

Evotional

Bible passage: Acts 28:11-31.

Speaker: Neil Durling.

Sermon title: "Autumn."

Date: 3.2.13.

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 autumn.

What does autumn feel like? Here's what someone emailed me:

- Starting to feel a little unsettled about work, career, church role.
- Feeling that it is time for a change - enforced or otherwise.
- That feeling that it is an end of an era - end of a chapter.
- Not quite sure what the future holds but a sense that change is imminent.
- Good things coming to an end.
- Making the most of the now because you sense something is about to change.
- A time of sadness maybe as you move into a new phase of your life.
- A time of grief as you move on from a good thing that is coming to an end.....
- God is close - still feeling on top of things but you know change is coming and not sure how it will pan out.

Autumn in Paul's life:

Paul had a dramatic conversion, planted churches, saw people come to faith, placed women, Gentiles and slaves in more prominent positions in culture and then heads for Rome. Then comes Acts 28:11-31. After 14 days at sea in a storm he encourages the sailors to eat. All 276 people on board were saved and no prisoners were murdered afterwards. The islanders of Malta showed them kindness and as Paul helped build a fire he was bitten by a viper! But he didn't die! They then travel for three months to Rome where Paul lives under house arrest for two years (in AD60). No more church planting for him. He explains himself to the Jewish leaders who respond by saying: "We haven't heard about you. Can we hear your views about this sect everyone is talking against?" Paul teaches them about the Kingdom of God and some believed whilst others didn't as they disagreed amongst themselves. Paul loses his patience with them. Do you notice that this letter (Acts) doesn't finish... what happened to Paul? Ignatius (c.110) said Paul was martyred and Christian tradition holds that Paul was beheaded in Rome during the reign of Nero (c.mid-60s).

What is autumn? I think there are at least two autumns:

Autumn in the "arc" of life: We're getting old and it is hard to accept, especially if we've been raised to understand that God loves us for what we do rather than who we are. However, autumn can still be a place of beauty.

Autumn in the specifics of life: We just feel that things are slowing down and we are out of sorts.

How do we end up in autumn?

1. *School holidays:* When I was a kid they went on forever and it never rained, not like nowadays. We hark back to the good old days and never embrace the "now"!
2. *Slide away:* Sin, and the guilt and shame we feel, draw us away from God even though he never steps back from us.
3. *Step down:* We finish in a role at church or work and struggle to verbalise and "enflesh" our faith. This is quite common amongst ministers in retirement.
4. *Silent home:* Empty nest syndrome (nicknames can belittle these realities) is a tough time for many of us. We have invested decades in our children and now they (they think!) don't need us.
5. *Sliced fingers:* Death by a 1,000 paper cuts, as Robe Bell puts it. We just get loads of tiny knocks by others who try and correct us, help us improve, etc.. We end up giving up and not being true to ourselves.
6. *Short supplies:* Tight finances cause strain.
7. *Situation changes:* Change home, job, new boss, aging parents, etc..
8. *Squandered opportunities:* We have taken summer for granted and thought it would never end. Or, we felt God asked us to do something and we backed out – we regret it big time.
9. *Satisfaction guaranteed:* Bishop John Pritchard shares a survey where a lot of people "outgrow" services and small groups as they grow in their faith. Willow Creek Church found out that programmes don't make disciples. The conclusion? Rolling up your sleeves and getting involved with God in her mission does. Services and small groups are still of value, but they simply aren't enough.

10. *Shallow distractions*: Many have been told that the things they're passionate about shouldn't be done because of the whole "sacred/secular divide". God likes some things (service, prayer, Bible study, etc.) and not others (art, films, food, sport, etc.). The truth? God likes them all because he created them all. When we snuff some out our life can become beige and limited.
11. *Sideline forgiveness*: A Rabbi pointed out that the Hebrew root word for forgiveness and dance is the same. When we don't forgive we struggle to, spiritually speaking, dance and autumn can settle in.

No wonder we spend some periods of time in autumn!

However...

We can move out of autumn in the specifics of life.

Nevertheless...

We should embrace autumn in the arc of life.

Questions:

1. Did anything grab you in this sermon/evotional?
2. Do you agree with the description of autumn under: What does autumn feel like?
3. Why "leaves" in "How do we end up in autumn" pricked your soul as Neil went through them on Sunday morning? Why?
4. How can we move out of autumn in the specifics of life?
5. How can we embrace autumn in the arc of life?

Prayer:

Father God, Please help me to embrace autumn in the arc of life and come out of it in the specifics of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.