

THE DESERT ALWAYS WAITS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
June 27, 2010

*The desert always waits,
ready to let us know who we are -
the place of self-discovery.*

*And whilst we fear, and rightly,
the loneliness and emptiness and harshness,
we forget the angels,
whom we cannot see for our blindness,
but who come when God decides
that we need their help;
when we are ready
for what they can give us.*

Ruth Burgess, "Bread of Tomorrow"

I used to torture myself about religion. I had a thousand questions. I would sit for hours with anyone just to talk about it. Whether it was sitting in a manse with a minister as a teenager, or wandering off on a Friday night to see if there were any professors at Baptist seminary at Acadia University, which was just down the hill from my residence. I've spent time talking with military chaplains, Student Christian movement leaders, and with friends. I learned along the way that no one had the answers. But what they could do was to show me a map. I'm thankful for these many followers of Jesus, the angels of faith, who spent time with me in my anxiety over the years.

One of the great spiritual pilgrims of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton, said that in a way our discovery of God is God's discovery of us. God comes to us from heaven and finds

us and looks into us and, seeing us, gives us a new being in which we may discover God. (*Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 41)

I'm not sure when I first discovered God. I know people had told me stories about God. I knew people who went to church, as we did, and God seemed to be a very real presence in people's lives. But I can't describe the moment when I first became aware of God. But there was a moment when my own soul reached out, and was met by that Presence. And it changed me. It didn't make me different from everyone else, but, it did help me to see things differently.

Following God.

The Hebrew scriptures describe it differently, though. I've done five burials this past week. Inevitably, people will always ask for Psalm 23 to be read. I don't mind. After all this time in ministry, I find something new in it most of the time. Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote that in the original translation of "surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life" the word "follow" was more closely aligned with the word "pursue." As if goodness and love are following us.

I'm not sure how the translation works here in the Gospel, but let's forget grammar for a moment and follow that line of thinking. After all, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and people in the area also spoke Hebrew. The scriptures were read in the Synagogue by the Rabbis and educated leaders – as people listened. These stories told by Jesus were retold for approximately eighty years after he died before they were recorded in Mark's Gospel. After they were written down in Hebrew or in Greek, they were then retold from those pages, shared with other communities as word spread and soon Matthew and Luke's communities (using many of Mark's stories, and changing them sometimes in order to fit their own communities) began their own Gospels. John came even later. The Bible was translated twice into English before King James I authorized his own translation, which he told scholars to reflect the beliefs of the Church of England. It's the

Bible most people in this congregation grew up with, and to this day some think it's the only version that should be read as if it were written by Jesus himself. When you read the story of how it came to be, I'm not so sure of that!

So, what if we applied Rabbi Kushner's take on Psalm 23 and applied it to Jesus' own command to "follow me"? What if that 'follow' was more aggressive – pursue me. Pursue my teachings. Search for the authentic Christ in your life and in the life of your community? What if you and I pursued Christ in such a way that we read our Bibles a little more, acted a little more like the stories within, and saw Christ in everyone? What if it meant looking for Christ in the books we read, in the movies we watch, in the art we contemplate, as we sit on the beach, as we eat our meals and have conversation?

When I was first ordained, I ended up playing a lot of cards for two reasons: there was no TV hook up at the manse, and I lived alone. Many of my evenings were spent at other people's homes. Despite my father forbidding card playing on Sundays, each Sunday night after church in the summer, I would go visit with a woman by the name of Kay (who was in her 80s at that time) in Marble Mountain. She would cook me supper and teach me how to play crib. She knew the way to my heart! One thing I did notice, though, that it was about fifty games of crib together before I really started to learn her story. As I became known as a good crib partner, I had more invites into members of my congregation's homes. It became my way into their lives, and their way into my life. If I had a particularly good hand, Kay would look under the table, "just checking to see if you have hooves." Because of memories like that, whenever someone asks me to play Crib with them, I smile and say, "I'd love to."

The Bible says faith is hearing the voice, the call of Christ, and stepping out onto the road and following. It's not how we define faith usually, but it is there from the very beginning. That, the

Bible says, is what faith is. It's a matter of getting up from where you are and following.

In a recent interview, Barbara Brown Taylor observed that she had been “brought up with a definition of faith as ‘adherence to a set of beliefs’ but now she says, she is redefining faith as ‘openness to truth’ whatever truth turns out to be.” If faith is adherence to a set of beliefs, we can draw a line between those who are in and those who are not, those who believe and those who do not, those who can and those who can't. If faith is adherence to a list of beliefs, we can struggle with those beliefs and set ourselves to the challenge of finally working our way to a position of intellectual agreement. Or we can tell ourselves that we don't belong in church because we can't affirm all the beliefs. And we can have a fine old time arguing and fighting one another about whose list of beliefs is the real and authentic one and which is watered down, heretical. We've made a game of it for 2,000 years, and we're still at it.

But we do need to remember that it all begins not with a list of beliefs to adhere to, not with a creed, but with a voice saying, “Follow me.” It begins not with a theological examination but with a summons: “Follow me.”

Maybe the decision to follow came after a lot of struggling and hoping and doubting. That's the way it is for most of us, I believe. We don't know. All we know is that for them faith begins when they hear a voice, a summons, and decide to get up and follow. In the meantime, once in a while we find ourselves in a spiritual desert. It's then, the Gospel suggests, that we should just keep walking. For sometimes, along the path comes one who looks at us and says, “Follow me.” And we are never left the same.

As Eugene Peterson said: “Jesus is our way to God, but at the same time Jesus is God's way to us.” (*The Jesus Way*, p. 37.)

May each of you have a blessed summer. We'll see you back here at St. John's in August.