

September 3, 2023 Sermon

“Turning Aside”

Text: Exodus 3:1-6

Prayer: Prepare our hearts, O God, to reflect on this story in Exodus. Silence in us any voices but your Spirit, so that we may hear with wisdom and understanding. Amen.

If you have been to any of Disney’s Hollywood Studios in the United States, you must have seen the spectacular Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show. This stunt show features high-flying, gravity-defying automobiles, high-speed motorcycles and watercraft stunts. My family watched this show in 2016 and I honestly had the thrill of my life. Who could not be awestruck and mesmerized watching stunt drivers and actors do their tricks that include high-speed spins, two-wheeled driving, high falls and jumps and plenty of amazing feats created for the 5000 spectators? The one that caught my attention the most was the pyrotechnic stunts - explosions and burning up of cars. And then there was a man on fire - literally. I’m sure he was not dead. I know it was fake but it felt so real that I cannot help but scream: “OMG! How did they do that?!” I couldn’t explain the exact science behind it. What I keep on thinking was that fact that the man was burning but he was not burned and turned to ashes. He was not consumed by the fire!

You know where I am going with this story. Because there is a phenomenon in today’s Exodus passage that continues to keep me wondering – maybe you are too. It is this famous story of Moses and the burning bush that was on fire but was not consumed. Who can forget Moses? He was that refugee baby hidden in a basket by his sister, Miriam, who was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter, and lived like a prince. In his adult life, however, in a fit of compassion and outrage, Moses defended his Hebrew heritage by killing an Egyptian. He ran for his life after that incident, became an exile in the desert of Midian, married Zipporah, one of Jethro’s 7 daughters and became a settled, domesticated sheep herder, a husband and a father. Despite his so-called secured life, the Moses we meet today is a Moses who seems to be bored—a modulated, moderated, midlife Moses with a comfortable, cautious, careful outlook on life. A Moses who "has nothing to get excited about." A Moses who seems to have had all the passion

squeezed out of his life. Yes, Moses' life has become predictable, his God has become vague, and his dreams and gifts have become buried in the dust of the desert.

Today's story tells us that Moses led his sheep across the arid sand to a place called Horeb. The word "Horeb" means "wasteland," and we must wonder if it describes not only the terrain of the desert, but also the terrain of Moses' soul. It was at that point in his life that Moses needed to accept the "challenge" – only this time, it was not the sound of blaring trumpets that awakened his senses, but a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire. It is important to note that the bush was not consumed. God does not destroy, but rather enkindles.

The burning bush. As soon as I say these words at this time, I'm sure your minds turn from a Moses desert scene in our text today to the wildfires that have been raging in Canada and many parts of the United States, particularly that of Maui Island. As of March this year, did you know that all 13 provinces and territories have been affected with wildfires? With the largest fires in Alberta, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec? 2023 has seen the most wildfires in Canada's recorded history. According to statistics, as of September 1st, more than 6000 fires had burned about four percent of the entire forest area of Canada. There are over 1000 wildfires that were currently active, and about 700 of those were deemed "out of control". We all know that smoke emitted from those wildfires has caused air quality alerts and evacuations, not to mention the death of living things, particularly people, wild animals, plants and trees. The beautiful verdant and colourful landscape has been replaced by grey, charred ashes. They were consumed by fire. We asked, "how did this happen"? We point to nature, climate change, global warming and humans as the culprits. There is one thing that we can do. We need to pay attention – to pray and to act with vigilance and hope.

In his blog, *Interrupting the Silence*, Rev. Mike Marsh defined the burning bush as "*those circumstances or events that interrupt life and grab our attention. They are not part of our plans. They take us by surprise. They stop us in our tracks and cause us to turn aside. Burning bushes come to us ---, sometimes in positive and welcome ways and other times, not.*" The unconsumed burning bush caught Moses' attention and said, "*I must turn aside and look at this great sight.*" Moses did not run away in fear. Instead, he became curious as to why this burning bush was not consumed. There must be an explanation – perhaps a scientific or a

mysterious reason, that will give him the answers he was looking for. When Moses turned aside and looked, his curiosity led to a more profound discovery. He experienced a theophany - an appearance of God, the divine. It also led to an epiphany – a recognition of God’s presence. A voice coming from the bush told Moses that he was standing on holy ground and must give proper reverence to the Holy by taking off his shoes. When God finally appears to Moses in that wasteland, Horeb, God converts this wasteland into a holy ground. God does not destroy. God reveals.

Rev. Marsh offered some “what if” questions to understand this burning bush phenomenon:

What if burning bushes are a dime a dozen? Maybe the burning bush is not unique to Moses. The rabbis of old say that others passed by the bush while it was burning but only Moses turned aside.

What if the miracle of the burning bush, isn't that it wasn't consumed by the fire, but that Moses turned aside? Maybe turning aside to see this thing is the real miracle of this story.

What if the burning bush is a part of each of our lives? Maybe the only question is whether we will turn aside.

What if every burning bush is a call asking for and awaiting a response from us? Maybe the Caller of this call, God, not only wants but needs a response from Moses and from you and me.

I love this God of Moses who chooses surprising ways to appear in a rather unconventional way. In the midst of Moses’ boring, predictable life, God appears in the form of a burning bush - something spectacular enough to get Moses’ attention, something hot enough to spark curiosity. I would like to think that the burning bush signifies Moses’ heart and unwavering passion. The fire did not char Moses’ faith. Instead, Moses was consumed *with* hard questions— perhaps questions about his family back in Egypt, the state of his people, or God’s plans for him. No matter what he was consumed *with*, Moses was about to be consumed *by* God.

What would you do if you encounter a burning bush experience? Or when you notice something spectacular or mysterious? Would you turn aside like Moses? Would you get off the path, or perhaps stop what you're doing and pay attention? How many burning bushes – those moments of grace – do you miss each day because of your most endless capacity to keep walking without paying attention? So often, we have this tendency to walk on, to not notice, to not even get involved. We're busy. Or we're too swallowed up by our Horeb moments – our wasteland landscapes that we forget that God is waiting for us to be more conscious of God's presence. Rational thoughts and our tendency to prove the mysterious keep us from turning aside. We don't really believe in these kind of visions – these theophanies or epiphanies. But Moses turned aside and became curious. It was in that moment that God called him to a holy ground. Will you like Moses, turn aside, take your shoes off and respond to God's call?

Friends, paying attention is a spiritual practice. If we desire authentic spirituality, we need to turn aside and pay attention - to resist escaping and evading. We pay attention in order to offer reverence and reverence requires a willingness to take detours, side trips, which were not part of the original plan. Philosopher Paul Woodruff says that *“Reverence is the recognition of something greater than oneself- something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding.”*

Let me close with an excerpt of a poem written by a Welsh poet and Anglican priest, R.S. Thomas:

*Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,
nor hankering after an imagined past.
It is the turning aside like Moses
to the miracle of the lit bush,
to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once,
but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Amen.