death of a spouse; it’s the hospital waiting room where there is no hope to be found; it’s that place where you suddenly are, yet didn’t choose to be. You’ve been flung into it.

Part of the wilderness experience is that it is there where we learn what we are truly capable of. We learn of strengths we didn’t realize we had, and we zoom in on our greatest needs and weaknesses.

Richard Swanson writes, "Luke did not imagine pitchforks, horns, pointy tails, or the red long-johns that you see in cartoon devils" (*Provoking the Gospel of Luke*). No, it might be

closer to imagine a seductive voice offering very "good" things to Jesus - an attractive strategic plan for his ministry.

More than one writer even suggests that the tests come from deep within Jesus himself, hungry and alone and wondering: N.T. Wright tells us, "The story does not envisage Jesus engaged in conversation with a visible figure to whom he could talk as one to another: the devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head."

You could argue that the dialogue of temptation is not external, it comes from within. We like to blame advertisers, big businesses, and celebrities for all our problems; however, it's what is inside of us that manifests itself in other ways, not because of something we saw on a commercial. Though, without a doubt, advertising can help us along, and some of it is terribly inappropriate, such as marketing to our children and teenagers things they specifically don't need. And the image of Jesus being hurled off the top of the temple, only to be caught by angels, would certainly do wonders for church attendance, I'm sure. Yet even unplugging from the world won't make God's voice any clearer; but, there are distractions that keep us from our purpose.

Just as the voice of temptation comes from within, so too does the voice of God. Sometimes the spiritual bell inside of us is rung by a small child. Last week, as I was leaving the house, I told Allie to be good for mommy; and she yelled back, "Ok Daddy, be good for yourself!"

What are the children in your life saying? Sometimes, the spiritual bell within us is rung by stopping what we are doing right where we are, and looking around and taking in God's green earth. Sometimes the spiritual bell within us is rung by

the person who comes to you in need because life just isn't fair (and is sometimes cruel), and the ringing of that bell compels you to go easier on yourself, and not try to be superhuman every day. The ringing of that bell reminds you that the earth, and everything that walks upon it, belongs to God, and we must not only marvel at it, but protect it as well. The ringing of that bell means that when a need comes before you, you are to try and meet that need, and if you can't, pray for that person.

Most of us here today would say that we are living as good a life as we can, and that we're doing our best with what we have. The call of Lent, which is an English word meaning "Spring" isn't simply about denial. "But if you have spent a lot of time and/or money trying to acquire whatever it takes to grow your soul without seeing any new buds, then maybe a little spell in the wilderness is worth a try - a few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more - of practicing subtraction instead addition - not because your regular life is bad, but because you want to make sure it is your *real* life - the one you long to be living - which can be hard to do when you're living on fast food and busyness..;" (*BBT*) and it takes time. There are no instant results. But there can be some good that comes from it.

I'm going to suggest a small spiritual discipline for all of you this Lenten season. No matter where you find yourself, whatever room you are sitting in, be it a meeting room, a classroom, in a cubicle, in a car, in your apartment, walking down the street, sitting at the rink, in a restaurant, walking in a mall, or at the hospital, pray for the people around you. Pray for the person beside you. It doesn't have to be brilliant; just a prayer for that person's heart, and for their needs.

I started doing this a couple of years ago, and the exercise does three things: First, it directs your positive thoughts and lifts that person before God. Second, it gets you beyond yourself to think about someone else. And third, if you're sitting in a mall and you would rather be any place else on earth, it takes that stress away and makes you think about something else, thereby decreasing your blood pressure! (I'm joking about the third one.)

Years ago, I heard a story told by former Moderator, Angus MacQueen, who told of a minister in Port Hawkesbury going to visit a member of his congregation. After his visit with the couple, he asked if he could read a few passages of scripture from their Bible. They gave it to him, and it was covered in dust. He admonished them for obviously not reading their Bible, when the husband spoke up and said, "Oh the Bible we read is in the living room. That's the Bible we use when the minister comes to visit."

A friend of mine, who just might be the holiest person I know, is in her 80s. She walks with God, talks with God, prays hard, gives thanks, and basically opens herself to the spirit pretty much all the time. For someone like me, who tends to worry about little things, constantly debates theology in my own head, and gets withdrawn when I'm stressed, she is refreshing. As you can imagine, she's wonderful to talk with. She has a method of reading the Bible that I think is perfect, and I'd like to share it with you as something you can do daily over the next six weeks of Lent. Her method was to just open the Bible at random, and to start reading where you find yourself. Just read and read until you come to a line or a thought that makes you pause and reflect. Maybe you don't

have time every day, and it's just one more thing - but even once a week just for a few moments will work.

I admire her faith, and I admire the faith of the Psalmist. And then I wonder why I can't have such a faith:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." Because you have made the LORD your refuge, and the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

One of the things that stand out for me is that the things Jesus is being offered are actually pretty good: to turn a stone to bread so he can eat; to have control over an area where people are routinely punished and brutally oppressed; and the chance to prove that no matter how far you fall, you will be caught by angels. You can see how those things would appeal to Jesus. Our wilderness tests will be different from Jesus' experience. We all have different devils tempting us from within.

May each of you have some holy experiences this Lent as we lead up to the celebration of Easter. The deeper we go with this, the more meaningful that day will become.