



“Turn Aside”
Scripture – Exodus 3:1-12
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, August 30, 2020

Have I ever told you my Call Story?

I was 22-years-old — fresh out of college and serving abroad with the Presbyterian Church’s Young Adult Volunteer program. I’d been in India for about six weeks when the site coordinator took my fellow volunteers and me to a retreat center nestled in the tea plantations of the Western Ghats Mountains. This was a retreat in every sense of the word: The “hill station” town provided refuge from the heat and humidity of India’s coastlands; the weekend away gave us time to recharge after days upon days filled with new faces and routines, foreign words and unfamiliar customs; and the retreat center offered space for respite and reflection and prayer.

After dinner that first night, our site coordinator called us together for Bible Study. He directed us to Hebrews 11, that great exposition on the efficacy of faith. It was then — while rehearsing the faith of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses, of Rahab and Samson and David — that I heard God’s voice. It was nothing more than the whisper of a sigh in the back of my mind, but the message was clear: God was calling me to ministry. I cannot tell you what word or moment sparked this realization. I can only tell you that I stumbled upon holy ground and walked away with a profound sense of clarity and calm.

In retrospect I see that God had been calling before — through the voices of Sunday school teachers and youth group friends. Mentors. My home church pastors. Others had taken notice; when I told my family I was going to seminary, my sister said, “We’d been waiting for you to figure that out.” God had been calling before. It’s just that I’d never turned aside to listen.

You know, we refer to these moments as “Call Stories.” But they’re actually “Listening Stories” — moments when people pause long enough to pay attention, to incline their ears to hear God’s voice.

The thing we remember about Moses’ “Call Story” is the burning bush — the surprising image of a shrub ablaze and the startling resonance of the divine voice echoing from the flames: “Moses! Moses!”

But we often overlook the moment before God speaks.

Moses is keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. It’s a typical day for this fugitive turned shepherd, who’s found that tending sheep in the wilderness is a pretty effective way to hide out from Pharaoh. There is nothing about this stretch of desert that would suggest to Moses that he’s about to stumble upon holy ground; there’s no temple, no shrine to alert passersby that God is near.¹ *We* know differently because *we* have the benefit of a

¹ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 54.

storyteller. But, as far as Moses is concerned, it's a mundane day in a mundane place with a mundane task before him.

But, then, something catches Moses' eye: a blaze of light off to the side ... A sight so unexpected that Moses must have done a double-take to be sure he wasn't just seeing things.

Now, if *I* noticed a burning bush out of the corner of my eye, I'd probably start looking for the source of the flames: Searching the skies for signs of lightning, scanning the horizon for someone who might have kindled a fire. I expect I'd step back, out of range of flying sparks; maybe I'd have the wherewithal to drive the sheep farther away so they wouldn't singe their wool.

But Moses has a different reaction: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight."

Only *then* does God speak. "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see," the narrator tells us, "God called to him out of the bush." When the Lord sees that Moses is paying attention, God calls his name: "Moses! Moses!" And Moses replies, "Here I am."

The rest — as they say — is history. This is just the first of many conversations between God and Moses as the Almighty uses this flawed but faithful servant to carry out the divine plan. You know the rest of the story: How God delivers the Israelites out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey.

But before that ... Before God liberated the Hebrew people, before Moses stretched out his hand to divide the Red Sea waters, before God sent plagues of locusts and thunder and days of darkness, even before Moses approached Pharaoh to demand, "Let my people go!" ... Before all these things, God set a shrub ablaze and Moses turned aside.

I find myself wondering: Was this the first time God called to Moses? Had God already attempted the tried and true methods of visions and dreams, of speaking into the stillness of night, of sending a trusty messenger to deliver the divine word? How often had God whispered Moses' name on the wind as the sheep grazed nearby? Did God finally resort to a tactic with a bit more flare because Moses had yet to pay attention?

Who knows? Maybe I'm just projecting my own experience onto Moses — my own tendency to go through life without pausing to pay attention. And I don't think I'm alone in this. How often do we go about mundane days in mundane places with mundane tasks before us and never turn aside to notice God in our midst?

The renowned preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor describes such a moment. She has quite a way with words, so I'll let her tell it:

"I have never been presented with a burning bush," she writes, "but I did see a garden turn golden once ...

I must have been sixteen, earning summer spending money by keeping a neighbor's cats while she was away. The first time I let myself into the house, the fleas leapt on my legs like airborne piranha. Brushing them off as I opened cat food and cleaned litter pans, I finally fled through the back door with the bag of trash my employer had left for me to carry to the cans out back. I could hear the fleas inside flinging themselves against the plastic, so that it sounded as if a light rain were falling inside the bag.

I could not wait to be shed of it, which was why I was in a hurry. On my way to the cans, I passed a small garden area off to the left that was not visible from the house. Glancing at it, I got the whole dose of loveliness at once — the high arch of trees above, the mossy flagstones beneath, the

cement birdbath, the cushiony bushes, the white wrought-iron chair — all lit by stacked planes of sunlight that turned the whole scene golden. It was like a door to another world. I had to go through it. I knew that if I did, then I would become golden too.

But first I had to ditch the bag. The fleas popped against the plastic as I hurried to the big aluminum garbage cans near the garage. Stuffing the bag into one of them, I turned back toward the garden, fervent to explore what I had only glimpsed in passing. When I got there, the light had changed. All that was left was a little overgrown sitting spot that no one had sat in for years. The smell of cat litter drifted from the direction of the garbage cans. The garden was no longer on fire.

‘I think it [makes God mad] if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it,’ says Shug Avery, one of the wise women in Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*. I noticed the color gold, but I did not turn aside. I had a bag full of fleas to attend to. While I made that my first priority, the fire moved on in search of someone who would stop what she was doing, take off her shoes, and say, ‘Here am I.’²

“I noticed the color gold, but I did not turn aside.”

God only knows how often *I* have walked past holy ground because I was too busy to turn aside. It’s so very human to miss out on holy encounters because we don’t pause to pay attention, because we don’t attend to the divine voice calling our names.

The good news is that God keeps calling. God is in the business of calling. Because the Lord longs to draw us into relationship, because the Holy One chooses to draw us into holy work. God persists until we turn aside — until we take off our shoes and say “Here am I.”

No, God may not appear to us in a flame of fire out of a bush. From all accounts, God seems to prefer subtle to showy. To quote one of the texts in our hymnal, “God is calling through the voices of our neighbors’ urgent prayers” or “through the music of sublime and human arts.”³ Maybe God is speaking to you through news reports that spark righteous anger and compel you to confront injustice in our community. Maybe God is summoning you through the voice of a friend, calling to invite you to serve alongside her with Meals on Wheels ... or through a child’s question: “What can we do to help?” Maybe God is beckoning through quiet moments that allow for respite and reflection or surprising sights that startle you with grace. Maybe God is calling to you as God called to me — through the enduring truth of our sacred story.

God’s claim on each of our lives is different, but the Lord longs to draw near to us, to draw us into holy work.

God is calling. God is in the business of calling. The question is: Will we turn aside?

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 25-6.

³ Mary Louise Bringle, *God is Calling Through the Whisper in Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), Hymn No. 410.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God – at the sound of your voice, light first pierced the darkness and creation dawned. At the sound of your voice, prophets and apostles stepped out in faith to herald your new creation. At the sound of your voice, the world turns toward wholeness and the promise that all will be made new. You are still speaking, O God of Life – sometimes in a thundering cry, sometimes in a gentle whisper. Speak to us this day.

Speak your healing Word to all in need of comfort and hope. We lift before you those who are grieving, those who are lonely, those who are sick. Speak into the lives of those who need work and those who need rest; those who live under the threat of violence, and those who face this day with fear or uncertainty. We pray, especially, for the people of Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Laura. Uphold those who are surveying the damage wrought by wind and wave, and sustain those who are rushing toward these communities in crisis. Remind them – remind us – that we are all your beloved children. Speak, Lord, that we may be whole.

Long ago you observed the misery of your people Israel and leaned close to hear their cries. Lord, we trust that you *still* hear the cries of long-suffering people who crave justice, who hunger for healing and hope. Liberating One, be with communities across this nation who know too well the yoke of oppression. When we turn away from their suffering or tune out their cries for justice, break our hearts of stone and give us hearts for love alone. Empower all of us, we pray, to work for the world you imagined at the dawn of time.

Holy God, who speaks into the chaos and quiet of life, help us turn aside and incline our ears to you. Help us to hear your voice that comforts and challenges, summons and inspires. Help us to hear your voice, which calls us to service and beckons us closer to you. In your grace, you offer again and again your invitation to know your love, to be loved, and to respond to your call. Open our ears and our hearts, we pray, that we might discern your whisper amidst dissonant and distracting voices, and find our place within your creation. For we trust that yours is the way that leads to life, for ourselves and for all the world.

We pray in the name of your son, our Lord, and lift our voices as one to offer the prayer Christ taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.