

Moses: Turn Aside

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Exodus 3: 1-15

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I never saw the HBO episodes of “Six Feet Under” because I’ve never had HBO. But others—some fervent watchers--told me about that weird drama of members of the Fisher family, who ran a California funeral home. The oldest son in the family, Nate, in the next-to-the-last episode died, (apparently to many viewers’ distress). And, then, in the final episode, Nate reappeared! He came back as a kind of “spiritual advisor,” so to speak, to his friends and to his 20-something sister, Claire. Now, Claire was kind of a mess; she was torn between staying in California or following her passion and moving to New York to be a photographer. Nate spoke to her in his loving voice, "Claire, I spent my whole life being scared, not being ready, not being what I should be, and where did it get me?" In the next scene, Claire is driving across the desert, her red hair flying. She's on her way to Manhattan and to whatever life has in store for her next. (Joanna Adams, “Clarity about Your Calling,” Day 1, 2/12/06)

So here's a question for you: How do you decide about your life direction if you do not have a brother who comes back from the dead to tell you what to do? Well, there are all sorts of guides. Andy Fleming, a well-known ethicist, suggests that you could ask yourself three questions:

- What do I like to do?
- What am I good at?
- What needs to be done in the world?

Where these overlap is "the place where you and I are meant to be" and where we are able to live out our destiny at its fullest. That's a pretty good decision-making process when it comes to deciding what to do next.

But in the Old Testament account of the commissioning of Moses, another decision-maker is obviously at work. What God does to Moses is to challenge him in the opposite direction from those three questions! God, in fact, drags Moses into what must have been the most anguishing moment of his life. Let’s read from Exodus 3:1-4 & 9-12; 4:10-16.

Moses' skills lie in the area of shepherding, and that's exactly what he's doing, tending the flocks of his father-in-law. He’s comfortable and settled in the land of Midian, and God is calling him to step way out of his zone! With our elder Nominating Committee, some of you may soon be among those called to step out of your comfort zone, too, so this sermon may be for your ears especially!

You may recall that Moses, born to Israelite slaves in Egypt, was the Hebrew baby put into a basket to be found among the bullrushes by Pharaoh's daughter; she raised Moses as her own child, so he grew up in Pharaoh's palace. However, one day Moses, a young adult, became angry by the harsh treatment of an Israelite and he murdered the Egyptian, so he fled! When we come across him today, he is away, far away, from all of that. He has gotten his life back together. He's married, he's had a baby, he's enjoying life. Moses has no ambition other than being a shepherd.

But suddenly God appeared in the form of a bush ablaze with fire. What would Moses have thought? He could have blinked twice and turned away, avoiding anything so strange, perhaps fleeing in fear. But Moses made a huge decision. The text reads, *"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.'"* Let's stop and look: what did Moses do? He **turned aside** to see—something most of us would probably do if we came upon something so strange in our field. And there, in a burning bush, God spoke to him. Before God even called out his name, Moses had already responded. He had turned aside. Then God's voice called to him. Moses answered, "Here I am." One moment he's herding his sheep and then suddenly he's talking with God.

The reluctant Moses engaged with God, arguing that he wasn't the right man for the job, that God certainly must be able to find someone who could speak better, or more eloquently, or without stuttering. So God made a deal with Moses that Aaron could be the spokesperson, but God would tell Moses what to have Aaron say. Moses' entry into leadership was just beginning. God apparently knew Moses could do the tasks needed.

At this summer's Presbyterian Women (PW) Gathering, a conference at Masanetta Springs, one speaker was a woman who confessed, "Five years ago I would never have believed that I would be standing here speaking to over 300 women." She went on to explain that she'd quietly attended her church's PW meetings when someone asked her to be part of the council, the church leadership of PW. She took on various positions for a few years, when someone there said, "I think you have the gifts to lead us," and asked her to consider being the PW Chair for her church. With that position came meetings with other PW leaders, who asked her to preside as a PW officer for the presbytery. She now was speaking to the women of the whole Presbytery. It was the people who saw and affirmed her gifts that gave her confidence each time, and each time she decided to go ahead and try. She herself would not have even considered such tasks, but when others encouraged and nudged her, she was stretched and grew into leadership. She had been willing first to listen, and then to consider whether God was speaking to her through those women.

Moses, who had begun as a simple shepherd, would also grow into leadership. As God led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years, Moses' gifts developed steadily. In time, he would carry down from Mount Sinai the tablets with the Ten Commandments

inscribed upon them. By then, Moses was able to stand before the Israelite people himself and to speak with great confidence and authority. His sheep-herding days far behind him, he was shepherding people in the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the single most important story to the Jewish faith to the present day. It all began with Moses's willingness to turn aside to listen to God's call to him.

How about you? You're probably saying: "No, ma'am. God's never spoken to me from a burning bush." Let me respectfully disagree that God has never spoken to you. I believe that there is not a single person here to whom God has not spoken, some way, somehow, about where God's wants you to go, what God wants you to do in the next chapter of your life.

How does God speak? Sometimes, God's voice is heard in the form of a tug at your heart. Sometimes, God can speak through the losses we endure, as well. But always, God does not leave you alone to find your way. Are we listening to the ups and the downs in our lives? Are we listening to the people around us who believe in us? Are we listening to the surprise developments that come, truly, out of nowhere?

At a nearby church one man, who'd never been in a small group before, came along to the first meeting. As each person introduced themselves, they were to say why they were there. He said, "Well, the pastor asked me if I'd join this small group. And I said I'd have to think about that. You see, I think I hold some views that aren't orthodox so I have lots of doubts; and second, I wanted to check the schedule with my wife. So I guess I'm here because I felt that if someone invited me, maybe I should be here." That was over three years ago, and my pastor friend says he's grown in faith and biblical understanding, and is now one the team guiding their church's small group ministries.

God is afoot in all our lives, even when we're fairly content. Moses did not reach out for that something; it came to him. Something of God called him to respond to a call. It happens, doesn't it? It happens to people whose lives are going very well. But then something comes reaching into that good life, something of God that reaches in and disturbs our tranquility. If we will only listen, God speaks and draws us further.

We can learn many things from Moses, I am sure. But one small thing that we can see in his earliest steps was that he turned aside to listen to the voice calling him from the burning bush. He was ready to listen – yes, and to argue with God, but ultimately to follow God, the One who pursues us, too, to bring others into the light of his love for them. You and I are not alone, but one of the great company of faith, bound together with believers all over the world, celebrating the Lord's Supper on this World Communion Sunday. Together—with people who respond to God--like Keith and Marty Franchois in Jordan, like Linnea Good in traveling for the music ministry, and like so many of you here -- we work to bring people into the forgiving mercy and upholding love of God, whose Son gave his life for us that we might live in peace and unity. To get

there, it takes each one of us to also “turn aside” and consider God’s hand upon us, nudging us and guiding us to step forward in faith and hope.

God, help us to be ready for your claim upon us, your path before us, and your light to lead us. Amen.

Last Sunday several people heard Lucinda Yates, creator of pins that support programs for homeless people, spoke at a fundraiser for the Daughters of Zelophehad. The Daughters of Z is a local Presbyterian program for homeless women who are nurtured in faith while learning skills for jobs and for parenting and living on their own.

Twenty years ago, Lucinda herself was a homeless young mother in Maine, and endured all the risks and hazards of life on the street, until she was finally accepted into a shelter. Eventually, Lucinda became a waitress and began meeting regularly with a psychologist to recover from her painful experiences. In time, the psychologist noted she was recovering well, but asked her, “What would you really like to do with your life?” With little hesitation, she answered that she’d like to make jewelry. And so, acting on that wish, she began making and selling jewelry at fairs and other venues, not earning much.

Then, one day at her table, Lucinda was playing with shapes and put a triangle on top of a box. She thought, “Hmmm, looks like a house.” And something inside her—almost like a voice--told her to make it into a jewelry pin and give the proceeds to homeless programs. The pins would honor the real shelter and stability a roof over one’s head provides. At the next show, a realtor saw a pin, liked it, and wanted to take 100 such pins with her to a convention in Florida. There, the pins apparently sold quickly. Within days, Lucinda was getting phone calls from realtors all over the country, wanting more. And they caught on. Now, just fifteen years later, Lucinda’s pins have raised over \$25 million for programs to help the homeless in places all over the world.

It was the suggestion by the psychologist that Lucinda could pursue a dream, and a later nudging – perhaps a small voice at her shoulder – urging her to make these pins for the sake of others yet homeless. I believe this was something of God . . . and the blessings that would grow from Lucinda’s pins was “out of her hands,” she readily admits. Something beyond her was at work.

God speaks if we will listen. We can learn many things from Moses, I am sure. But one small thing that we can see in his earliest steps was that he “turned aside” to listen to the bush calling him. He was attentive, ready to open his ears to hear – yes, to argue with – but to ultimately follow the God who pursues us, too, to bring others into the light of his love for them. We are not alone, but one of the great company of faith, bound together with believers all over the world. Together we work to bring people into the forgiving mercy and upholding love of God, whose Son gave his life for us that we might live in

peace and unity. To get there, it takes each one of us to also “turn aside” and note God’s hand upon us, guiding us and nudging us to step forward in faith and hope.

⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He 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.” **Exodus 3:9-12**

10 But Moses said to the LORD, ‘O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ ¹¹Then the LORD said to him, ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’ ¹²Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.’ ¹³But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send someone else.’ ¹⁴Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, ‘What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.’ **Exodus 4:10-17**
