

Evotional

Bible passage: Jonah 4:1-11.

Speaker: Neil Durling.

Sermon title: "Winter."

Date: 10.2.13.

Message:

Our faith isn't "Barcode Christianity" (BEEP – I'm in! now it doesn't matter how I live my life). Neither is it "Escalator Christianity" (this idea that we must always be more holy and improving in every way). I think, like our world, there are four seasons to the Christian faith. The seasons may not come in logical order (e.g.: we might be experiencing summer and then something knocks us flat and we're in winter). Also, they may not be split into equal quarters in our lives. We might experience far more of one than the others for a myriad of reasons. This week we think about winter. When we say "winter" death naturally springs to mind and this should be acknowledged. However, winter isn't a dead period, seasonally speaking. Rather, it is dormant. I think winter, spiritually speaking, means: "We feel disconnected from God." Note the word "feel". God never distances himself from us, even though it might feel like this at times.

As we look around us I think we can see...

1. **Winter in the world:** Frederick Nietzsche famously wrote: "God is dead." But the quote doesn't end there; he says: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" Frederick Buechner speaks of visiting a twelve year old boy in prison who had murdered his father. When Fred left the prison he could hear him crying out for his dad. We live in a world that has tried to kill God but desperately needs something "Other" to sustain and guide us through life. Douglas Coupland, who first coined the phrase "Generation X" wrote in *Life after God* (a novel of short stories about people who no longer need God): "My secret is that I need God--that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love." I think it is fair to say that our world feels largely disconnected from God.
2. **Winter in the Church:** The average age in the Anglican Church is 61 and 48% of the congregation are over 65. I'm not ageist but the plain fact of the matter is that many churches aren't reaching or including the younger generations (whilst there is always room for improvement, I think Bessels is doing quite well here). The Church feels somewhat disconnected from God.
3. **Winter in our lives:** Do we feel disconnected from God?

Jonah:

Jonah does a runner to Tarshish because he hates Ninevites and doesn't want to be God's prophet to them (ironically, he is the most successful prophet in scripture). A storm rises; after picking straws he's thrown overboard, swallowed by a Megalodon (or some such fish, if this isn't an apocryphal piece of scripture) and vomited up in Nineveh three days later. He preaches for repentance for three days - forty days later they respond and do repent! *Jonah* is greatly displeased and becomes angry. *Why?* Because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love – How dare He! Jonah is so angry that he wants God to take his life – he's suicidal. I think this is a stunning description of spiritual winter and I love it that this is where the story ends – we don't know how Jonah responds to God after this.

How do we end up in winter?

1. **How do we get to winter from spring?** We expect everything to go our way; we possibly have a naive view of faith. When God doesn't meet his side of the bargain we are stunned.
2. **How do we get to winter from summer?** Tragedy hits us hard. The most often asked question and barrier to God being in our lives is: "If God is a God of love why do people suffer?"
3. **How do we get to winter from autumn?** This is a short and easy step when we don't acknowledge that we are struggling.

Below is a real email about winter:

How did I get there?

I was 30 - I had served in the church for the previous ten years in various roles - youthwork, deacon etc....But I was tired, single, lonely, always doing church stuff & stuck in a job on a comparatively low wage. The uncommitted around me all seemed to be moving on in their lives & getting the things I desired - a wife, a family & a well paid job. Where as I had busted a gut for God for 10 years but I seemed to be missing out. The half hearted Christians seemed to have a good life. The fully committed seemed to miss out.

Then Dad got cancer & died - that was the final thing that broke for me.

So I put God on a backburner. I still went to church, still did the right things but there was no passion, no life no energy in it.

It was a subconscious thing. And that is how it was for maybe three years - I didn't realise it at the time but I was sulking - I was angry at God.

*I felt I had been a good faithful servant to God those ten years - but I had missed out because of it. It had been one sided. I had done my bit but God hadn't done his bit.
I was expecting God to deliver on some of this other stuff*

I had joined up on the basis of a deal - "I will do this Lord & in return I expect this from You". When he didn't deliver on what I believed was his half of the deal I sulked & put him on a backburner.

I didn't walk away from God - I knew it was true - I just backed off.

What did those three years feel like?

I felt tired, bored, lost, stuck, lonely & left out. I had lost my buzz.

I always knew something wasn't right but didn't know what it was.

I blamed the church. I became cynical, bitter & angry. I started to read Brian McLaren stuff & used it as a stick to beat the church.

I guess a lot of people would have actually drifted away from church at this point.

In truth I was no better off putting God on the back burner.

What turned me around?

I started to question why I was unhappy & where God had gone & why others were moving on spiritually when I wasn't.

It was process of waking up to what an idiot I had been & recognising I had got my thinking wrong.

This all coincided with Rach turning up in my life.

"For I will yet praise him my saviour & my God" became significant for me

We are not in it for the perks but because it is true.

We are not in it because it is easy we are in it because it is true.

Two final thoughts:

- God loves us completely when we're in winter.
- God doesn't want us to stay in winter.

Questions:

1. Did anything grab you in this sermon/evotional?
2. Do you agree with the description of winter? "We feel disconnected from God."
3. Did the email about winter ring true with your experience?
4. How can we remember and feel God's constant love for us when we are in winter?
5. If God doesn't want us to stay in winter how can we move out of it?

Prayer:

Father God, Thank you that you love me when I am in winter. Please help me to move out of this period of feeling disconnected from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.