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Pentecost Proper 17A
Peace, Seattle
August 28, 2011 epk
Exodus 3:1-15

BURNING BUSH PART I: TURNING ASIDE

This sermon is part one of two on the First Testament reading, the story of Moses and his encounter with God at the Burning Bush. And I've entitled it: TURNING ASIDE.

Like so much of Scripture, to know what's at stake in a particular story we have to have a sense of the larger story. So let's remember the backstory together.

- Joseph's family and tribe, who we've been hearing about the last month, had migrated to Egypt to escape famine, and, while under Joseph's protection, had thrived there.
- But generations passed; the memory of Joseph faded. A new king arose who "knew not Joseph."
- Alarmed at the success of this alien tribe, this Pharaoh heaps more and more tasks on them. They become Egypt's "slave class" and to stem their growth in numbers, Pharaoh orders that all newborn males be drowned.
- Against these odds, a Hebrew woman gives birth to a baby boy hiding him successfully for three months. When she can hide him no longer, she fashions a papyrus basket for him, plasters it with bitumen and pitch, and keeps him secreted in the reeds near the river's bank, under his older sister's watchful eye.
- One day, while bathing in the river, Pharaoh's daughter discovers him there, takes him in, and gives him the Egyptian name: MOSES.

- **Moses grows up with all the privileges of a member of Pharaoh's household.** But eventually he reaches that age when "pat" answers don't work anymore. He starts asking questions, he becomes curious about his origins, and his eyes are opened to the plight of his people.

- One fateful day he witnesses a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian, and he rises to the man's defense, killing the Egyptian.
- When word of this reaches Pharaoh, Moses becomes a fugitive and heads for the hills.
- There he finds a fresh start a wife, a new family, and a new life as a sheepherder for his father in law.

We can imagine Moses, in this "second act" of his life, thinking perhaps: WELL, I GUESS THIS IS IT—I HAVE A LOVING FAMILY, A SIMPLE LIFE, MEANINGFUL WORK.

But all that changed the day that Moses "turned aside."

According to the storyteller, he was tending his father in law's flock in a place beyond the wilderness at Horeb, the mountain of God, when he noticed something…a bush that appeared to be burning and yet was not consumed.

Notice what the text tells us next [verse 3]:

> 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 Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, MOSES, MOSES!

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The bush, you see, this phenomenon that had caught his attention because he was paying attention, was not right in his path. It was over yonder somewhere. **Moses had to decide to leave the path he was on in order to go over and investigate. He had to turn aside.**

Paying attention to what's around us and what's happening within us, is hard to do these days, and it's growing more so. Is it harder than paying attention when you're leading a herd of sheep through a mountain wilderness? I don't know.

There are so many voices, so many distractions calling to us these days; we flash a glance at the latest text message, or the latest news crawling on the bottom of the TV screen, or the latest U-Tube video; and that's about all we have time for—a glance—before moving on to the next thing.

It's hard to know what's essential and what's not.

Ironically, with so much begging for our attention, the practice of paying attention takes time and intention to develop. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> "Most of us move so quickly that our surroundings become no more than the blurred scenery we fly past on our way to somewhere else."[1]

Our first family trip this summer was to Whitefish, Montana, for our biennial Kindem family reunion. The first morning there was a beauty, and I hopped on my bike for a ride up to the Big Mountain ski resort.

After lingering where the road ends, enjoying the view of the Flathead Valley, the Mission Mountains, and peaks of Glacier National Park, I pointed my bike downhill for the descent.

A few years back, the upper half of the six-mile, serpentine road up Big Mountain had been re-engineered, straightening it out considerably. Construction crews had made the route shorter, the road wider, and in the process the steepness of the grade had gone up from about 5% to 9%.

Without the help of gravity, it wasn't long before I hit 40 mph on my descent.
Coming off a long curve I began flying down a ½ mile stretch of straight road, hitting 45 mph and climbing.

At 45 mph on a bike, the only thing you pay attention to is staying upright. There's no looking left, or right, there's no looking over to the lake below or the valley beyond; or even your speedometer. **Everything but the road in front becomes a blur.**

Just at that moment when my inner voice said, ERIK—FAST ENOUGH, the front end of my bike started to shimmy and my handlebars to shake uncontrollably.

That got my attention. I squeezed on my brakes, but cautiously, because it didn't know if doing so would make the shimmying worse and cause me to loose control altogether.

GREAT! I thought. FIRST DAY OF THE REUNION AND I'M GOING TO BE ROAD KILL!

Now somehow—by the mercy of God—in those critical seconds, I was able to slow down enough to bring the bike under control. But even so, the rest of the way down, at half the speed, the shimmy would start creeping in again, until finally I reached the bottom.

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[1] Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) p.24.

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I was never so thankful to be on the valley floor; grateful to have survived a ride that might well have turned out very differently than it did.

For the rest of that week, you can well imagine, I slowed down. **No more blurs; I paid attention.**

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Barbara Brown Taylor says that, to go deeper in the practice of paying attention, to a place of awe and wonder, where we recognize something greater than the self, something beyond our ability to create or control, is to find ourselves in a place of reverence.

And reverence, Taylor suggests, requires a certain pace.
A willingness "to take detours, even side trips, which are not part of the original plan."[2]

The bush that Moses saw from a distance required him to go off trail to investigate. And it's only after he commits to getting off the trail, and the LORD sees that he's done this, that God calls to him out of the bush—MOSES! MOSES! – calls his name.

He didn't need to turn aside, of course. He could have, as Taylor observes,

> "seen the flash of red out of the corner of his eye, said, "OH, HOW PRETTY" and kept right on driving the sheep. He did not know that is was an angel in the bush, after all. Only the storyteller knew that. Moses could have decided that he would come back tomorrow to see if the bush was still burning, when he had a little more time, only then he would not have been Moses. He would just have been a guy who got away with murder, without ever discovering what else his life might have been about. What made him Moses was his willingness to turn aside. Wherever else he was supposed to be going and whatever else he was supposed to be doing, he decided it could wait a minute. He parked the sheep and left the narrow path in order to take a closer look… [and] when he did, the storyteller says, God noticed. God dismissed the angel and took over the bush. MOSES! MOSES!"[3]

HERE I AM, Moses called back.

TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES, says God, YOU'RE STANDING ON HOLY GROUND.

Sometimes it's only when we're cruising along and life starts to shimmy that we start paying attention. But really, does it have to get that bad for us to pay attention?

What does God have to do to get us to pay attention, to get us to turn aside?

Poets are God's allies in helping us develop the practice of turning aside. And it doesn't take much. Listen:

> "There is the heaven we enter
> through institutional grace
> and there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
> in the lowly puddle."
> - Mary Oliver[4]

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Mary Oliver, *Evidence*.

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The August issue of THE LUTHERAN – is on Sabbath keeping.[5] Check it out. At its core, Sabbath is none other than a weekly discipline of turning aside.

Moses turned aside, and that decision made all the difference.

In Seattle, coming to worship is an intentional act of turning aside. It's counter cultural! Coming to listen for God's voice, coming to meet Christ in a meal of bread and wine.

Here's an invitation for the rest of the week:

- Find a place and time where you can unplug,
- Cultivate a sense of expectation that God is waiting for you—calling for your attention, eager to meet you, if only you will turn aside and come.

Now, what might God have waiting for you when you get there? That's the subject of next week's sermon.

Let us pray.

> "Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Oh Holy One, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by Thee, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, "How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it."[6]

Amen.

[5] Link to *The Lutheran Magazine*, August 2011 issue: http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=10100

[6] From Rachel Naomi Remen's collection of stories in her book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000)