

## Noticing the Burning Bush

Rabbis like to tell stories. Maybe that's one way Jesus was like the other rabbis of his time. He liked to tell stories. When they sit down to study a part of the Hebrew scripture, there are two main ways they do it. One is to pick it apart, word by word, sometimes letter by letter, seeking for the hidden treasure in the text. The other way is to seek for deeper understanding by telling stories about what's behind the text, stories that tease out the human motivation and God's motivation and meaning in the stories of our faith. Those stories are called *midrashim*, midrashes. There are many midrashes about this morning's story of Moses, God and the burning bush. One of the questions that is behind some of these stories is, "Why did God choose Moses?"

A good question. As with so many people God chooses, Moses might not have been the first one you or I would have picked. To start with, he had a stammer. Words did not come easily to him. Public speaking was not his best thing. And it was going to take some eloquence to convince both the Israelites and Pharaoh to listen to him. Secondly, Moses had a checkered past. Adopted by an Egyptian princess, raised by his Israelite mother, Moses had a foot in both camps, but was also somewhat distrusted by both camps. And the reason he was herding sheep in the distant land of Midian instead of living in Egypt was that he had killed an Egyptian overseer – an act of anger at injustice, but a murder nevertheless. No, Moses does not seem like the perfect choice.

Rabbi Marc Gellman suggests that God knew the person God would need for the task ahead would need to be patient, and so the burning bush was a test of patience, as Moses settled in to watch and see what happened. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who some of you may remember as the author of "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People" has a different idea. He suggested that Moses was the one who paid attention.

Who knows how many other fires God set in the wilderness. Who knows how many shepherds, wrapped up in their own business, ignored it and walked

by without even noticing. Who knows how many more glanced at it, didn't notice anything special, didn't notice that the bush burning but it wasn't burning up, and continued chasing sheep. But Moses, of all those possible people, noticed and paid attention, turned aside from the normal course of his life for an interruption, and found himself on holy ground, listening to the voice of God.

It makes me wonder how much we miss when we fail to pay attention. In our clicking, beeping, swiping world there are so many things to distract us from what is beautiful and full of wonder and full of God. This week, I heard that some of the promos on football games will be only six seconds long. How do we hear the cries of our brothers and sisters when we only pay attention for six seconds or less?

For the last fifteen years or so, there has been talk of the need for church to be more missional. That doesn't mean sending more money to overseas missions. It means that the mission field is right here where we are, where so many people have moved away from church, moved away from faith and never knowingly experienced the love of Jesus. The missional church folks say that if we are going to make an impact in the community where we live, the first thing we have to do is pay attention. Pay attention to the needs of those around us, pay attention to where God is already at work in the world outside the church, and go there.

I remember a day maybe ten years ago when I noticed a dad and his daughter walking through our church parking lot. I'd seen them before and rushed on with barely a smile and a nod, but that day, for some reason, I paid attention. I stopped to talk and to listen and to hear a little bit of a story. The dad I met in our parking lot was Jim Wurster, who is our key partner in Our Community Cup Coffeehouse. In that moment of paying attention, in that brief conversation, a seed was planted for a relationship that would lead our church in a new direction.

It's not only about who and what we pay attention to. If you listen carefully in this story, you'll notice that God is also paying attention. God asks Moses to pay attention because God has been hearing the cries of the Israelites, seeing their suffering at the hands of their taskmasters. God has been paying attention and decided to act. And because God pays attention, Moses- and we – must also pay attention.

It would be easier if we didn't stop to pay attention. We could just get on with our lives and continue watching that flock of sheep in Midian. Life would be so much calmer and less complicated if we didn't turn aside to pay attention to a burning bush. Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook wrote last week, "If I had not seen and heard the Word of the Lord – the Word that says: **"I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cries and, oh, by the way, I am sending you to break the rod of their oppressor"** – then I could go about my business watching my father-in-law's flocks. **The pay isn't great and the work often dull, but at least I am not in Pharaoh's crosshairs out in the field (and the people aren't looking to me for leadership).**

But if you miss the bush and you spend the rest of your life with the sheep, you miss out on so much as well. You miss the voice of God, you avoid the Holy Ground. Yes, you miss the struggle and the complaining, but you also miss the wonder and glory of mountaintop moments. You miss the chance to act on God's behalf, to be part of God's liberating, faithful work with God's people.

I guess the question at the moment is to what do we pay attention? There are so many places demanding God's attention just now, so many places affected by storm and flood, earthquake and fire, war and poverty and addiction. God's ears must be ringing with the cries of the people from so many different places. God's eyes must be weeping with the sights God has seen.

The answer to that is to keep paying attention: Pay attention to where God is calling you in particular. Surely there were other places demanding

God's attention at the same time, but God sent Moses to the Israelites. And pay attention to where you – uniquely you – can make a difference.

Because you, one person as you are, imperfect as you are, can make a difference. Throughout his whole encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses keeps bringing up reasons why God should send someone else. God keeps coming back at him with answers to all his objections, and at the heart of all God's answers is this answer: I'll be with you, and I'll give you all you need.

That's God's promise to each of us, if we only pay attention.