

Everyone Wants Free Parking

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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Though it is still only Lent, my mind has been swirling around thinking about Lazarus - my favourite story to read at a funeral. It might be because of the number of funerals we have had lately. If I have too many in a row I tend to obsess about death; just ask my wife. In these thoughts of the story of Lazarus, who is brought to life in a tomb, I was recently thinking about a book that a member of our congregation, Sarah Lesperance, now Dr. Sarah Lesperance, loaned me, called "Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers" by Mary Roach. I immediately appreciated the fact that Sarah thought that I should read that book, and I appreciate how Mary Roach visits the good deeds of cadavers over the centuries. Using humour and storytelling, Roach tells the fascinating story of our bodies when we are no longer with them. Fortunately for Lazarus, he was given a get-out-of-jail-free card.

When Sarah handed me another book after church one Sunday a few months ago, I was curious. I read the cover, "The Year of Living Biblically" written by A. J. Jacobs. I had heard of the book, but passed over it (to borrow a phrase) because it didn't grab my attention. One day, as I was waiting for someone to come and visit me at the office, I picked up the book and started to read it. The book is about the quest of the author to live the ultimate Biblical life, though not as you may think. It's not a moral quest Jacobs follows; however, it's more to do with the rules and commandments as set forth by God through the prophets and Biblical writers over generations. He tried, as best as possible, to follow every single rule in the Bible, even the one about eating crickets.

Jacobs comes clean from the beginning: his background may be Jewish, but his family never practiced. As an agnostic, Jacobs wasn't expecting to herd sheep in Israel, or hold a pigeon egg, or find solace in prayer, or hear Amish jokes from the Amish. He didn't expect to confront just how flawed he was, and he didn't expect to find such strange things in the Bible. And he also didn't expect to take refuge in the Bible and rejoice in it. His new favourite curse words are: Fudge, sugar, and shoot, which I expect many of you will be saying during the Olympic hockey game this afternoon between Canada and the USA! He has been to church services with snake handlers, a fundamentalist mega-church Bible study, a gay evangelical group, an evening of dancing with Jewish men, and a circumcision among many other things. One day in Jerusalem, he was walking past a dozen brown-robed Friars, who were walking past a family of Orthodox Jews, as the Muslim call to prayer was heard over the loudspeakers: All three Abrahamic faiths intersecting on the same street.

As a minister reading the book, I found it extremely funny in parts, like the time AJ decided he should stone someone. He writes, "The Hebrew Scriptures prescribe a tremendous amount of capital punishment. Think Saudi Arabia, multiply Texas, and then triple that." In the Bible, it has a whole list of people you should kill. You could be killed for murder, adultery, blasphemy, breaking the Sabbath, and perjury among others. One day, he gathered a handful of small white pebbles from Central Park and went looking for victims. He decided that he would start with Sabbath breakers. Now while he was doing this, AJ was dressed in a white robe with tassels, sandals and a wooden walking stick, because the Bible says you should wear such an outfit. A man in his mid-seventies saw AJ and insulted him. AJ told him why he was wearing it, and that he was stoning adulterers. The man said he was one, and so AJ threw some stones at his chest, which bounced off, and the man in his seventies said he was going to

punch AJ right in the kisser. As AJ wrote, ‘He had just threatened me using corny Honeymooners dialogue.’”

The book is also poignant in parts. AJ and his wife Julie are having trouble conceiving a child, and he wonders about what the Bible thinks about their invitro-fertilization? He becomes closer with a neighbour who suffers from loneliness among other things; and he sees parts of himself that he doesn’t like, and other parts of his life for which he becomes deeply thankful.

AJ decided to spend three quarters of the year living in the Hebrew Scriptures and the remaining third of the year living in the New Testament. He also found a group of supporters who were Rabbis, Ministers, and Priests, some of them were conservative, and some were one four-letter word away from excommunication. One of them is a retired Lutheran minister who refers to himself as a “pastor out to pasture”, and another is the Rabbi at one of Brooklyn’s largest synagogues, named Andy Bachman. Rabbi Bachman told AJ about Midrash, which is a story, or a legend that isn’t in the Bible itself, but deals with Biblical events and comes from the past. He told him a midrash about the parting of the sea.

“We all think of the scene in the Ten Commandments movie with Charlton Heston, where Moses lifted up his rod, and the waters rolled back. But this midrash says that’s not exactly how it happened. Moses lifted up his rod, and the sea did not part. The Egyptians were closing in, and the sea wasn’t moving. So a Hebrew named Nachshon just walked into the water. He waded up to his ankles, then to his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders; and right when water was about to get up to his nostrils, the sea parted. The point is, sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in.”

Many of you here today are here because you too are seeking something a bit deeper in life. Your quest may not be to live Biblically, as AJ did, but to seek mystery and faith. So here you are. Today’s Gospel story is one in which we just need to jump

in. It is actually quite sad, and it speaks for itself. It's the image of Jesus grieving for the city of Jerusalem. Of how he has tried to gather its people together, like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Beautiful imagery. There is something about the image of Jesus crying over the place where he is about to be betrayed. This story is profound and beautiful. These stories are compelling when we think of God at work in our lives. As someone said, "This is a deeply troubling story that is deeply true." It's the moment when Jesus could have turned back yet chose to go forward into the place that kills prophets. But, there is no turning back.

It's that moment of decision that I most appreciate about this story. He has to go forward. Try as we may to live a life of faith, and prayer, and belief, not one of us is perfect. But we must go forward in faith: live it, breathe it, think about it, study it, and take part in it, whether or not we know what we believe. Faith cannot stand alone with a book. It needs to be put into practice.

At the end of the day, when I take my collar off, I'm not going to kneel in prayer and read the Psalms. I'm going to watch the hockey game and pray that Canada wins in a comfortable two-goal lead over the Americans! Try as we may, when we walk towards the cross and the suffering of this world, we will be detoured by any number of distractions that come our way too, and faith won't be among them. Yet ours is the Lord of life, whose wings will gather us on the way, and pull us back to the path we should be walking rather than the one that is the most comfortable and desirable, because that's what faith does. And despite what your inner voice says to you about not being worthy, not being holy enough, or good enough, or anything enough, the wing will come behind your back and pull you forward into goodness. That is a promise of faith. But we have to live it.

The Christian writer, C. S. Lewis said that the distinction between pretending you are better than you are beginning to be

better in reality is finer than moral sleuthhounds conceive.” Meaning, pretending to be better than you are is better than nothing. Whether or not you do something because the Bible tells you to, or because you really want to, doesn’t really matter. Putting it into practice is what counts.

One of the comments Jacobs made at the end of his year of living Biblically, his life was changed in ways big and small. He is much more grateful than he used to be. And it also made him a better person. In Ecclesiastes, it says that our clothes should always be quite, so he wears more white clothing, which makes him feel more spiritual. As he says, “How can I be in a bad mood if I look like I’m about to go play the semi-finals at Wimbledon?” He and his wife also joined a synagogue to give his sons a basis in religion, so that they’ll know what they are accepting or rejecting, something he never had. He also toned down his individualism because the smallest unit of society in Biblical times was the family or tribe.

Last week, that clicked for me too. In my own little world, where I always have to have certain CDs in the car, a cup of tea in the morning (I’ve given up coffee for Lent, but I broke that yesterday when I was out visit, but to justify it I drank the coffee black), I need my private time to read, and I find that I get uncomfortable if I’m around too many people for too long. When we were walking back from sledding with some families from the church, we passed a few more people cross country skiing, and we could see more playing cards through the windows as we walked towards the Centennial Lodge, I had an epiphany that this was “church” at its best. We weren’t saving the world in that particular moment, though maybe we were saving a different part of ourselves: the part that reminded us that we don’t need certain things in order to have fun, or find meaning, or feel alive. We have our community. What we really need is what we already have. A community. We miss it when we can’t be here. We support it through our financial givings and our volunteering. We open our hearts on Sunday morning even

on those days when it would have been so nice to stay home. Yet, there are very real benefits to being here. Music. Prayers. Laughter. Deep thinking. A change of scene. A place to see children's questions. Gathering with strangers in, and for, peace.

In a very real way, after a week of busyness, stress, heart ache, boredom, and anxiety, we sometimes come here waiting for the waters to part. Like Jesus in today's Gospel, we have wept over something. We have tried to gather it in but it's just not coming together. Like the Psalmist we ask, of what am I afraid?

I've often found comfort in the fact that the fears of the Psalmist aren't that different from our own fears. The Bible makes over three hundred references to fear. They refer to either a sense of awe, or heart-pounding fright. Our fears, says the Psalmist, is induced by many things. In today's world, we seem to be surrounded by fear: mounting debt, natural disasters, rising violence, health concerns, and the list goes on. Just out of curiosity, I looked on CNN.com for examples of fear. Near as I could tell, the whole website is dedicated to it. So, for a more neutral count, I went through Saturday's edition of the Moncton Times and Transcript for evidence of fear. Teen pregnancy rates are on the rise in New Brunswick, which is causing the Advisory Council on the Status of Women to not push the panic button but to be aware. The NB Power debate is going public, and people are concerned about the process. And, Tim Horton's is worried McDonald's is giving away free coffee for two weeks starting tomorrow. Apparently Monctonians are mad for coffee. In all, after quickly skimming the Saturday paper, I found twelve or thirteen stories that involved fear. I lost count because I was startled by a picture of Arnold Dunn announcing his 80th birthday!

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" asks the Psalmist. Peter Steinke says that it is the role of the Psalmist to cast out fear. He writes, "In the context of Psalm 27, the inducers of fear are identified as slanderers, adversaries, breathers of violence, and betraying relatives. o respond to their

threats, the psalmist doesn't appeal to a simplistic platitude, such as "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." He refuses to make light of the impending danger by urging everyone who is afraid to "make lemonade out of lemons," or suggesting that one project an image of having "the right stuff." If there is to be any encouragement, it is to come from outside of the fearful soul." (Peter Steinke, *The Christian Century*, 2007.)

The psalmist believes:

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
he will set me high on a rock. (Ps. 27:5)

Jesus confronted his fear head-on. And when we can't do that ourselves, it's important to have a tribe. If there's any power to a church, it's in our gathering. It's in sharing our fears, our anxieties, our hurts, and our worries. It's also about those moments when fear means something else: wonder and awe. It's about sharing those things together, too. Which is why we drip water on baby's heads and call them blessed, and we pass the peace together because for some reason, after a week of passing strangers, it's awfully nice to shake someone's hand and wish them peace. I often wish I could do that in the grocery store. It speaks to my outgoing nature. My wife usually knows when it's coming, too. When we went out on our first date in about six months, I heard two people talking at the next table, one with a Scottish accent. I said to my wife, "I can't leave here and not meet that woman." Within five minutes, I had agreed to do her son's wedding, and I'm pleased that they've asked for a Baptism, as well!

I want to leave you with a bit of advice that comes from the street. After visiting some members of St. John's in the hospital this past week, and meeting a few more in the parking lot, I was driving out of the hospital parking lot when the man at the gate was distracted by the other window and told the person they had to

get a parking pass. I looked at him and asked if everything was ok, and he said, “Everyone is always trying to get free parking.”

I was stunned driving home at the insight in what he said, because it’s true. We want and wish for life to be easy, and it isn’t. We gain all kinds of theological weight because we gobble up platitudes written on angel trinkets that make us feel better when we should be wrestling more with our angels for the blessing. We want a pretty faith that talks about flowers and butterflies when in reality faith is about crucifixion and being broken before seeing the light. We want the benefits of a faith without the agony of the struggle or even walking through the doors. We all want free parking in more areas of life than we care to admit.

Lent is that harsh reminder that all is not well or fair or right. Lent is a time of doubt, of denial, and of agitation. And in all of that is the Christ of faith who has set his face to the crowded city of our hearts, as he is pushing through the hate, pushing through the violence, pushing through the hunger, pushing through the homophobia, pushing through the bigotry, pushing through the depression, pushing through the closed mind, pushing through the doubt, pushing through the injustice, pushing through the indifference, pushing through the disease, pushing through the addiction, pushing through the pain, not to fix it but just to reach you and me who are hanging on those crosses so that he can be beside us, turn his head to the side and say, “Today you will be with me...”

Today.

When I’m up to my nostrils in life, sometimes I just need to hear that. Do you?

The Psalmist says, “I believe that we shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” That doesn’t mean when we die, it means in the here and now. I pray we all find some goodness, and for goodness sake, that we share it.