

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

Let me ask you a question about today's first lesson was about Moses and the burning bush: was this the first time you've heard this story? That's what I thought. It's a well-known story. At the same time, God's Word is living and true – this means that on Monday, when I read this passage to prepare for today's sermon, I heard something in the story was that true and living to me (and, frankly, kind-of new). The phrase that stood out for me this time around on the passage was “Moses **turned-aside** to see the bush that was on fire but not being consumed.”

When Scripture repeats itself, it is wise to pay attention. The next line is this: “When the Lord saw that Moses had **turned-aside**, He spoke to him; Moses, Moses.”

I wondered what is with Moses “turning-aside” – why is that a big deal and why is it repeated in Scripture?

To jump into those questions, I first looked at the Hebrew to English dictionary (the story's original language is Hebrew) to take a look at the phrase. Oddly enough, it is “sur” (pronounced *s-oo-r*; “oo” as in pool). Yes, just one word – sur – is translated with two words in English: turned aside. There are many other examples in the Hebrew Scripture (commonly called the Old Testament) of sur. Most of them are the blessings of someone turning aside from what they were doing and following Torah (the Law). Moses was before Torah, if you will, because during his lifetime, he will bring down the Ten Commandments from the mountain. This makes me wonder what Moses was turning aside from?

Moses, a child of an Israelite family living in Egypt, was as an infant, placed in a basket and floated downstream. He was noticed by a daughter of the Pharaoh's family, taken out of the river and raised in her household (this was because there was a royal decree to kill all new-born Israelite boys). 40 years later, an Egyptian taskmaster was beating an Israelite slave. Moses struck the Egyptian dead. It did not start the uprising as he thought it would, so he fled Egypt for the land of Midian. He was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law when he saw the burning bush.

Back to the question: what did Moses turn aside from? I think he turned aside from envy and then God spoke to him.

The past week, I read an article in the NY Times titled, *It's Natural to Envy Your Friends*. The author stated, as the title indicates, that envy is a natural process. It destroys happiness but it can be a tool for discernment. When you envy something – a trait or habit or something like that from a friend – it can help you discern what you find important. For instance, if you envy your

friend for being so outgoing, it can tell you that you value being outgoing (and therefore you can practice that skill and behavior). This is probably not the envy that Moses turned aside from. While it is true that envy can ruin happiness there is a type of envy that can ruin just about everything else too; and that is the envy of what you could have, should have, or would have been. Called having a case of the could-a/would-a/should-a means that one is dwelling on past regrets, mistakes, what others have done to you, and opportunities not taken. That type of envy takes away one's peace.

I'd like to think you have no idea what I'm talking about, but my hunch is that everyone has regrets and, from time to time, will envy what they could have/should have/would have become. I can tell you from personal experience, envy of what you could have been is poison. At some point, everyone has to turn aside from what could or should have been and focus on what is.

Moses was walking along, a stranger in a foreign land, shepherding sheep that were not his own, and in my mind's eye, ruminating on what he could have been, and suddenly God gets his attention. At this point, Moses could have kept on the path of self-negativity; but, something in him changed. Moses turned aside. Once he did, the Lord spoke to him: *Moses, Moses, take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground.* He did not know he was on holy ground until he turned aside, and God spoke.

Once Moses turned aside, and God spoke, his life was never the same again. The life of the Israelites then, and now the people of the Jewish faith, and the faithful for centuries to come, will never be the same. The life of every single Christian has changed because of Moses' turning aside. And, the people of the faith of Islam also have been changed because of his turning aside. In other words, this was the most significant turning aside in history and it is still affecting us today. If Moses hadn't turned aside, where in the world would we be?

Hearing this story again (many for the tenth, or thirtieth, time) it makes me consider my own could-haves and should-haves. It makes me discern what path I am on – am I walking in the present or am I dwelling in the past? You see, if I'm dwelling in the past, God's voice is not discernable in the present. God is the God of the present. It's the time where God lives. And yes, God is certainly in the past and future but where we experience God is in the here and now. In fact, I'd say we only have one moment and that is the current moment. Jesus did and said a lot of things to get people to be present in the moment – the here and now.

So take a look at this: God said to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." At 40 years old, Moses' father is dead. Moreover, there is somewhere between 430 and 645 years from Abraham's life to Moses. Yet, God refers to Moses' father and Abraham in the present tense – like they are still alive. ... because God is in the present moment and is speaking from a place where linear time does not have an effect. If Moses was wallowing in the past, God's not speaking there. God is speaking in the present moment.

(Now, we can reflect back on our lives and see where God's presence has acted, and I think we do that with the help of the Holy Spirit to see how God is always active in our lives; but, we have difficulty doing that if we're stuck in the could/would/should haves)

One more thing, when Moses asked for God's name, the response is this: *I Am Who I Am*. Translating it directly from Hebrew to English creates grammatical errors, but it is more closely aligned to this: *I Be Who I Is*. Notice how that it is in the present tense. God's not saying God is who God was or will be; no, God *Be Who God Is*.

God doesn't dwell in the would have/could have. God is the God of the present. The here and now. God also sees in us stuff we'd never see. In Moses, God did see the man who will lead the people out of captivity into the promised land. Moses couldn't see it; God sees it.

Life has a way of making us think, ruminate, about what could have or should have been. But that's not where God wants our mind to remain. Moses turned aside from his negative self thinking and marveled at what God was doing – creating a fire that did not consume. Suddenly God spoke to him and told him to take off his sandals because he's standing on holy ground. ... Moses didn't even know he was on holy ground.

Where are you standing? Where are your feet? What if you too are standing on holy ground... and didn't know it because of your internal rumination on the past. You can't change your past. God can't change it either. But, you and me, we are living in the present (which is a gift; that's why it's called the "present"). Thankfully Moses turned aside and then has forever changed your spiritual life and mine. I invite us all to live in the present, with God, and let go of our could have and should have and enjoy the present. When we turn aside from negative self-rumination, we'll see that we too are standing on holy ground with God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.