

TURN ASIDE
Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Back in March when the governor ordered the shut-down to try to contain the coronavirus, a part of me was delighted. At last, an opportunity to enjoy doing some long overdue reading, trying out some new recipes and being freed from my usual to do list. I thought my biggest worry would be finding enough books to read with the library closed.

Things did not go as anticipated. Committee and board meetings were still being held, only now I had to figure out how to work Zoom, rather than driving to a meeting place. Church went on, but doing church became more complicated and demanding. My grandkids needed a place to go besides home and adults to be with besides their parents, so grandparent duty became regular part of the week. It wasn't long before I had a new and growing to do list. Busyness once again ruled my life.

When this story of Moses came along in the lectionary, I thought, "Now here is a man who may have something to tell me." And, I suspect, for others whose lives are also afflicted with busyness even during shut-down. Here is a busy man, with his own to do list—supporting the wife and kids, protecting the sheep, keeping his father-in-law happy, since the family business was his—the usual responsibilities of life. And yet, here is a busy man who turned aside from all those demands to encounter the living God.

The last we heard of Moses, he was but a baby, whose life was threatened by the king of Egypt, but was saved by a trio of women, his mother, his sister and the daughter of the king. Much happened after that day in the bulrushes. Nursed and cared for by his birth mother, then moved to the royal palace to be raised by the princess, he knew both the oppression of his own people and the privilege of being a member of the royal household. Caught in that bind of divided loyalties, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, his anger exploded and he killed the Egyptian. Afraid of Pharaoh's wrath, he fled Egypt and made his way to Midian, where he married and settled down, presumably planning to hide out for the rest of his life.

Then one ordinary day, knee-deep in sheep, Moses noticed a bush, all aflame but without being destroyed, and he turned aside to investigate. He left the sheep to their own devices, dropped everything and went for a closer look. It has been said that the real miracle in this story was not the bush that was burning but not consumed. It was not that God spoke through the bush. It was not even that God chose to address a fugitive from justice. No, the real miracle is that Moses noticed the bush at all.

But notice he did and when he turned aside, God noticed him and called to him by name. What began as just another day, became the first day of the rest of an

extraordinary new life. Standing before the miraculous bush, Moses found himself in a liminal place, an in-between transformative space, between what was and what would be.

It strikes me that we, too, find ourselves in a liminal space as a nation, a place of transition, of waiting, of not knowing. We have been living in this altered reality of pandemic shut-down and the resulting economic uncertainty and, triggered by the death of George Floyd and others, a renewed crisis of racial injustice. Some day we will look back and see that this was a turning point; we will remember life as it was before Covid and life after Covid. The author and activist Arundati Roy has observed, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”ⁱ

We are also in a liminal space as a congregation. Next Sunday our new Pastor will step into this pulpit for the first time, and a new era will begin. Of course, the past won’t vanish, but Scott will bring to us his unique understanding and experience of ministry and mission. His leadership will steer us in a new direction and help us to claim a vision of what it means to be church in this moment. We are between what was and what will be. I trust that we are ready and eager to discover and to be a part of that future, but for now we are waiting, unsure what will come. As one who has been in such a situation as Scott is now, I can assure you that he, too, is not quite sure what will come. Together we share this in-between space.

Our nation and our church stand in liminal space, and you and I as individual followers of Christ find ourselves there, too. Here is where the model of Moses speaks to me. Moses turned aside. He made the choice to drop his to do list and stop to pay attention to that crazy, fiery bush. Perhaps if we were to drop our lists, cease our busyness for a moment, we too would discover God calling us to a new future. Perhaps we would discover an invitation into the vulnerability that comes with trusting ourselves to God. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven / And every common bush afire with God. / And only those who see, take off their shoes. / The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”ⁱⁱ If she is right—and I believe she is—then our lives are crammed with God and our world is filled with burning bushes. I suspect that, for me, having that to do list is just more comfortable and familiar than risking being scorched by a burning bush. What might God ask me to do if I turned aside? What might I glimpse if I started looking for the possibility of a world filled with the wonder of God? What would it mean to stop and take off my shoes, recognizing that all around me is holiness? What might it mean for any one of us to drop what we are doing and turn aside, to look deep into every bush, every face, every event in our lives, looking for God’s presence and call?

Now, if you, like me, are tempted instead to pluck blackberries or tend sheep or run errands, let me acknowledge, that liminal space, the space between what was and what is next, can be pretty uncomfortable. Moses wasn’t wild about the plan that God had for his life. He came up with excuses—“Who am I to confront Pharaoh? I’m a wanted man back in Egypt; they will throw me in jail. I don’t know your name. I don’t know anything about organizing an exodus. Why should the Hebrew people trust me?”

Right there at that liminal place, Moses started thinking that his old life, the before-the-bush life seemed like a better choice. This new life God had planned seemed impossible, dangerous, frightening.

And, of course, he was right. Leading a group of slaves out of Egypt to freedom, right under the nose of the a powerful king, was impossible, dangerous and frightening. God's answer to Moses' concern? "I will be with you." This God, who had made promises to Moses' ancestors in the past, made the most important promise of all to Moses, to be with him. Moses' inadequacy would not be a problem because God would be with him. And if that were not enough, God tells Moses the divine name—I am who I am. I will be who I will be. Turns out God's name isn't a name at all, but a verb, a verb which proclaims God's freedom and agency, reliability and power. God, who promises to be with you, is living and active, dynamic and present. Nobody will ever wield power over or despite God. This is the One who makes promises, the One who calls people to unexpected and dangerous newness, the One who reaches out in personal relationship, this is the One who promises to be with Moses.

Moses didn't know any more about the task he was given. He didn't have any guarantees of success. He wasn't given any unique abilities. All he was given was the promise, the assurance of God's presence in that unknown future. He could have said, "No thanks," and gone back to herding wayward sheep, but for Moses, that promise was enough.

So here we are in liminal space. Arundati Roy, who observed that a pandemic is a portal to a new world, goes on to say that "we can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."ⁱⁱⁱ It is the choice we are given whenever we find ourselves in this in-between space—to try to recapture the past or step into the God-given future.

Our nation grapples with its brutal past along with a crisis of illness, death, poverty and injustice, while waiting to imagine and build a future that is new and fair for all people. Our church is ready to take a step into a future that God has imagined, a future where we will be called to be God's agents to do the things God has promised. And each one of us, if we are alert to the holiness all around us, if we dare to listen for God's call to turn aside from our ordinary busyness, to take off our shoes and open our hearts, if we believe that God can be trusted, then maybe, just maybe, we will agree to give ourselves to something that matters and take up God's own work of liberation and goodness. In all this, God promises, "I will be with you."

ⁱ Cited on the Summer Book Study, Presbytery of Southern New England, <https/psne.org/summer-2020-book-study-week-six/>.

ⁱⁱ Cited by Barbara Gaddis, "On Plucking Blackberries," *Network News*, Winter 2000, p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Summer Book Study, *op cit*.