

Turning Aside
Exodus 3.1-15
September 3, 2017
Pentecost +13A
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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Last week we read the story of two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, instructed by a new king in Egypt (a king who does not remember Joseph or the contributions of the people of Israel) to kill all of the Hebrew baby boys. Pharaoh is afraid, threatened, intimidated by this population of outsiders in his country, and so he turns to the midwives, asking them to do the unthinkable. Because the women revere God more than they revere the king, they ignore his instructions and lie to him about why the boys aren't dying. The Pharaoh then puts out a new edict across the land: every baby boy born to Hebrew mothers is to be tossed into the Nile.

We move immediately from the civil disobedience of Shiphrah and Puah to the creative resistance of a mother-daughter team. The mother protects and hides her son for three months before creating a scenario in which he technically does go into the river in a basket, though strategically placed near the daughter of the Pharaoh who immediately saves the boy. The three then make a way for Moses to live with Pharaoh's daughter as the adopted mother, and Moses' mother as a paid nurse who cares for the baby until he is old enough to live with Pharaoh's daughter.

Moses then grows to be a man in the court of Pharaoh, but it seems he is a discontent observer. He witnesses the cruel mistreatment of the Hebrew slaves and recognizes them as his kinsfolk. We aren't given much in the way of timeline at this point. We do not know what culture and faith he was taught in those early years by his mother-turned-nurse or what culture and faith he was taught by the Pharaoh's daughter. What we hear is that he is overcome with compassion when he sees one particular Egyptian harming one particular Hebrew person so severely that he goes after the Egyptian, kills him, and hides the body. Even though he thought he made sure no one was looking, word somehow spread all the way to the Pharaoh, and Moses fled to Midian. In Midian, he makes a name for himself as a helpful and kind protector, and soon he marries and has a son of his own "and he named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.'" (Exodus 2.22)"

Already at this point in his life, Moses has lived three different lives—son to his birth mother, son to the daughter of Pharaoh, and now husband and father and farmer in Midian. At no point do we hear that Moses was a devout man, an observant man, or a

follower in the one, true, God. But he is a man whose life has been spared over and over again. He is a man who sees injustice and intervenes. It seems maybe Moses' life will be settled there in Midian, and many years pass. But eventually, the king of Egypt dies. And the Israelites are groaning and crying out in slavery. God hears their cries and remembers them. The end of Exodus 2 reads: "God **looked** upon the Israelites, and God **took notice** of them."

And there, today's text begins—Exodus 3.1-12 (p. 44 Pew Bible):

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; **he looked**, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "**I must turn aside and look** at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." **When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see**, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

Here in the great calling of Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, we have a few simple phrases that might easily go ignored, and I suggest our study really begins with the very end of chapter two: "God **looked** upon the Israelites, and God **took notice** of them." We have a Divine action of looking and noticing—hearing the groaning cries of suffering people and turning God's attention to them. Just two verses later, it is Moses who notices, looks, and turns. God watches and sees the same

Divine pattern mirrored in Moses that God initially modeled. Moses turns aside to see, and God sees that Moses has turned aside to see.

In my study, I've gotten fixated in this phrasing because of the shared root word between "turn aside" and "repent." Repentance is talked about as a turning, shifting from one direction in life onto the path of God—a spiritual, metaphorical turning. Moses here is physically turning his body, stopping what he is doing for work and his father-in-law, noticing and turning to the work of God even though he does not yet know that is what he is witnessing. And yet, the spiritual turn is in synch with the physical. The stuff of vocation, justice, even Divine identity all comes later after this first act of noticing. Not in fear, not in distraction, but in full, open-hearted curiosity, Moses turns aside.

The Rev. Barbara Lundblad, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, notes of this scene, "here, God did not speak until Moses turned aside. It is one of God's great inefficiencies, this waiting for human beings to turn aside. 'Immortal, invisible'...inefficient. Story after story in scripture points to God's inefficiency. It is an inefficiency born of relationship. Bound up in the very nature of God who longed not only to be, but to be with."¹ This scene calls to mind the Latin words carved into the handmade table in our chapel which translate, "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." I am drawn to this image of an inefficient God, present but not pushing, seeing and noticing, inviting and waiting to be seen and noticed in return.

In *The Divine Dance*, Richard Rohr writes, "God is completely unavailable for any manipulation or cajoling, but God is always and immediately available to the sincere seeker of love and union. God waits until you are capable of an I-Thou relationship, or edges you in that direction."²

Rohr describes an attentive way of noticing and being present in the created world that draws the seer into a way of holy knowing. Even slowing down and noticing one leaf can draw the seer to "know, really know, that this leaf is a participation in the eternal being of God...It's not the inherent dignity of the object that matters; it is the dignity of your relationship to the object that matters...as Martin Buber famously put it, shifting from an I-It orientation to the world to an I-Thou relationship. For a true contemplative, a green tree works just as well as a golden tabernacle." Is it a step too far to add, "or a

¹ <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/454-barbara-lundblad-program-4323>

² Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, p. 181

bush on fire that isn't consumed?" In this exchange, we engage God or God's creation as a reality to experience (I-Thou) but not an object to possess (I-It).

The detail that matters in the story is not the method of communicating wildly through this fiery bush. The detail that matters is God made Godself present and waited, then Moses noticed, Moses saw, Moses turned aside. The turning toward the wild scene becomes the means by which Moses turns toward the path of God. To use Richard Rohr's language, that Moses turned aside is evidence he was in the flow—in the rhythm of God's nature and reflecting that nature as he moves about his day. For Moses' NOT to turn would be for Moses to be sin because "sin is whatever stops the flow."³ We are invited into this way of being, too. And before we dismiss the work and way as far too grand, Moses also replied to God, "Who am I that I should go?" This way of being and seeing and turning is life's work that opens us to the ultimate work of God. The first work is noticing, and the rest is yet to be revealed.

Barbara Lundblad reiterates this first work, saying, "[W]e have an almost endless capacity to keep walking. Schedules can do it. We're terribly busy. We need to get someplace, no time to stop, we'll come back later. Rationality can keep us from turning aside: we don't believe in visions. Belief in an all-sufficient, autonomous God can keep us from stopping: God so totally other that any earthly sign could only be our own psychic illusion. There are plenty of sound reasons to keep on walking. But Moses turned aside. And when God saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him."

Start here. Start in the routine of your life. As you are walking along, at work or at play, do so mindfully, ever aware that God is so present in the world that even a long, green leaf might reveal something more of God's path if you will simply turn to it. Rohr's great meditative poem speaks of this way of seeing:

God for us, we call you Father.
God alongside us, we call you Jesus.
God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.
You are the eternal mystery that enables, enfolds, and enlivens all things,
Even us and even me.

Every name falls short of your goodness and greatness.
We can only see who you are in what is.
We ask for such perfect seeing—
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

³ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, p. 160

Amen.

It is the attempt at naming the Eternal Mystery that today's story ends. "I am who I am" is sending the noticer and turner Moses into tremendous justice work, but the I Am goes before and alongside and within Moses. And it is here that Barbara Lundblad says we must add our names to the calling work of God, "After giving Moses the great mysterious name, God went on: 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob--has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.' God is not only beyond all words; God's name is attached to human names: The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, the God of Mary Magdalene and Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King. The God of Barbara. And there is always a blank space for you to add your own name. You see, God has a very long name and by this name God will be known forever. Mystery and revelation. Majesty and earthiness. Immortal, invisible, and inefficient--the Holy God waiting for you and me.

And when God saw that we had turned aside to see, God called to us...

It's enough to give you goose bumps, or at least to stoop down and take off your shoes."