

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC  
August 31, 2014  
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## Turning Aside

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' 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.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He 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.'

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.\*' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." ' God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord,\* the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

It is an educated guess, but neuroscientists estimate that the average human being makes 612 conscious decisions each day.

That means we make 4,900 decisions in an average week.  
Over 250,000 decisions in an average year.

Some of these decisions are small – like what kind of cereal to have for breakfast, or whether or not to have that second...really thin...slice of chocolate cake.

Other decisions carry weight. Like the decision to stand up to a bully, or whether to swallow your pride and take the first step to repair a relationship that is broken.

Still more decisions have far-reaching consequences. Like what college or career to pursue. Or who to marry. Or whether to pick a job based on the salary or on what the work will contribute to the world. Or when it is time to stop the treatments.

612 decisions in an average day.

What I notice about the difficult decisions that I am in the process of making or have had to make is that they are very rarely obvious. I love that exercise that most of us type-A personality types use (and I am guessing that you have made it): we make a list with two columns. Pluses on the left. Minuses on the right. We think through all the angles, put all the information on the page. As if somehow seeing 29 pluses and 31 minuses is supposed to make the decision easier?

For church folk, you might think that we would have a leg up on making decisions. We are praying people. We pray to understand God's will. We study the scripture. We believe the Bible is God's authoritative word that leads us along the right path. It might be that the prayers you pray are better than mine, or you have a different translation of the Bible, but even when I go to God with a difficult decision I am normally still not completely sure I have made the right one.

If only we could have one of those burning bushes.

Like Moses.

What a gift. To have God be that direct with his call; with his will.

"Go to Pharaoh. Tell him to let my people go."

It's not easy, but it's clear!

When I wrestle with making the right decision – especially those really complicated decisions that are weighted with implications – I get jealous of Moses. If only I could have it that easy.

But ask yourself this: where was the burning bush?

In my jealous imagination I had always thought that the bush was right there in the middle of Moses' path; like he had just rounded the corner on his hike across Mt. Nebo with his flock of sheep when BAM he tripped on a flaming bush, heard God's voice booming forth and then marched straight into Pharaoh's court.

It's tempting for us to believe that everyone else is sure of their decisions; that everyone else is confident in their calling; that for everyone else, the choices are obvious.

So what if I told you that the burning bush wasn't on the path – that it was actually removed/set off from the place where Moses was supposed to be.

The fact is that Moses was not looking for his call and he wasn't looking for God, either. He was minding his business...walking through his duties as a shepherd...on the outskirts of the wilderness. Then, along the way, he saw something.

And he was curious.

Something piqued his interest - so he made a choice to turn aside from his task at the moment and go in for a closer look.

The scripture is clear: Only after Moses turned aside did God speak to him.

Given the weightiness of his particular calling, perhaps Moses wished he were a little less curious. I'm willing to bet that sometime during his 40-year sojourn through the wilderness, the stiff-necked Israelites complaining the whole way, Moses might have wished he'd have taken those sheep on a different path that day. That's sometimes how it works. We follow the pathway of our passions and find ourselves way over our head. But the God we worship provides; sometimes what we think we need and other times what we don't know we need.

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In the early 1970's, after dropping out of college after only one semester, and after quitting his first stint in the world of the gainfully employed - a 20-year old young man and his friend built a small computer out of supplies they bought with the proceeds from the Volkswagon bus they sold for around \$700.

Ten years later, this young college dropout and his business partner were running a company with 4,000 employees that was valued at \$2 billion. His name is Steve Jobs.

Arguably, Jobs did more for the way we communicate with one another than anyone else on the planet. Maybe some of you have one of these in your pocket. Hopefully, you aren't using it right now...

Apple took the technology of the computer - perhaps the most revolutionary invention in the past 300 years - and made it usable and accessible to hundreds of millions of people.

Steve Jobs' contributions through his company aren't just about gadgets that we use to waste time. Apple has contributed to the way doctors and nurses track patients with tablet computers; their machines have been used to enhance learning in classrooms around the country for the past 30 years; think about how many of life's moments - births, weddings, graduations, celebrations - we can share because of a technology that fits into little black boxes like this one.

For his part, Jobs credits his achievements (and those of his company) to an unrelenting curiosity. In a commencement address at Stanford in 2005, Jobs

encouraged graduates with these words: “I’m convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You’ve got to find what you love. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it. And, like any great relationship, it just gets better and better as the years roll on.”

If you have read anything about Steve Jobs you know he was not a perfect man.

He was a driven – sometimes obsessed – task master who made life exceedingly difficult for his employees.

Our pursuit of curiosity should have limits. We should not be so committed to our passions that we lose sight of ourselves, our families, or lose our appreciation for the God who is the source of all our passions.

And yet...we are right to understand the role that curiosity plays in helping us make decisions. We are right to see that – many times – the way that God speaks to us is through a question, or a wonderment, or a nagging feeling that there is something else just beyond the place we have imagined.

What if Moses hadn’t noticed the burning bush?

What if – like us much of the time – Moses was so preoccupied with the things that already filled up his life that he was blind to the ways that God was trying to get his attention?

What if Moses was walking down the path – like I tend to walk around these church hallways – one eye on the sheep, and the other on his smart phone in his hand, checking his email, updating his Facebook, and sending a text?

What if Moses believed that in spite of his curiosity, it would be a sin to explore anything beyond the well-worn pathways of the places where people had walked before?

What are the obstacles that inhibit us from paying attention to a God who is still speaking? Who is still creating? Who is still calling us to join in the work of the world?

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One of the things that I find so intriguing and encouraging about this story of Moses discovering his calling is that he did so in the midst of his life. Moses was not a well-poised college graduate jumping into a robust job market. He was a middle-aged, married, father who was on his second career.

So whether you are a baby-boomer in the wheelhouse of your “earning potential,” or someone who is stubbornly refusing to give up the “young-adult” status, or a retiree, or you are disabled, or you are young and vigorous with time on your side...maybe the best place to start with your calling is to examine your curiosity; to consider what you notice. What causes you to “turn aside” and take a closer look?

Wherever it is, pay attention. God might just be speaking to you with a new challenge for how to live your life.

*Prayer: It is you, O God, who are behind every mystery, every question, every fascination. Who are we to participate in such a marvelous design? And yet you call us – you prick our curiosity – you give us specific, and important, and – yes – small ways to join you in your plan to bring this world and its people to final and beautiful completion. So continue to speak to us, we pray, and help us to listen. In Christ’s name and the sake of those Christ came to save – Amen.*