Matthew 4:1-4 *How to Eat a Sermon: Getting Hungry*

***Nutrition Science***We all eat.

Most of us eat at least three times a day.

And most of us, I would guess, eat without thinking too much about why we eat.

We eat because we’re hungry. We eat because, at some level, we realize that if we don’t eat we will get sick. We eat because it is the social norm—people have breakfast when they wake up, eat lunch at noon, and have supper in the evening. It’s just what we do.

But maybe somewhere along the way you took a nutrition class, or you read a diet book, or you got interested in cooking. Your basic understanding of why we eat, and how our body utilizes the food we give it, may have changed. You became more aware of which foods were good for you—green stuff and healthy proteins—and which foods were bad for you—sugars and fats. Maybe the more you learn about food preparation, the more you appreciate the finer details of the food you eat.

Well, that’s sort of my goal for our new series of sermons. For the next couple of months we are going to do a series I am calling *How to Eat a Sermon.* The idea is, we all listen to sermons—at least, if you come here on Sunday mornings you do. It’s just what we do. You probably haven’t thought too much about it. It’s how church works. Hopefully, there have been times when you have been hungry to hear a sermon. Fundamentally, you know it’s good for your spiritual life. But, for the most part, I’m guessing you take the sermon for granted as a part of being a Christian.

What I’d like to do for the next couple of months is dig into why have this 30 minutes of talking every Sunday morning. I’d like to have a Food Science class for preaching, if you will. I’d like to talk about why the sermon is good for us; maybe help you know what kind of preaching is good for you and what kind of preaching to avoid; and, hopefully, help you to appreciate the sermons you hear a bit more.

My guess is you already know how to listen to a sermon. You probably have a pretty good idea of when a sermon is good and when a sermon is bad. Hopefully, you have benefitted from most of the sermons you have heard.

And yet, it is my contention that if you know a bit more about why we have preaching, and if you have a little insight into what a sermon is supposed to do, you will be able to enjoy the messages you hear even more.

***Not a Great Word***I should get this out of the way now: the words “preaching” and “sermon” are not always the most popular words. For many, the word “preaching” evokes unpleasant memories and negative connotations. Whether it was counting the ceiling tiles while trying to endure a dry-as-toast sermon as a child; or the image of a red-faced man in a too-tight suit haranguing the evils of America on TV; we all have pictures of preaching that are less than great. We use expressions like “Don’t preach at me” or “Don’t get preachy” as a way of warning people that their speech is getting too strident for our tastes. We have all had the experience of a teacher about to chew out a rowdy classroom when the class clown says: “Uh oh, here comes the sermon.”

I did a little experiment. I asked some friends with diverse Facebook followings to post this statement: **“When I hear the word ‘preaching’ I…”** and then ask their friends to fill in the blank.

It’s hardly scientific, but the results were about what you would have expected. Several Christians responded positively, filling in the blank with phrases such “hear the Word of God” or “get ready to listen.” But many of the other responses—including from many Christ-followers—were decidedly negative. They said:

When I hear the word ‘preaching’ I….

**…tune out.**

**…think of the phrase “preaching to the choir.”**

**…lose interest.**

**…turn off.**

**…cringe.**

**… roll my eyes.**

**…wince.**

**…consider the source.**

One gal was a little more detailed:

**“When I hear the word ‘preaching’ I… run.** Preachers yell and try to make you fear (actually fear) God. They ramble on and on about fire and brimstone and all the scary things. Also, the crazy guy on 3rd Ave downtown carrying the sandwich sign that says we're all going to die soon and yelling through his bullhorn is a preacher. Preachers are scary.”

Now, considering that my profession is preaching, that one hurt a little bit. But it also reminded me of my own unpleasant experience with preaching. When I was in college there was this guy—we never figured out where he was from—who would show up once a year and stand outside the student union and preach that most everybody there was going to hell. He’d wear this sandwich board sign with messages like “Repent or Die” and “God Hates America” and he’d wave a Bible around and he’d tell us everything that was wrong with America and how God was going to punish us for it. He’d yell at girls who were wearing shorts and call them ugly names and he’d yell at guys with long hair and pretty much everybody else. And if somebody tried to argue with him or tell him to leave he’d get into shouting matches and talk about God’s judgment. There was no love from this guy, no grace, nothing to attract anybody to his version of God.

We called him the “turn or burn” guy, and no Christian on campus wanted anything to do with him. He fit all the worst stereotypes of what preaching is.

In fact, I’ve wondered a lot about this guy over the years: how did he earn a living? Was there a church at which he regularly preached? Were there people who actually liked listening to this kind of preaching? My theory is that his church encouraged him to make these trips to college campuses because they wanted him to yell at someone else for a while.

At any rate, there is no getting around the fact that the word “preaching” doesn’t always make people hungry to hear more.

And yet, those negative examples of preaching notwithstanding, it is my contention that regularly hearing God’s Word preached is an important part of a Christian’s spiritual diet. I have three points I’d like to make today: 1) God’s Word is spiritual food; 2) preaching is a way we are fed God’s Word; and 3) It is dangerous to starve ourselves of preaching.

***Duel in the Desert***First, **God’s Word is spiritual food**. One of the Bible’s favorite metaphors for itself is food. God’s Word is compared to food (Jer. 15:16), honey (Psalm 19:10), and bread (Deut. 8:3).

In fact, let’s consider that last image. It comes up in the story of Jesus’ temptation, in Matthew chapter 4.

It is at the very beginning of His public ministry. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan by His cousin John while the Spirit descended on Him like a dove and He was greeted by a voice from heaven that declared He was God’s Son. Then, immediately after that, **Matthew 4:1** says:

**1**Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Immediately after publicly putting His stamp of approval on Jesus, the first thing the Spirit does is lead Him out to be tempted. Jesus begins His ministry by doing combat with the devil.

And the way he prepares for combat is by fasting. **Matthew 4:2:**

**2**After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

This might just be the greatest understatement in the entire Bible. Jesus was the Son of God, but He was also fully human. And after 40 days and nights without food, He was undoubtedly very hungry. Sometimes, if supper is an hour or two later than usual, I’ll come to the table and say: “I’m starving.” No doubt, such a remark sounds very flippant to Jesus as he reflects on those 40 days.

Then, on the 41st day, the devil slithers **in and says**:

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” (Matthew 4:3)

It strikes me that we may never know how close we came to having the entire plan of salvation derail at that very moment. Here is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, who is going to fulfill all God’s plans to crush the head of the serpent (cf. Genesis 2:15); and He is vulnerable, depleted and hungry. It would have been so easy for him to take the tempter up on his suggestion and just manifest some bread out there in the desert. We know He could have done it, just look at what He did with that little boy’s loaves and fishes (cf. John 6:8-13). He could have heeded Satan’s suggestion and abandoned the path of lowliness and humility and served Himself, and you and I would stand condemned today.

But that’s not what Jesus does. He remains humble and faithful to His Father. And He counters the devil **by quoting scripture**:

“‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

There’s something more important than food. There’s something more nutritious than bread. And it is listening to the words that come from the mouth of God.

Every year, when the fair comes around, I’m one of the first people in line at the Townhouse Tenderloin stand. That first Saturday morning, I’m outside their window at about 9:30. Those golden fried, hand breaded hunks of pork are about perfect. And every year, I tell Beth: “I could live on these things.”

Probably, I could not. Or, at least, I could not for very long. That much grease, day after day, would definitely shorten my life.

But, of course, Jesus is not talking about physical diet. He is making a much bigger point, a spiritual point. There’s more to life than making sure we take in more calories than we burn. We also need to be fed spiritually. We need the words that come from the mouth of God.

God’s Words are spiritual food. They are an essential part of our well-being. You need a decent diet of proteins and carbs and vegetables and fats to keep your physical body going; and you also need a good diet of God’s Word to keep your spiritual life going.

***Preaching is One of the Ways God Speaks***Now, second point: **preaching is a way that we are fed God’s Word.** When Jesus talks about every word that comes from the mouth of God, one of the things He is talking about is preaching.

To be sure, Jesus is talking about more than preaching. We have stories of God speaking directly to people (i.e. Genesis 18). Sometimes He communicates through dreams (i.e. Matthew 2:13). And today, anybody who can read can read God’s words in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16). Those are all ways that God speaks, and would be in mind when Jesus talks about the words that come from God’s mouth.

But preaching is definitely included in what Jesus is talking about. From the prophets who declared “Thus saith the Lord…” before preaching to the people (e.g. Isaiah 44:6), to Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), to Paul in the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22), to the countless Christian preachers who have ministered over the centuries; God has long chosen to speak through the preaching of His Word.

Let me give you an example. In Acts 6 the early church faced a crisis. The widows of the Grecian Jews were being overlooked in the daily food distribution in favor of the Hebraic Jews. It looked like there might be some discrimination going on, or maybe it was just an organizational mix up.

At any rate, the administrative details and logistics threatened to distract the Twelve apostles from what they considered to be their primary task. So they gathered the church together and created a solution: they appointed the first deacons and charged them with the responsibility of seeing that no one went hungry.

And what was it that they saw as their primary task? **Acts 6:2**:

**2**So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

It’s not that they didn’t think the food distribution was important. They weren’t looking down on those who were waiting on tables. But just as important as it was that people were being physically fed was that they were being spiritually fed. And that came through the “ministry of the word.” In other words: preaching.

The Apostles saw their main task as preaching and it was just as important, if not more important than, getting food to the hungry.

The point of preaching is that it is a way we are fed God’s Word.

***A Famine of Hearing the Word of God***Which leads to a third point: **It is dangerous to starve ourselves of preaching**. Just like you wouldn’t want to go days and days without eating physical food, it is unwise for a Christian to go days and days without the spiritual food of God’s Word.

Consider **Amos 8:11-14**:

**11**“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord,  
   “when I will send a famine through the land—  
not a famine of food or a thirst for water,  
    but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.  
**12**People will stagger from sea to sea  
    and wander from north to east,  
searching for the word of the Lord,  
    but they will not find it.

**13**“In that day

“the lovely young women and strong young men  
    will faint because of thirst.  
**14**Those who swear by the sin of Samaria—  
    who say, ‘As surely as your god lives, Dan,’  
    or, ‘As surely as the god of Beersheba lives’—  
    they will fall, never to rise again.”

Amos was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 years before Christ. The central theme of his prophecy is the covenant between God and His people. God is faithful to his part of the covenant, but the people haven’t been faithful to theirs.

Consequently, by the time we get to chapter 8, Amos is relaying a series of visions warning of Israel’s coming destruction. The people are compared to a basket of fruit, ripe for God's judgment. "The day is coming," God says through Amos, "when Israel will pay for its sins."

And verse 11 tells us that this judgment will include “a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.” In other words, God is going to end the preaching of His Word in Israel.

If you are somebody who has a hard time staying awake during church, that might sound like an o.k. thing. Or, if your only experience of preaching is the guy on the street corner yelling condemnation, then a “famine of hearing the words of the Lord” might not sound so bad.

But look what Amos says would happen: as bad as "a famine of food or a thirst for water" would be, being deprived of the proclamation of God’s revealed will would be even worse. Verse 12 says the “people will stagger from sea to sea,”– directionless without God’s Word. Verse 13 says “the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.” Even the best of the people, the youngest and brightest, will be depleted and weakened without someone to speak God’s truth to them. Verse 14 says that they “will fall, never to rise again.” They’ll be destined to destruction without the preaching of the words of the Lord.

Preaching is important because it is one of the ways God’s life-giving Word is fed to His people. If one of the ways he might discipline His people is by causing a famine of hearing His words, the question is: why would any Christian want to voluntarily starve him or herself of this important spiritual food?

***Action Steps***Let me wrap up with three challenges.

**1. First, make regular reading of Scripture a habit*.*** The reason preaching is important, of course, is because we are talking about the proclamation of God’s Word. It is the Bible—the holy, inspired, infallible word of God—that gives us direction and life and calls us out of darkness. God’s Word is the bread of life. Therefore, it is important that every Christian is finding a way to regularly take God’s Word in—to chew on it, if you will.

As much as I want you to be here every Sunday and hear the sermon… and as much as I’m going to be talking how to get the most out of a sermon... if this is the only way you are being fed spiritually every week, then you are starving yourself. If you only ate one big meal a week—no matter how nutritious and delicious it was, it would not be good for your long term health.

So you need to make regular reading of the scripture a habit. Make it a part of your regular routine. 15 minutes a day. A chapter or two a day. A “Bible-in-a-year” plan.

Some days, you’ll spend that 15 minutes and not much will happen. You’ll forget what you read as soon as you move on to the next thing in your schedule.

And sometimes, God will grab you and get your attention, and you’ll get something that can carry you through your entire day.

But, whatever happens, just like you wouldn’t skip a meal, make a point of reading your Bible on a regular basis.

**2. Second, make attendance at church on Sunday a priority*.*** There is something about sitting in the community of believers and*hearing* God’s Word proclaimed that is especially nutritious for our souls. It’s like Sunday dinner with your family—the family of God.

But what about the internet? We live in an age when it is possible to listen to nearly any preacher in the world. Thanks to the wonders of the world wide web we have access to podcasts, streaming services and web-based churches. With just a mouse click or swipe of our smart phones we can listen to some of the most gifted Bible teachers of the day. What if we prefer listening to a favorite “celebrity” preacher over the less-than-stellar preaching at our local church?

I believe the access we have to quality preachers is a good thing. Christians can grow deeply in the Lord by listening to some of the best preaching available. The principles and suggestions I’m going to give during this series are equally applicable to sermons listened to on your iPhone or sermons listened to in person. We can all be fed by the “celebrity chefs” of the Christian world.

And yet, if I eat out at a fancy restaurant with a famous chef’s name attached one night, and then eat at home the next, I am certain that the home cooked meal will be just as nutritious and, in its own way, just as satisfying.

In fact, while I enjoy going out to eat from time to time, I would not want to do it every night. When I return home from several days out of town and eating in restaurants for every meal, one of the greatest pleasures is getting back to a simple, home cooked meal prepared with love by my wife. She is not a world-acclaimed chef, but she knows me and cares about me and prepares food that is just right for me.

I’d like to suggest that the sermons you get here at Hope are like those home cooked meals. I’m not Andy Stanley or Kyle Idleman or Rick Warren, but I know this church and this community and the sermons I prepare are—I hope—just as nutritious and—in their own way—just as satisfying as sermons by those “big name” preachers.

3. Then, **third, make a point of being an active, engaged listener*.*** If you are going to benefit from a sermon, you have to pay attention.

It doesn’t matter how skillful or inspiring the preacher is, if you are not engaged as a listener you will get nothing from the sermon.

Imagine going to a fine restaurant where you are invited into the kitchen to watch the chef at work. You see all of this magnificent knife work and innovative cooking as a delicious plate is put together. But then you leave. Without eating anything. What good does that do for you?

If you are going to receive any nutrition, you need to eat. It doesn’t matter how good the chef is, if you don’t actually put food in your mouth, chew it and swallow it, the meal does nothing for you. Eating is an active process.

The same goes for listening to a sermon. The preacher can put together the finest sermon in the world, but if you don’t engage as a listener, it won’t do anything for you. Listening is an active process.

I don’t mean to sound defensive: but not every time you leave a sermon and say “I didn’t get much out of that” is it entirely the preacher’s fault. I admit, I’ve preached some boring messages. I’ve preached some confusing messages. Sometimes I haven’t done my job very well. But sometimes, maybe it was you who didn’t listen as well as you could have. Maybe you were not engaged. Maybe you were distracted.

Believe me, I know how easy it is to be in church and to zone out during the sermon. When I was a kid, I was a chronic daydreamer. Sunday mornings were when I used to imagine what would happen if the Russians attacked. (I grew up in the 80s, at the height of the cold war). I would daydream about being some sort of freedom fighter, just like in the movie *Red Dawn*. And every Sunday morning, when the sermon started, was when I would mentally tune out.

But I was cheating myself. And it wasn’t the preacher’s fault that I wasn’t paying attention. Listening well takes work. Just as the preacher has a job to do, so does the listener.

***Letter to the Editor***The following illustration has been around for so long, and used by so many preachers, that no one is entirely sure where it originated. But, regardless of its source, it demonstrates that questioning the importance of preaching is hardly a new phenomenon. It begins with a letter to the editor of a weekly magazine:

Dear Sir: I notice that ministers seem to set a great deal of importance on their sermons and spend a great deal of time in preparing them. I have been attending services quite regularly for the past thirty years and during that time, if I estimate correctly, I have listened to no less than 3,000 sermons, but, to my consternation, I discover I cannot remember a single one of them. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitably spent on something else? Sincerely....

The letter triggered an avalanche of angry responses for weeks. Some people agreed and wrote letters ripping sermons. Others wrote in defense of preaching. But eventually a single letter closed the debate:

My dear Sir: I have been married for thirty years. During that time, I have eaten 32,850 meals – mostly of my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered that I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I received nourishment from every one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago. Sincerely....

The regular hearing of God's Word preached is a vital part of our spiritual diet***.*** The experience of hearing God's Word, of being touched in our hearts and minds and wills, provides important spiritual nourishment in our lives. A Christian can no more go without a regular intake of God’s Word than any human being can go without a regular intake of food.

We may not remember every sermon we hear, but if we listen actively and attentively—and if the preacher does his or her job--we are fed and nourished each time we go to church.