

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD

The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence

Promptings offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Exodus 3:1-6

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 Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight,
and see why the bush is not burned up.'***

Exodus 3:3

The Moses we encounter today is a man who seems to have slipped into the mundane busyness of life. Moses is taking care of himself and his family in Midian and staying out of trouble. This same Moses – who started out as a political refugee in a basket, who became the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, who in a fit of compassion and outrage defended his Hebrew heritage by killing an Egyptian, who as a wanted murderer became an exile in the distant desert of Midian, who rescued the seven daughters of Jethro from attack – this Moses...this passionate, rebellious, and complex man has become a settled, domesticated sheep herder, a husband and a father. He is an owned man now, answerable to his in-laws for both his security and his wealth. Moses' life has become predictable, his God is vague, and his dreams and gifts have become buried in the dust of the desert.

The text tells us that Moses led his sheep across the arid sand to a place called Mt. Horeb. The word "Horeb" means "wasteland," and we must wonder if it describes not only the terrain of the desert, but also the terrain of Moses' very life. It is into Moses' middle-aged settled, hum-drum, ho-drum busyness that God appears, turning the wasteland into holy land.

Perhaps because Moses' numbness is so thick, God chooses to appear in a rather unconventional way. All of a sudden, in the midst of Moses' ordinary, mundane life fire appears...a burning bush. Finally, there is something spectacular enough to get Moses' attention, something hot enough to spark his curiosity. With clever intentionality, God commands Moses' attention. And that's what burning bushes are meant to do, aren't they? They are meant to get our attention! And through these burning bushes God has a perverse way of blasting through our numbness and malaise, a way of stopping us in our busyness. And we can either ignore them, continuing our plodding pace of predictability, or we can "turn aside," curious as to what this conflagration is all about!

Taylor, true to her brilliant and playful exegetical skills, says:

Moses' life changed one day while he was tending his father-in-law's sheep. According to the storyteller, he had led the flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God, when an angel of God appeared to him in a burning bush. The bush was not right in front of Moses, however. It must have been over to the side somewhere, because when Moses saw it, he said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

The bush required Moses to take a time-out, at least if he wanted to do more than glance at it. He could have done that. He could have 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 it 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 at a marvelous sight. When he did, the storyteller says, God noticed. God dismissed the angel and took over the bush. "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'"

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pgs. 24-25)

Before I go any further, let me offer a confession. Call me a hypocrite if you want, call it a classic case of projection if you must, but while I preach and insist that people slow down and look and listen and pay attention to their life if they ever want to experience God, I find myself, more often than I care to admit, not practicing what I preach...not practicing what Wisdom knows to be right and good!

I find myself, more often than not, running around, as they say in Kentucky, "like a chicken with my head cut off!" And like Moses, I find myself tending the needs of my own flock, the sheep of my life, if you will, responding to their needs, both real and imagined, saying yes to one more task than I should, following a calendar that is way overbooked, making sure the family is fed and the laundry is done, all the while ignoring the One who calls me to stop, slow down and take time to pay attention to the life that is before me, and there, right there...in the paying attention... experience God!

Earlier this week, as I started to think about preaching a sermon on this theme from Barbara Brown Taylor's book on "The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence" I started to get anxious. How in the world was I ever going to get the sermon done with all that I had going on?! There was a lot to do last week. There were the weekly administrative details that needed my attention, there were e-mails (lots of emails) that needed to be replied to, there was the worship order for this service that needed to be put together, there was *This Week at the Creek* that needed to be written, and there lots of meetings on the agenda that needed to be attended.

On top of all of that I needed to finalize plans for worship for this fall, there were many details that needed to be addressed concerning our upcoming HOLY C.O.W. weekend, and there were many people in our congregation I wanted to visit and call with words of care, prayer and concern.

And on top of all of that it was Dan's birthday this past Friday (the big 44!)...so there was a birthday dinner to prepare and a house and lawn to bring up to some respectable condition before my parents and my mother-in-law came to visit this weekend and celebrate Dan's birthday with us. AND, there was a super, spectacular sale at JCPenney's, and we had some great coupons that could be used ONLY on Thursday or Friday of this past week...and time was of the essence...school starts next week...and we need some school clothes!.

I think you get the picture.

And in the midst of all of that busyness and anxiety I bumped into this passage from Exodus and the story of the burning bush...and, well, my gig was up! This story was for me, and for you, and for ALL of us who are overcome, overwhelmed and addicted to busyness. This is a story of a person who turned aside from the busyness of his life and in so doing encountered the LIVING GOD!

And it was there...right there...in the turning aside, when Moses left the sheep to wander...when Moses stepped away from his normal routine in order to pay attention to the remarkable sight right under his nose...it was there and then, and only then, that God speaks to Moses out of the bush.

WOW! Those were the good ole days! To encounter burning bushes, to hear angels, to witness pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night, to walk between parted seas on dry ground...all of those incredible and fantastic signs of God's presence... Who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't want such clear and specific direction, just one burning bush to call us by name and tell us what to do?

But I stay so busy most of the time, I honestly wonder if I would even notice it. A burning bush? Where? I didn't see it. A burning bush? I don't have time for this! A burning bush? There must be a reasonable explanation. A burning bush? Someone, please put it out!

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
each common bush aflame with God.
Yet only he who sees takes off his shoes.
The rest set around and pluck blackberries.*

Or tend sheep. Or write sermons. Or run errands. Or say yes so much there is no time left for paying attention.

Thank goodness what we are talking about are *practices*. We are not talking about things you buy, or acquire, or once you "get it" you've got it forever. In our faith journey we never arrive...but we keep on practicing...we keep trying to be open to and engaged with God. And it helps to surround yourself with a practicing community who can remind you of the importance of practice...offer you opportunities to actually practice...and encourage you to keep on practicing along the way!

For those of you who like to pay attention to what is going on around here, I like to share my sermon topics and themes in advance. And I am especially getting a kick out of having so many of you read along with me in our Cross Creek-sort-of- version of the "big read." I am so thrilled by the many positive and affirming comments I have already heard about your experience with Barbara Brown Taylor's book AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD. And by golly, this past week several of you even sent me some potential sermon material IN ADVANCE on this very theme of "paying attention," which is always greatly appreciated! I long for the day when the sermon can be more of a community effort than a solo enterprise!

Well, out of the submissions I received this week, Kathy Swenson is the winner! She sent me a story I couldn't pass up! And this particular story even checks out as "true" on SNOPE.com:

Washington DC Metro Station on a cold January morning in 2007. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time approximately two thousand (2,000) people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After 3 minutes a middle aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule.

4 minutes later:

The violinist received his first dollar: a woman threw the money in the till and, without stopping, continued to walk.

6 minutes:

A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

10 minutes:

A 3 year old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly, as the kid stopped to look at the violinist. Finally the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. Every parent, without exception, forced them to move on.

45 minutes:

The musician played. Only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32.

1 hour:

He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100.

Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities. The questions raised: In a common place environment at an inappropriate hour, do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent in an unexpected context?

One possible conclusion reached from this experiment could be: If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world playing some of the finest music ever written, with one of the most beautiful instruments...How many other things are we missing? (<http://www.snopes.com/music/artists/bell.asp>)

According to the old play, Our Town, by Thornton Wilder, Emily Gibbs had died during childbirth as a young woman and was buried in the cemetery on the hill, high above Grover's Corners. Through the miracle of play writing, she was allowed to return to life for one day. Emily is counseled against such a choice by the others in the cemetery but she insists.

Emily returns to relive her 12th birthday. The scene opens on her 12th birthday. Her mother is in the kitchen, busy with pots and pans, preparing for another meal, another day. Everyone in the family seems busy – too busy to notice each other or to touch each other. At one point, Emily is so frustrated that she pleads: "Oh, mama, look at me one time as though you really saw me."

She feels life going by so fast, too fast to notice it. Emily finally has had enough. She can't go on and asks to be taken back to the cemetery on the hill. But, first she must have one more look. Listen to her goodbyes: "Goodbye, earth. Goodbye, Grover's Corners. Goodbye, mama and papa. Goodbye to clocks ticking and to Mama's sunflowers and to food and coffee and new ironed dresses and to hot baths and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anyone to realize you. Does anyone ever realize life while they live it? Or, are we blind to it all?"

And the stage manager answers Emily's rhetorical questions: "The saints and poets, maybe – they do some." The saints and poets do...they realize life while they live it. The saints and poets do...sometimes!

More than sometimes...I am grateful and amazed at the great cloud of witnesses who surround us, who testify to the wisdom of paying attention to this one, precious life we have; who proclaim that God is not found separate from the world of time and space, but that God is found in the right here, right now, is-ness of life. Yes, the saints and poets, the artists and writers and musicians, the gardeners and birdwatchers, the scientists and mystics can, and often do call us to pay attention to the miracle of life and the very life-giving presence of God that is pulsating and real and right in front of our noses!

Like the artist Georgia O'Keefe, the great painter of flowers, who said:

"When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not..."

Nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small it takes time - we haven't time - and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time...

So I said to myself, I'll paint what I see-what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking the time to look at it--I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

Like the folk singer Carrie Newcomer, who with her Quaker spirituality in tow, helps us imagine an expansive communion with God that stretches far beyond a church sacrament to the ordinariness and everydayness of life if we would but only pay attention. And in her song, "Betty's Diner," she describes a powerful communion of the saints and the God who is discovered even in the midst of a local diner:

*here we are all in one place
The wants and wounds of the human race
Despair and hope sit face to face
When you come in from the cold
Let her fill your cup with something kind
Eggs and toast like bread and wine
She's heard it all so she don't mind*

And if you don't get what Newcomer is talking about in her song, she makes it crystal clear in the bridge:

*You never know who'll be your witness
You never know who grants forgiveness
Look to heaven or sit with us*

In other words, you can look and long for heaven, and ignore life on this earth all you want; you can keep waiting for the sweet bye and bye until life itself has passed you by; or...OR...you can "sit with us;" you can find life and love and forgiveness and grace and GOD...right here...among us...ON EARTH as it is in heaven...if you pay attention.

Like the poet Mary Oliver, who so often knows how to say it just right. In her poem, called "Praying" she says:

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few*

*small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

Like the writer and a saint among us Barbara Brown Taylor says:

The practice of paying attention is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. To see takes time, like having a friend takes time. It is as simple as turning off the television to learn the song of a single bird. Why should anyone do such things? I cannot imagine – unless one is weary of crossing days off the calendar with no sense of what makes the last day different from the next. Unless one is weary of acting in what feels more like a television commercial than a life. The practice of paying attention offers no quick fix for such weariness, with guaranteed results printed on the side. Instead, it is one way into a different way of life, full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 33)

Like all the other practices in this book, 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, trusting that even something as small as a hazelnut can become an altar in this world. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 34)

Additional resource:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Uncommon Light" from [Mixed Blessings](#), pages 9-16, whose words and insights and excellent exegesis of Exodus 3 are also reflected in this prompting.