

Are you ready Trinity? Ready to be distracted by God? If you were here last week, you heard our guest preacher, Gregory Conarro, point out that it was only because Moses was distracted by a blazing bush not being consumed by the fire, that he had an encounter with God that changed the course of his life and that of the nation of Israel.

A few weeks ago, I got to go to Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, made famous by Georgia O'Keefe, for a week-long retreat with an organization called Stillpoint. They were offering a course on Eco-spirituality, which is a worldview that sees the natural world as sacred and views humans as deeply connected to the Earth rather than separate from it. I decided to ride my motorcycle there. Let's just say the desert was blazing hot. That meant traveling very early in the morning to avoid the worst of the heat.

But when I got to the high desert in Arizona at roughly 7000 feet, the landscape was glorious beyond words. The rock formations, the gradient colors of the stratum, all were breathtaking. They have a rock formation at Ghost Ranch that was given the name La Puerta del Cielo by the early settlers. The Gateway to Heaven and it looked like it really could be.

While at Ghost Ranch, we were given multiple opportunities to go wandering through that wilderness to listen to what Mother Earth had to say to us. And, no surprise, she had a lot to say. Sitting under two juniper trees on my final day there, a blue jay kept coming back to sit on a branch just above me. He seemed to be saying, "Welcome to my world. And if you don't mind my asking, what are you doing here?" My response, "Well I'm searching for some answers to the riddle of life." He seemed to laugh as he flew off and said, "Good luck with that!"

That initially seemed a little rude until moments later, I realized I was being given some wisdom from the ancient bird kingdom. Was this a chance encounter with God? Maybe.

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When I got home, I went out for a jog and wondered if Mother Earth would be as present in Santa Barbara as she was in the high desert?

Somehow, everything felt too groomed and tidy for me, because, truth be known, I was starting to take my beautiful surroundings in Santa Barbara for granted. Until I ran by 3 ancient Eucalyptus trees. And they all shouted out to me in a chorus, "Good morning, We're still here, when were you going to notice us?" Another chance encounter? Maybe. I will confess that when I got home from my jog, for the first time in my 77 years, I hugged and kissed a Manzanita tree in our driveway.

And after hearing Gregory's sermon last week, I was on the lookout for something similar to a blazing bush but alas, nothing that spectacular showed up. However, while I was on my jog this last Tuesday, running along the beautiful Santa Barbara coast line, as I started to run by three people, I noticed that the guy had on a pair of blue Hoka shoes which happened to match my own. I was distracted by that and mentioned it as I ran by. Was this another possible chance encounter with God? Most of us would say no, it was just a coincidence. But the answer might be yes, because as I made the observation to the man, he and his friends smiled and we all chuckled together about the happenstance. It became a connection with 4 total strangers as we felt a kinship with each other. Mother Earth smiled as I noticed the connection and as she flew off, she simply said, "You're welcome!"

So, what's that got to do with our lessons this morning? In today's first reading, the prophet Ezekiel was trying to resolve a paradox in his day. The people of Northern Israel had been conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. One decade later, Jerusalem was conquered and the temple was destroyed. How, they asked, could this happen to the chosen people of God? Had God broken his covenant and abandoned them? In today's reading, Ezekiel is saying no, God has not left them, and if they turn from their wicked ways and repent, God will forgive them and restore them to the way things used to be. But it's more than that. God will also do all the heavy lifting. We see that a few chapters later when God gives Ezekial a vision of breathing life back into

Israel's dead bones and replacing their heart of stone with a heart of flesh, basically giving them the ability love God in return.

Today's Psalm also echoes that theme of depending on God to provide the understanding needed to keep God's law. Only then is the Psalmist able to promise that when that happens, "I shall keep your law with all my heart." Reminds me of the 6th and 7th steps of AA. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings."

And in today's New Testament reading Paul points out that the entire law is fulfilled when God helps us to simply remember to love one another. Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

And Jesus has the final word in today's gospel reading when he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," empowering us to love one another the way he loves us.

It seems that all four passages are saying what blazing bushes, blue jays, Eucalyptus and Manzanita trees are all trying to say, "You are never alone and you will know that when you slow down long enough to listen to how much I am in love with you."

Brother David Steindl-Rast gave a Ted Talk in 2013 that helps us to stop long enough to listen for the sound of love. It always begins with gratitude. He points out that gratitude is the reason for happiness instead of the reverse. He observes that we all know people who seem to have everything but they're still not happy. And we also know people who have had a lot of misfortune, and yet, they are happy. He suggests that the reason for that is because these people recognize that every moment is an opportunity to feel grateful. That does not mean that we can be grateful for everything. We cannot be grateful for violence, for war, for oppression, for exploitation. On the personal level, we cannot be grateful for the loss of a friend, for unfaithfulness, for bereavement. But we can be grateful in every given moment for the opportunity, and even when we are

confronted with something that is terribly difficult, we can rise to this occasion and respond to the opportunity with kindness. Actually, when you look at it and experience it, you find that most of the time, what is given to us is the opportunity to enjoy, but we're usually in too big a hurry to stop and recognize it.

How can we start noticing these opportunities? Brother David's simple rule is the rule we learned as kids when crossing the street: Stop–Look–Go.

- Stop–Be intentional about taking a break from the noise in your head. Take a deep breath. As Thich Nhat Hanh used to say, "Wash the dishes to wash the dishes" instead of washing them to get on to something else. I meditate to practice not being distracted by random thoughts. I jog, because when I'm jogging it helps me to get into the rhythm of taking one step at a time. I hope you take a moment this week to notice what helps you to stop and slow down long enough to be present.
- Look–And when I'm present like that, I have the time to look and notice two people holding hands, a mother carrying her infant baby, or a man wearing a pair of blue HOKAs.
- And then Go–Now I have an opportunity to act on what I noticed by saying something kind to a total stranger with a smile: "Keep holding hands, it's beautiful to see." "Enjoy this moment with your baby, they grow up so fast." "Hey, good choice of shoes on your part."

And then, we can delight in the joy of sharing that moment with the children of God.

But sometimes, no matter how hard we try to be gentle and humble in spirit, the struggles of the day are just too much. And in those moments, if we pause long enough to listen, we can hear Mother Earth whisper ever so gently, "Just breathe, just be." Let's close our eyes and listen to those words for a moment. . .

https://youtu.be/1wZw_0yowhs?si=7fCe69X0CfAyMUUsJ

Amen!