

Awe and Wonder – Turn Aside (Exodus 3:1-5, 2 Cor 3:13-18, John 20:11-18)

Almighty God, to whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secret is hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Problem in the world

In the modern world we live in what Charles Taylor calls an “**immanent frame**.” He says we live increasingly **buffered lives**, often disconnected from a sense of wonder and mystery at the world around us—experiencing the world as though what we can see, measure and explain is all there is. For some, this is a **closed immanent frame**, with no higher, transcendent reality. The material universe is all there is and ever will be. For those of us who believe in a God who can act in history, we inhabit what Taylor calls an **open immanent frame**. We believe God exists, can break into history. But most of the time we live as though he doesn’t.

Alan Noble puts it starkly: “providence, mystery, contingency, uncertainty, wonder, and randomness have been systematically, bureaucratically, technologically, and economically drained from our world. We struggle to recognize beauty in the natural world because it has been so thoroughly conquered.” We are masters of our health, our safety, our morality, our time, and our success. Wonder has been domesticated. And so, Noble says, “**Living in this kind of society, it is hard to sense the transcendent. It seems superfluous.**” Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* writes that by the time we leave childhood we have “**repressed our vision of the primary miraculous-ness of creation.**”

And perhaps nothing has accelerated this more than the bottomless pits of distraction we now carry around in our pockets. We are endlessly distracted from the wondrous, God-infused reality of the cosmos. G. K. Chesterton famously said, “**The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.**” This is a task for the Church—to be a place where people are invited to burst out of the immanent frame into a world of wonder. Into a reality where God is transcendent, but also completely near, making his home within us. God is completely beyond all our words, categories and understanding. But also, God is so close, nearer than our breath (**Deu. 30:14**).

But the Scriptures we have heard today suggest we can miss it. We can fail to turn aside and notice. Moses in the wilderness. Mary at the tomb, not recognising the risen Lord. All three of our readings this morning has the same invitation to us – the need to “turn aside” to the presence of God. Paul diagnoses the human condition as having a veil that lies over our hearts and minds, unable to perceive the wonder of Scripture.

I will turn aside

Let’s take a deeper dive at the Exodus passage.

*Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “**I will turn aside** to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.”*

“I will turn aside.” That little phrase is the hinge on which the whole story turns. By the time of this encounter, Moses had been in this wilderness for 40 years looking after the sheep. It is remarkable that after **40 years** he noticed. He stops. He turns aside. Have you noticed how we fall into routine and stop noticing the little details of life?

At university, I took a paper called Thinking Skills in Marketing, with Peter November, the only lecturer whose name I remember! There were no assignments or exams, just a journal, and each week a small exercise to try and write up. One simple exercise was to go home from university a different way each day for a week and write down what we noticed. When we came back together, it was remarkable. People bumped into friends, found streets they'd never noticed, had serendipitous moments. People were amazed, but the point was that we had become more attentive. When we break out of the grooves, we suddenly notice things that were there all along. Perhaps something similar happens spiritually. We fall into grooves where we don't need, maybe don't even want God to show up and disrupt things, so we stop noticing.

The Common Bush

There is something else about Moses' encounter that is easy to miss. It is a bush, not a great cedar. Gods of the ancient Near East were associated with towering trees, something worthy of a god. Moses wouldn't have expected the encounter to happen in a shrub.

God chooses something small and ordinary, and Moses has to stop and look. God does not always appear where we expect him to. We might expect him in the spectacular, but sometimes he is present in the common, ordinary and overlooked: The bush beside the road. The person sitting beside you. And ordinary conversation. A passage of Scripture you've read a hundred times.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning captures this sense of the presence of God, if only we turn towards it:

“Earth's crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries...”

Every common bush afire with God.

I wonder how long had God been trying to get Moses' attention. What if this bush wasn't the first God had set on fire? What if it was simply the first one Moses noticed? Were there other liberators of God's people, who simply failed to see, to turn aside to the invitation of God? What would God do if Moses had not turned aside?

For us of course, we probably wouldn't expect anything like this. What do we do when we are confronted with something that does not align with our experiences? The cosmos that we live in is surely a wild and wonderful and weird place, but do we notice? How many invitations from God have we walked past because we were too busy, distracted or simply not looking?

Our expectations shape our perception. What we believe influences what we notice, and what we notice reinforces what we believe. If I believe that only measurable things are real, that belief will shape what I see. Our brains filter out what doesn't fit our worldview, unless it overwhelms us. Carlos Eire, in his book *They Flew: A History of the Impossible*, rigorously explores levitating saints of the 16th and 17th centuries and asks the question of whether what we believe *can* happen has everything to do with what in fact *does* happen.

We all filter reality. I'm a fairly sceptical person; I naturally question things. However, I decided that I would not limit reality to what I've experienced. When I read or hear the experiences of people that are way outside my own, (if the person is trustworthy) I choose to believe them. I have a friend who can vividly see the spiritual realm. Angels, demons, principalities, powers, even taniwha. I could dismiss him, or humbly say, what do I know? I met another woman this week whose family is deeply involved in the Peruvian shamanic tradition and run ayahuasca retreats. She came to faith here in New Zealand and eventually began exploring her visions again under the guidance of Christian friends, they were more powerful than anything psychedelics gave her. She has gone back to her family and people on the retreats, telling them: **"You don't need the psychedelics. You just need Jesus."**

I'm not suggesting every unusual experience is from God. I am simply saying: **our experience is not the boundary of reality.** Reality is stranger than materialism admits. How do we turn aside from this materialist, immanent frame? What would it look like for you, for all of us, to believe in a world where God can show up in a burning bush, interrupting our lives?

God speaks after the turn

Verse 4, *When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."* It strikes me that God only speaks, addressing Moses by name, when he turned aside from what he was doing to notice the sacred presence. Upon hearing his name, Moses responds: "Here I am." Moses is given a calling, but first he must stop, notice and turn aside.

In the Gospel reading, Mary too turns, and in the turning perceives Jesus. Mary turns twice towards Jesus in this John passage, leaving commentators to wonder about this. There is an initial physical turn, but she only sees Jesus as the gardener. Some suggest she turns back towards the tomb and the angels and the source of her grief. The veil, in Paul's terms, is still over her mind, because her grief has already decided what's true. It requires a second turn, to truly pay attention, to turn away from the grief and expectation of the moment. She cannot comprehend what is happening here. But having at least turned towards Jesus, Jesus then addresses Mary by name. In being addressed by name, she knows his voice.

Solution in the world

So, how do we become people who notice? How do we become people who turn aside? The answer is not a technique. No “three easy steps for noticing burning bushes.” The goal is not necessarily to experience more supernatural events. The goal is: turn towards Jesus.

Paul says: “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” We don't manufacture spiritual sight or force mystical experiences. We turn towards Christ, and Christ lifts the veil. We behold Christ, as we behold him we become like him. So, the invitation this morning: Stop. Look. Turn aside. Put down the phone. Break the routine. Pay attention. Notice creation. Listen. Receive the ordinary gifts of God. When something catches your attention, don't rush past it. Pause. Turn aside. Wonder. Say, “Here I am Lord, this is holy ground. You are here. What are you saying to me?”

One way to practice this is through journaling. Not writing to God, but writing as if God is speaking to you, in the first person, addressing you by name, the way he addressed Moses and Mary. I have been practising this this week, doing a meditation practice until I feel a sense of awareness of God, and then asking, “What are you saying to me today God?” Then, beginning by addressing myself by name, “Jeremy, my beloved child, today I am saying...” and then I write down what I sense God might be saying to me. To slow down enough to hear what Scripture already tells us is true; that we are seen, known, and called by name.

Perhaps the world is more alive with God than we have imagined. Perhaps the common bush is already burning. Perhaps holy ground is beneath our feet. Perhaps Christ is nearer than we realise. And perhaps, if we turn towards him, we will discover that he has been calling our name all along.