

# *Prepare to Meet Thy God*

A sermon preached by Aaron Billard at  
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB  
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The streets of Moncton have been pretty slippery over the past number of weeks. Lots of people were commenting that it was hard to cross the street as a pedestrian because people were driving so fast. I've noticed that there is about a ten-second wait at a cross-walk before people will stop their vehicle and let you cross the street. It occurred to me that what Moncton might need are a few more signs like the one I saw on Christmas Eve when I was driving to Cape Breton. It said, "Prepare to meet thy God." Of course, I slowed down because I wasn't prepared at that particular moment. But it was a nice reminder from the Gospel Hall to slow down. Of course, we could change the stops signs to say, "It's time to pray," and green lights could flash the message, "Go ye forth and multiply."

There's no way to predict when we'll meet God. None of us, as far as I know, have had the ghost-guided tour of the future that Scrooge had when he learned of not only how he dies, but also what people really think of him. Predicting the future isn't something any of us are very good at, yet we hear time and time again from people attempting to look into the future to see what interest rates will be, what real estate is doing, and even if we have love coming for us this year. This past week, newsman Tom Young, on the talk radio here in Moncton, spoke with a psychic who told the story about Prime Minister MacKenzie King who often consulted psychics and even spoke with his dead mother on a regular basis. He consulted his Irish terrier dogs about political decisions.

I want you to know that I wrote several jokes here about who Prime Minister Stephen Harper consulted in order to decide to

prorogue parliament, but I have decided not to share them so as not to be seen as being too political from the pulpit!

The truth is that we can't predict what kind of year we will have at St. John's. Over the past year, I've appreciated the number of times we came together as a congregation. I think the past year has been one unlike any other here at the Church, which isn't something we can always say. Some years have gone by exactly the same as the year before, while others have generated energy among us.

What has your own past year been like personally? Were their successes and failures? Heart breaks and personal achievements that allowed you to become more than you were?

There are few times in life when we really take inventory of what is going well and what isn't - and we should really take the opportunity to do it.

Two of my favourite moments last year were our congregational parties, one in the winter and one in the spring. Let's face it: we work hard as a church. We see indications of growth, and we are thankful for everyone who comes together to make this place what it is; and this year will be no different. We are having a winter party to share in what it means to be St. John's. Last year, we filled up quick so make sure you sign up early, and everyone is welcome.

Several years ago I heard a lecturer explain that Christianity thrived during its beginning years because of two factors: first, the brilliantly designed road and highway system of the Roman Empire; second, the language of the New Testament, which was Greek - the language of the common people. Both things are crucially true, but there is a deeper truth: the church grows and the gospel spreads because of the Spirit of the living God.

This Sunday, as we contemplate sacrament and baptism, where do we feel the Spirit of God?

We had an email this past week from a woman I don't know, and she was wondering what it was that I really believed. I wrote her back, and tried to say in writing what I felt in my heart. It's hard to do, and it was a fruitless exercise, but she did ask. When she wrote back, she gave me the third degree on religion and why I should believe what she believed, with scripture quotes and all. It reminded me of the time in my first church when a Bible-carrying woman stood at the door while I was shaking hands, and she anointed me with the Spirit, or at least I think that's what she did. It happened so suddenly I didn't know what to do but to stand there as she placed her hand over my heart and started to pray. Or, like the time the older couple I visited put their hands on my head as I was about to leave and prayed for the Spirit to descend on me. When people are speaking in tongues, it's hard to tell them that you didn't wash your hair that day.

Yet I do believe there are holy moments. There are definite moments in life when the heavens open up and we sense our connection to God, or to the holy, or to the world around us. We all feel those things differently, yet we have all felt them.

One of the commercials that got on my nerves a bit this past Christmas was the car commercial which shows one woman holding an appliance next to her embarrassed husband, as she stares out the window at the neighbours across the street, who were hugging next to a car wrapped in a red bow. While they may be nice, those aren't the holy moments. The holy moments are when you hold your child for the first time in your arms. The holy moments are when you have a vision of clarity about how to change something in the world for the better. The holy moments are when you are at the lowest point of your life and yet you choose to live.

Frederick Buechner is often very helpful to us when we are thinking of words that we use in church, like *sacrament* or *baptism*. Frederick Buechner says this: “A sacrament is when something holy happens.”

But, in order for that to happen, we must die to something within ourselves. Whether it is a long held truth or belief, whether it is an anxiety that we carry, whether it is a mark of pride, or whether it is a lie we tell our selves. It is any number of things that can either be painful or joyful. It can be an easy release or a slow burn. Yet, when it happens, something holy happens too - we are a new creation. When we breathe in, as if for the first time, we look around and see a new world around us. We may laugh, or we may cry. Our heart may be calm or it may race fast. But there is something different.

In one of her last sermons, the late Dana Ferguson wrote, “Thing is, at least in my own life, holy moments are few and far between. That is the very crux of why we come to this place each year, year after year after year: to live again the story that tells us so strongly that before something new can be born, something old must die. Sometimes it happens incrementally in our life - a dying of happiness as we had defined it, so that a new vision of happiness might live, the dying of an ineffective turmoil in our lives so that a new way of living in peace might be born. Whatever it is, these moments of death and rebirth happen over and over again in our lives, bringing us closer and closer to God’s intent in our life.”

What is God’s intent for your life in this coming time? No one can tell the future, but it does belong to God. As faithful people, all we can do is live out our baptism, because God loves us. “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” is what we all once learned; and it’s never too late to learn it again. When we do these things, Jesus says, we see God’s kingdom.

Prepare to meet thy God.