



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Paying Attention”

Exodus 2:23-3:6

September 3, 2017

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What gets your attention? We preachers know we’ve got just seconds to grab your attention as a sermon begins. If we don’t get it now we might not get another chance. So before you read the hymnal or count the flowers in the ceiling above me, consider the question: What gets your attention?

I know what gets mine. When my cell phone rings and I see the call comes from our daughter, in Santiago, Chile or from our older son, who is climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro as I speak, that gets my attention. Phones, watches, our ever present list of things to do, news about Houston and the Texas gulf coast—what gets your attention?

And then there’s the Grand Canyon. Apparently the average visitor spends between eight to fifteen minutes actually looking at the South Rim. Maybe that visitor explores other parts of the Canyon, maybe not.¹ Tourists drive for hours to get to the Grand Canyon for fifteen minutes. If the Grand Canyon can’t get our attention, what chance does God possibly have?

How does God get our attention? I think back to elementary school. At the beginning of the year my teacher, Mrs. Coleman, would take roll by calling our names. We all knew the proper response; “Here.” When we said “Here,” it let her know we were present, ready to learn. And sometimes we really were!

These days, I’m aware how difficult it is to truly be present in any given moment; to be “here,” now. Many of us arrive at our destination, still partially somewhere else.² Cultivating our spiritual lives involves facing this reality, acknowledging how distracted we are. It’s work to show up to where we actually are now, to resist escaping, to pay attention to a given moment: this given moment. It is a kind of labor. It is hard work, holy work.

Prior to our scripture reading, young adult Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Under Pharaoh such displays of excessive force are an everyday occurrence. It’s unclear why this particular act of violence gets Moses’ attention, but it does. Something in him snaps. Scripture says he “looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Exodus 2:12). In that moment his life of privilege ends. Suddenly Pharaoh isn’t the only source of violence. Moses may be a hero, but he is also a threat. He becomes an outlaw on the run. He heads into the desert, roasting in daylight, freezing at night. He starts a new life. Moses finds a job tending sheep. He marries and becomes a father.

¹ Rev. Cathlynn Lewis’s sermon on paying attention has shaped my own. <http://ucup.org/multimedia-archive/the-practice-of-paying-attention-sermon-series-on-altar-in-the-world-by-barbara-brown-taylor/>

² *Ibid.*

On a work day, performing his shepherding tasks, Moses leads his flock to a mountain beyond the wilderness. He walks by a bush. He notices something odd about it. It is blazing, on fire. But the bush itself is whole and untouched.

We Presbyterians belong to the Reformed Tradition. For hundreds of years, within Christianity, almost every Reformed denomination has incorporated the burning bush into its logo. For instance, the logo of the Presbyterian Church in Canada is on your bulletin cover. Their website says,

The burning bush reminds us of the bush that Moses saw. It was burning but was not destroyed. Presbyterians are deeply committed to being the church, the Body of Christ, which can never be destroyed.³

The burning bush also appears in the logos of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Singapore, Brazil, Malaysia; you get the idea.

Historically each of these churches was birthed out of conflict, you could say, under fire. Each of their logos has to do with being burned but not consumed. Our own Presbyterian Church, (USA) logo has a flame in it. Until this week I assumed the flames were symbols of the Holy Spirit. But when I read the fine print about our seal on the PC (USA) website I learned:

The flames themselves convey a double meaning: a symbol of revelation ... when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and ... the beginning of the Christian church ... at Pentecost...⁴

We Reformed Christians can't seem to get away from the burning bush! It keeps our focus on what is most important—revelation, God's word, and unmediated access to the holy. In other words, God can show up anytime, anywhere, on a special occasion or in the daily routine. God can and will interrupt us anywhere; God isn't a respecter of boundaries.

For centuries our tradition has been drawn to the burning bush. And so was Moses. It was an ordinary work day. The Bible says he walks by a bush. It's blazing, on fire. But the bush itself is whole and untouched. I'd like to think if I noticed something like a burning bush out of the corner of my eye, I'd turn aside; I'd step off the path. Wouldn't you? Of course we would.

Except... often, I'm busy. I tell myself I'll come back later. And so I'll walk on by. I have reasons to keep walking. We all have good reasons to keep on going. Besides, visions aren't part of our daily lives. Rational thought keeps us from turning aside.⁵

The angel of the Lord appeared ...in a flame of fire out of a bush... Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." (Exodus 3:2-3)

Moses, flawed as he is, turns aside. He gets off the path.

³ presbyterian.ca/wp-content/uploads/pcc_symbols_of_the_church.doc

⁴ <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/stated-clerk/stated-clerk/seal/>

⁵ Op cit., Lewis sermon.

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” (Exodus 3:4)

Catch the implication here. When God sees that Moses turns aside, God calls to him; in other words, if Moses hadn't turned aside, God might not have called. As if Moses' turning aside signals he's open to the Holy, willing to listen to God.

Moses stops and pays attention. He shows up. He is all there. Could it be that if we turned aside more often, God would speak more often? It's a risk worth taking. Yes, we may turn aside and hear nothing. Or turn aside and hear something. How do we differentiate God's voice from our own imagination? After all, we Reformed Christians believe our imaginations themselves are profound gifts from God, used by God. Such questions of discernment are worth asking, worth risking; they are timeless human questions.

Moses surely faces such questions himself. A burning bush? A voice in the bush? Am I crazy?⁶ Yet he takes off his shoes. He digs his toes into the sand, he stands on holy ground.

Paying attention is a time tested spiritual practice. But we lose touch with it. The daily pace, the volume of information careening at us, numbs us to our own lives. Paying attention is a way to push through the numbness, to reclaim our identity as God's beloved. Author Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *An Altar in the World* writes:

*Paying attention can be as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. ...paying attention requires no equipment, no special clothes, no greens fees or personal trainers. You do not even have to be in particularly good shape. All you need is a body on this earth, willing to notice where it is.*⁷

On August 21 many of us put on special glasses and turned our faces skyward to watch the eclipse. I stood on the sidewalk outside our home, across from a local elementary school. Kids, teachers and staff gathered on the grass and playground. We put work aside. We stopped and paid attention. Some might not name such an experience as holy, but the story of Moses and the burning bush invites us to claim it as a communal moment on holy ground.

I mentioned the Reformed Tradition and our affection for the burning bush. Eastern Orthodox Churches also embrace it. They emphasize how in the bush Moses gets to see God's glory. In other words, Moses witnesses eternal things. From that day on he becomes a kind of burning bush himself.

Back to the Grand Canyon. Earlier I noted that an average visitor only stays for fifteen minutes. That's not long. But in many cases, fifteen good minutes gazing at the Grand Canyon are enough to make an impression that lasts a lifetime. Some even say the Canyon, in the sun, is a burning bush, a glimpse of glory.

Our tradition claims that every day at every moment, we stand on holy ground. God calls to us, God continually calls our name. Our job is to follow our curiosity, to pay attention, to turn aside and see. Every day our job is to say what Moses said, “Here I am, Lord. Here I am.” Amen.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, p. 33-34.

