

Exodus 3:1-15
Romans 12:9-21

TURNING ASIDE TO SEE

This is going to sound like a Texas-tall tale to you, but it really is a true story! My grandparents lived in St. Louis but they also had a place in the country, in the beautiful Missouri Ozarks. It was my “home away from home” and I loved to go there occasionally on the weekends and summer vacation. As a boy, I would roam the fields, walk in the woods, and swim in the east fork of the Black River. One time I came out of the house and I spotted a hummingbird hovering near some petunias that were in a flower pot on the front porch. I quietly walked up behind the bird. That hummingbird was so intent on drinking the nectar from those flowers that he didn’t notice me at all. Very slowly, I cupped my hands around the small bird and caught it in my bare hands. I held it gently for about five seconds as I admired its bright green, iridescent color and its ruby throat; I could feel its tiny heart beating rapidly against my gentle touch. I had seen enough so I opened my hands, and that hummingbird shot out of my soft grasp and was gone. I still find it hard to believe myself, but it really did happen just as I described it! Have you ever experienced a strange and wondrous natural phenomenon like that one? If so, I would love to hear your story sometime.

One day, Moses, our spiritual ancestor in the faith, was keeping his father-in-law’s flock when he happened upon an unusual sight. A bush was on fire, burning brightly, and yet, it was not consumed. Curiosity took hold of Moses and he turned aside to see and investigate this matter further. In doing so, he got more than he bargained for because God called to Moses and told him, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then, Yahweh told Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt... the cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”

Moses was attentive to all that Yahweh was saying; after all, God’s people were Moses’ people as well! Certainly, Moses was supportive of God’s plan to deliver the Israelites. But then the Lord threw Moses “a change-up” when he said, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Moses balked and protested as he sputtered, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” But Yahweh cut him off and said, “I will be with you... when you bring my people out of Egypt.” Moses again objected and countered with what would the Israelites think when Moses told them “the God of your ancestors has sent me to you.” “What is his name? What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM

WHO I AM... I AM has sent me to you.”

Dawn Darwin Weaks helped me to see that when Moses asked the question, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” Yahweh didn’t answer him. Instead, God said, “I AM.” God didn’t say anything about who Moses was at all. God said who God is. In other words, Moses (and Randy), it’s not about you. It’s not about your abilities or inabilities. It’s not about your comfort or your convenience. It’s not about who you are at all. Tell them that the God of their ancestors has sent you to them – the God, who keeps promises; the God, who does miracles; the God, who gives us a new start. Moses said, “Who am I?” And God said, “I AM. And I will go with you.” God calls us to believe that who God is matters more than who we think we are. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Summer 2005, p. 25)

More than anything else, this biblical text encourages us to turn aside from our many preoccupations and see... God! We are summoned to stop, look, and listen for God is present with us as well. Our lives are so cluttered with noise and dazzling distractions that it’s easy to keep our attention on everything else other than the One, who matters the most. It’s been said that we find what we are looking for, and that is true to a large degree. However, from a theological viewpoint, we have not found God; rather, God has found us, claimed us, and loves us now and forever. God has come looking for us – just as God did with Moses – and God is present and at work in our own lives and in the life of this church.

That being the case, we not only need to turn aside from the worldly distractions around us, we are also called to turn aside from an inner preoccupation with self so that we can see and serve others in need. God does not work alone. God enlisted Moses for the divine purposes. Just as in the story, God took an ordinary bush, using it as an extraordinary medium of revelation, so also God took this rather ordinary man, Moses, and did some extraordinary things with him and through him. God used Moses as the messenger and the means by which Pharaoh was put on notice – “Let my people go... or else!” God could have strong-armed Pharaoh and forced him to release the Israelites, but God chose instead to use Moses to get the job done. So also, God has called and commissioned us as coworkers. We are sent forth to be instruments of peace through whom God can work to bring about his holy will. Our task is to turn aside from overly selfish pursuits in order to reach out to and minister to others. And, when we turn aside from a focus on self and turn toward others, do you know what we will see – actually, not what but Who will we see? The answer is found in one of Jesus’ parables: “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited

you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25. 37-40). That’s right, when we turn from our self-centered agendas and serve others in need, in the process, we will see and be noticed by King Jesus.

Finally, I would like to mention one more area of our lives that we need to turn aside from in order that we can see so much more. In the Exodus passage, after God had told Moses of the needs and hardships of the Israelite children and just how harsh the Egyptian taskmasters treated God’s people, God informed Moses that he was to go to work on the problem. And, what did Moses do? Immediately, he protested, made excuses, grumbled and complained a lot, and said, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Despite Moses’ objections, God overruled him, saying, “I will be with you... I AM has sent you.”

Clearly, God was calling Moses, and God is telling us, to turn aside from dwelling on the problems and turn toward God in order to see the possibilities. We have the vantage point of history. We can look back at the Exodus, the Babylonian exile, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If God overcame those problems, if God conquered evil, sin, and death (and God did!), then surely God can help us to turn aside from the problems that beset us, and help us see God at work (perhaps even through you and me) to find solutions that lead to peace and fulfill God’s holy purposes.

I remember, years ago, I taught a Presbyterian Women’s Bible study and the author made the point that the written Chinese character for the word “crisis” could also be translated as “opportunity.” Isn’t that the truth! What we look at as a dead-end or a closed door, God can bust through, knock down, or create another opening. There are a lot of good things that take place here in our church on a regular basis, week in and week out; our recent Coming Home event is an excellent case in point. However, we do have concerns that can distract us from being Christ’s church. We have differing and strong opinions about a number of items.

This past week, I went to see my good friend, Nancy Dawson, who serves as the General Presbyter of this Presbytery of the Peaks, and in the course of our conversation, I shared some of the issues facing us at FPC. For the most part, Nancy extended grace to me by listening. Then, she offered several suggestions as to how we can begin to get a handle on these problems. God sent Nancy to me, just as God once sent Moses to the Israelites to lead them out of oppression and into a land of promise. Nancy reminded me that God is in control and God will take all of these concerns and will fashion something quite beautiful and meaningful from them.

What I want to pass on to you, my beloved flock, is this: let us

covenant anew to turn aside from grumbling and fault-finding, and let's work together to bring peace and health to our congregation. Let us turn aside from tearing down, and instead, let us joyfully and compassionately build up one another. On our own, this might be seen as a monumental task, but we have the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. God is indeed with us and will empower us.

Let us turn aside from negativity and let us turn toward being positive and hopeful. We must take seriously our calling to be Christians. And what is that calling? We find the answer as we listen to the Word of God for us, given to us by the Apostle Paul in today's suggested epistle reading. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible into contemporary language (The Message, pp. 2055-2056). Listen to the Word of the Lord reading from Romans 12:9-21:

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.' Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Having heard the Word of God, let us do the Word of God – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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