

Sermon for Zion, August 19, 2018

Hymns: 67 – Thou shalt arise; 646 – Lead me, Jesus; 634 – Will you come and follow me; 592 – I, the Lord of sea and sky

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-15, Mark 1:16-20

Sermon Title: “To Turn Aside”

*Exodus 3:1-12 (NRSV)*

*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... 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.”*

Mark 1:16-20 New Living Translation (NLT)

*One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him.*

*A little farther up the shore Jesus saw Zebedee’s sons, James and John, in a boat repairing their nets. He called them at once, and they also followed him, leaving their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired men.*

Dana and I spent 10 days of our vacation in Penticton, visiting our friends Suzanne and Glenn, who were kind enough to take us on scenic drives into the mountains in south-central British Columbia. We saw some lovely mountains, some astonishing glaciers – snow-covered, despite near 40 degree heat – and we would have seen even pointier mountains in the distance, if it hadn’t been for the smoke.

I'm sure you heard about the many fires in British Columbia this summer. We very nearly cancelled our trip just a week before we were scheduled to go, when evacuation orders were given for communities close by Penticton. But go we did, and thankfully so, for we saw and tasted wonderful things, and shared special moments with friends. But there was smoke. And there was fire. Often close-by. I asked a winemaker if the smoke would affect the taste of his wine. He said maybe they would call that vintage, "Old Smokey." I suggested, instead, "Burning Bush," with a picture of Moses on the label. Which got me thinking about the Scripture this morning.

Moses is working for his father in law, Jethro, as a shepherd. Not exactly what he was trained for, growing up in the royal household of Egypt, but here he is, shepherding the sheep, sometimes leading, sometimes following. This time the flocks take him out of the wilderness country, all the way to the foot of Mount Horeb, which, because of the ominous clouds which often gather near its peak, people called the Mountain of God.

Moses' thoughts are here and there, firmly rooted in the mundane as he checks the flock for stragglers, drifting now and then to pass the time, occasionally wondering if there really was a God on this mountain. When he sees something.

At first he doesn't know what it is that caught his eye. Then he spies an orange glow, a bush, somehow burning, somehow not. He looks, he squints, he wonders, he scratches his head, he pulls at his beard, he does not move. The sheep have by now wandered off, as sheep do, but Moses stays standing. He should follow the sheep. But he doesn't. Instead, it says, "*he turns aside.*"

He walks closer, slowly, cautiously, easing up on the sight. It is a bush like any other – sumac, maybe, or acacia - but it is ablaze in glorious fire, a fire which burns cold like the stars, which somehow leaves the bush whole, intact, not a leaf out of place, not a twig aflame, not a spark, not a tendril of smoke. His sheep forgotten, he looks, he squints, he wonders, he scratches his head, he pulls at his beard, but still the fire rages, and still the bush remains. And speaks his name.

"*Moses,*" says the bush, says the fire. Moses doesn't hear it the first time, he just registers the sound somewhere in his mind, while the rest of him stands amazed at the miracle of the burning bush. "*Moses,*" comes the voice again, and this time Moses hears, gives a start, drops his jaw, looks this way, that, then back at the bush.

"*Here I am,*" says Moses. What else could he say? He takes a step towards the bush, to see if there is someone behind.

"*Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*" Moses stops in mid stride, frozen, looking to the ground. Moses knows ground, having walked plenty of it in his years, through the hills, through the desert, through the palaces of Egypt, through the pastures of his sheep. It looks like any other ground. It is the voice, which makes it holy. He takes off his sandals, and crouches low.

*“I am the God of your father,”* says the Voice, *“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”* Moses bows low, shuts tight his eyes, buries his face in the dust. His life flashes before his eyes. There are parts he hopes that God cannot see. There are pitifully few he hopes God can see. He crouches lower.

*“The cry of the Israelites has now come to me;”* says the Voice. *“I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come,”* says the Voice, *“I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”*

*“But,”* says Moses, from down in the dust, *“But who am I,”* he says, too terrified to realize he is arguing with the Voice, *“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”*

*“I will be with you;”* says the Voice, *“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.”*

*“But,”* came the voice of Moses from down in the dust, *“Who am I? If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”*

The fire burns brighter, ablaze with the light of the sun. Moses is flat on the ground, he is the ground, his arms up over his head. *“I AM WHO I AM.”*

Pretty dramatic stuff, this, and after each of us has seen Charlton Heston do his Moses bit countless times, it is hard not to envision it in glorious Technicolor Cinemascope, with Cecil B. deMille in the director’s chair, yelling “Bigger! Play it bigger!” everyone cast in heroic proportions, every scene done to the limit, every gesture grand. But I have tried this morning to cast Moses in a slightly less Hestonesque mode, Moses not as hero, but as Everyman, a guy whiling away the hours, thinking everyday thoughts, when God steps in, unexpectedly speaking from out of an unexpected place. Moses, I suppose, as you or me. Moses as you *and* me, as all of us.

Now I don’t mean to show Moses any disrespect, here. After all, Moses is the big gun, the keeper of the tablets, the lawgiver, the Man. Moses is the guy of which the Bible says, *“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10).”* But, despite the stirring eulogy and the wonderful respect accorded Moses, we mustn’t forget that he was human, that he had hopes and fears and successes and disappointments and a temper to watch out for. He was marvelously obedient to God, most of the time, and a man of great faith in God, but not particularly in himself. He made the occasional whopping blunder, enough to prompt a line like this one (Exodus 4:24): *“On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him.”* Not an auspicious beginning. But, things looked up from that point on, and Moses and God got along well enough, to the point that it says (Exodus 33:11), *“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses... as one speaks to a friend.”*

So maybe it is a bit arrogant to say that Moses was just like you and me, but if you look at our story this morning, and put yourself in Moses' sandals, you might learn something about what made Moses tick, and what makes us tick as the people of faith we are, or try to be. Or at least think about someday trying to be.

The story starts out, as you remember, with Moses shepherding his father-in-law's sheep. Moses has done this for forty years, day in and day out. Different sheep, of course, but the job didn't change much, even in forty years. Moses was at work. Moses was at the office. Moses was punching the time card, and walking onto the shop floor. Did he expect a voice from God? Would you? Did he expect his faith to be challenged, his life changed? Would you? At work? At home, doing the dishes, reading the paper, mowing the lawn, making the bed? But doesn't it seem, time and again, that God speaks when people least expect, where they least expect?

He comes, following his sheep, to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. Somehow, his everyday course of events bring him into a situation somehow sacred, somehow alive with the possibility of God coming up in discussion, of God coming into view. Are you surprised when, in the midst of the mundane, the sacred suddenly intrudes? Someone in the office mentions a dying relative, a show they saw, a worry they have. The phone rings at home, and a friend is upset, a child is in trouble, a marriage is on the rocks. "You go to church, don't you?" comes the question. "What about God?" they ask, to you, to no-one in particular. "Where's God when something like that happens?" What do you say? Something? Anything? Does that kind of question belong only in church, or does anyplace become sacred, when God is in the air?

And then the burning bush. "There I was minding my own business, when..." The extraordinary, the unexpected, in the midst of a day like any other. And now the important part: it says (Exodus 3:3), "*Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."*" He turns aside. He is busy, he has a job to do, he has responsibilities, but *he turns aside*. He stops, he takes a moment, *he turns aside*.

This is where we miss the boat. This is where we miss God, where we miss life itself. We miss the chance. We miss the opportunity. We drive by. We don't take a moment, just a moment, to stop and think. We let the one hundred and one little things we really should be doing push us along, and at the end of the day, we look back, having accomplished "x" amount of tasks and busy things, but we know, somehow, that we missed something far more important, if only we could remember what. This is, perhaps, the thing which sets a Moses apart. He stops, he takes a moment, he turns aside. And then?

And then it says, "*When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses!"*"

God speaks when Moses stops, when Moses notices, when Moses turns aside.

How many times has God wanted to speak to us, to move us, to work within and through us, and we were just too busy to turn aside? How many times did God have something in store for us, and we were watching TV? One of the great things about Church on a Sunday morning is that we do take a few precious moments out of the 10,000 minutes of our week to sit and listen. Hopefully, for God.

*And Moses said, "Here I am." He turns aside. He stops to listen. He hears. And he says, "Here I am." He doesn't say, "Not me," although he will think of that later. He doesn't run like hell the other way, which he also maybe doesn't think of 'till later, which I would have thought of first. He doesn't keep on walking, and pretend nothing happened, another great talent of ours. No, the opportunity is there, the moment is now, and he says "Here I am."*

It is coffee break, and a co-worker shakes his head, staring into his cup, and says, "Sometimes I ask myself if any of this means anything." We are on the phone with a friend, and they wonder out loud whether anybody really cares. Out for a stroll in the sun, and someone mentions in passing an old neighbor now in a nursing home, and nobody ever seems to visit. An old friend, we hear, is in Palliative Care. God calls our name. God opens a door. "Here I am," we say, and we reach out, we make ourselves available, we extend a helping hand, an encouraging word rather than a platitude. For once, for once, we don't put it off, we don't let the moment pass. Although we would rather chew nails than tell a co-worker that God cares, although we would think nothing of recommending a restaurant or movie we balk at recommending church, although the last thing we want to do is visit a neighbor in a nursing home who may not even remember who we are, although the thought of entering a room in Palliative Care terrifies us, for once we say, "*Here I am.*" For once, we give God the go-ahead, we make ourselves available, we respond to the opportunity. And what happens?

We know what happened with Moses. God spoke to Moses, and kept on speaking, and Moses kept on listening, sometimes arguing, sometimes afraid, but he kept on listening, and then he did what God inspired him to do, and taking one step at a time, one foot in front of the other, he changed the world. He had help, mind you, and plenty of it, but still, because in the middle of an ordinary day Moses stopped and turned aside, and listened to what God had to say, you and I are here this morning. It all started there. Three thousand three hundred years ago, Moses takes time in his busy schedule, his one hundred and one things he should be doing, and listens, just as you and I are doing here this morning.

In our other reading, someone else takes time, takes a moment, takes a chance: *As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father*

*Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)*

Now, admittedly, Mark is in a hurry here, and doesn't spend a lot of time on this story, leaving us precious little to go on in the way of rationalizations and motivations, but the point is, these guys, like Moses, were just doing what they always did, day in and day out, which in their case was fishing. Jesus walks by. "*Follow me,*" he says, and not much else, and they do. They turn aside. They are busy, they have a job to do, they have responsibilities, but they turn aside. They stop for a moment, they take time in their busy schedule, their one hundred and one things they should be doing, and listen, just as you and I are doing here this morning. And, it says, "*they followed him.*"

One last thing. God tells Moses the plan, that he will deliver the nation from the hand of Pharaoh, that Moses will be the spokesman, that Moses will be the instrument of grace. And then Moses, Moses the everyman, Moses you and me, says what all of us would say, what all of us want to say: "Who, me?" "*Who am I,*" says Moses, "*that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*" Who am I to tell someone about God? Who am I to invite someone to church? Who am I to visit someone in the hospital? Who am I to teach Sunday School? We can feel with Moses the lump of fear rising in our throat. Who, me? Who am I?

God answered Moses' question. He said, "*I will be with you.*" I will be with you. He said that to Moses, and God didn't let Moses down, even when Moses came close to blowing the whole thing. He said "*I will be with you,*" and so he was.

Someone else said much the same thing. "*Remember,*" said Jesus to the disciples; "*Remember,*" said Jesus, to you, to me: "*Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20). I am with you. Always. He said that to Peter and Andrew and James and John, he said that to Mary and Martha and Salome and Priscilla, he said that to us, and Jesus didn't let them down, and Jesus hasn't let us down, even when we've come close to blowing the whole thing, over and over again. He said "*I am with you, always,*" and so he is.

"*Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside...' 'And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me' And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*" May God help us to take the time to listen, wherever we are; may God help us to hear his voice, however it comes; may God help us to turn aside, to drop our nets and say "*Here I am,*" to whatever we are called to do, and so in following him, help bring healing to our hurt and lonely world.

Amen.