

Turning Aside

Exodus 3:1-15

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Have I mentioned to you that I have a new spiritual discipline, a new spiritual practice that I have observed nearly every morning all summer long?

I bet that you will never guess what it is...

It's watching the grass grow. Seriously! Nearly every morning I spend some time — at least fifteen minutes — in our backyard watching the grass grow.

You might remember that at one point earlier this spring, I shared with you how our back lawn was a desolate wasteland of a yard. And I shared how Christen and I were going to water our back lawn any way, and see if we couldn't get some grass to comeback. Well, we watered diligently for weeks... and all we accomplished was the proliferation of every type of weed you can imagine... Not one ounce of grass sprouted anywhere in the lawn.

So we began pursuing other options. We considered hiring a landscape company to come in and remove the weeds, trench out the lines to add a sprinkler system, till the ground, add compost, and sod the backyard. As it turns, out I would have had to sell a kidney on the black market to afford that project. Who knew grass could be so expensive?

So the first option was to eliminate the sprinkler system. We can hand water, we thought to ourselves. It was still too expensive.

Then we decided to seed the yard rather than lay sod. It takes longer, but it should save us some money, we thought. It was still too expensive.

Then we eliminated the labor of a landscaping crew and decided to do the labor ourselves. Finally we had reached a solution that we could afford — seeding a lawn without a sprinkler system and doing all of the labor ourselves.

So we rented a tiller and we tilled up the hard, compact, weed-ridden soil in our backyard. We raked out all of the weeds and garbage we uncovered. Then we did that again, and again a third time. Then we went and got compost and, one wheel barrow at a time, we hauled it into our backyard and spread it across the surface of the yard a few inches deep. We tilled the compost into the soil. Then we leveled the yard as best we could with rakes. After that, we spread grass seed — 'ol Kentucky Blue — and a starter fertilizer, before rolling out straw blankets to keep the seed from being blown away or eaten up by the pesky squirrels.

At the end of the day, our process turned out to be the exact opposite of that parable Jesus told about a sower going out and throwing seed willy-nilly on any and every type of soil he could find...

And once all of that work was done, we started watering the yard on a daily basis to see if we could get the seed to take. And the most amazing thing happened — grass started to grow.

At first it was fine and delicate and vulnerable, barely poking up through the straw blankets. It came in patchy at first — not that different from my beard. But — as I sat on the back porch with my cup of coffee nearly every morning surveying the growth — the days turned into weeks and the yard slowly filled with green grass.

But, to be honest, it was only about a week ago that I realized what I was doing each morning was a spiritual practice. That's because about a week ago, we upgraded our sprinkler to one of those yellow, tractor sprinklers — you know, one that is geared so that as the water is thrown the sprinkler is slowly propelled along the hose.

Before that I was having to move the sprinkler every few minutes all morning long to get the yard covered. But as I watched that tractor sprinkler work I was drawn to how slowly it moved. I started to reflect on its pace and how thoroughly it soaked the soil in which the roots of the young grass grew.

And as I watched and reflected each morning this past week, I began to understand at a deeper level what Paul meant when he said to the Church in Corinth, "I planted (the seed), Apollos watered it, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6).

Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that God was in this simple act. And if God was in this simple act — of watering the lawn — where *wasn't* God? And just like that the practice of watering grass became a *sacramental act* for me.

So, technically, my new spiritual discipline isn't watching the grass grow. It's watching the sprinkler work — and somehow that has brought me to a heightened awareness of God's presence.

The Celtic Christian tradition has a term for such moments when the distance between heaven and earth collapse. It calls these moments *thin places*.

Theologians have other terms for it, one of which is *theophany* — "an indication, a presentation, a revelation of God for those who try to see" (Brett Younger, "Doing Church," a sermon preached at Broadway Baptist Church, May 18, 2008).

What Moses experienced at the burning bush was a *theophany*, a moment when God's presence was made manifest; a *thin place* where the distance between heaven and earth collapsed.

It's hard, isn't it, to even hear this story read without imagining brawny, tan, chiseled Charlton Heston saying, "Let my people go!" Cecil B. DeMille's telling of the Moses story seems to have the corner on the market of many of our imaginations, but the Moses of the Bible is less self-assured Charlton Heston and more... well, Steve Carrell. He's awkward. He stammers and stutters. He doesn't really want the job... or the responsibility.

Moses would eventually turn out to be God's great partner in the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. But he was not that, yet.

That all began to change one day when Moses was out watching the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. The storyteller tells us that he led his flock out of the wilderness and all the way to the base of Mount Horeb looking for a place to let the sheep graze. There an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a burning bush.

The bush wasn't right in front of Moses, however. It must have been off to the side somewhere, because when Moses saw it, he said, "I must *turn aside* and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up" (Exodus 3:3).

He didn't know. How could he? He simply did not know that the LORD was in that bush. If he had known — if he'd known what the LORD was about to ask of him — he might not have been so curious. He might have just tried to ignore that bush. He might have tried, like Jonah, to run the other direction.

But he didn't know. So he *turned aside*.

And when he did, the storyteller says, *God* noticed. God dismissed the angel and took over the bush: "When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush..." and the rest is history (Exodus 3:4).

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that "what made him Moses was his willingness to *turn aside*" (*An Altar in the World*, 25).

If that's true, maybe we are missing the chance to meet with God because we *aren't* willing to turn aside.

Our culture tells us that our lives aren't valuable unless we are getting things done, unless we are being productive, meeting goals, checking items off of our lists. We like things that can be quantified: projects completed, tasks finished, units sold, programs initiated, members gained. We are a people always in a hurry to get the next thing done.

I once heard someone say it this way: "If you are someone who changes lanes at a red stoplight in order to get two car lengths closer to your destination, hurry has too much control over your life."

Moses could have ignored the bush, could have gone on with getting those sheep to pasture, could have stayed focus on his task at hand — but he didn't. He *turned aside*. And because he turned aside, he found himself in the presence of the *Sacred*.

"The LORD called to him out of the bush, 'Moses! Moses!'"

"Here I am," said Moses.

But Before God asked him to do anything else, God asked him to take off his shoes. "Come no closer!" God warned him not because the ground was hot, but because it was *holy*. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

How often do we miss the presence of God in our world because we simply fail to stop long enough to notice it? How often do we miss the presence of God in our world because we refuse to *turn aside* from next thing on our list?

How much holy ground have we tread with our shoes still on our feet?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it like this:

"Earth is crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God,
But only those who see take off their shoes.
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries."

How much holy ground have we tread and not even noticed, simply because we aren't in the habit of slowing down, of taking note, and of *turning aside*?

The truth is, regarded properly, *anything can become a sacrament*; anything can become an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 30).

Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, even that stop light where you changed lanes to get two car lengths closer to your destination; even in that unfolded laundry that sits piled on the chair next to your bed; even when in your first cup of coffee in the morning; even in the slow movement of that yellow, tractor sprinkler.

Hasidic Jews tell the story of a young man who, one afternoon approached the community's deeply revered rabbi.

"Rabbi," the young man asked with great seriousness, "What is the way to God?"

The rabbi looked up from his work and answered, "There is no way to God, for God is not other than here and now. The truth you seek is not hidden from you; you simply do

not notice it. It is here for you if you will only awake" (Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 1).

Maybe, God is not hidden from us at all. Maybe, we simply do not notice.

I lost my last living grandparent — my Grandad — in November of 2018. If I remember right, I woke up on a Tuesday morning before 5:00 AM to my ringing phone. It was my mom on the other end. She was in tears. She was exhausted. She was scared. She'd been up all night with Grandad at his house until finally they called 911 and sent for an ambulance. Grandad's health had been failing for years, but now he was on the last legs of a long struggle.

When she called me, he'd been admitted into the hospital, moved to ICU, and she'd been told it didn't look good. He was my last living grandparent, but her last living parent. The stress and sadness and grief was palpable. She told me that my dad was off taking care of his sick sister, and couldn't leave her to come back. So I booked a flight that morning, cancelled my appointments and headed for Texas.

By the time I got to my parents' house, it was late that evening — too late to go to the hospital. So mom and I decided to try and get a good night's sleep and head there first thing in the morning.

When we walked into his hospital room, Grandad was already non-responsive. He had a ventilator and tube filling his mouth and throat. He was gaunt, off-color, and his hair and beard were unkempt — something I'd never before seen.

We'd only been at the hospital for a few minutes when Joyce walked in. Joyce was his home health nurse. She'd been taking care of Grandad for months by then, and they had developed a great rapport.

In some ways, they were the "odd couple." They really had no business being in relationship or having a rapport with one another. He was an old, staunchly independent, conservative Texan; she a young, black woman whose life would not have held up under any careful scrutiny by my Grandad's belief system. But here in the throes of illness and at the edge of life, they became fast friends.

When Joyce came in, she hugged my mom and introduced herself to me. My mom said, "Honey, you don't have to be here. They're going to take good care of him."

Joyce said, "I understand, Susan, but I *want* to be here. You don't abandon someone under your care at the point of death."

Together, we made the decision to remove the ventilator came out. The doctors told us it was just a matter of time, but that it would become clear when we were getting close.

And so we sat. For what was only a few hours, but seemed an eternity, we sat. Finally, my mom and I decided to get a cup of coffee. No sooner had we sat down in the cafeteria than mom got a call on her cell phone. We were getting close, we may want to get back up there as soon as possible.

When we walked in, it was clear that we only had a matter of minutes. Mom and I leaned on each other, too numb or in shock to know what to do — but not Joyce.

She got up and started clipping grandad's fingernails. And then she lifted the blanket of his feet and massaged them before clipping his toenails. With the ventilator out, she lathered his face with shaving cream and carefully shaved his face. She trimmed his ear hair and his nose hair. She wet a comb and combed his hair. With a long q-tip looking swab, she cleaned Grandad's teeth. She got a wet cloth and, between desperate gasps of air that were only coming every once in a while, she carefully wiped all of the dried spit from around his mouth.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Joyce was gently and lovingly preparing my Grandad for death.

And as Grandad started to heave for air, I held his hand and mom held his foot. We started to sob, and as we did, Joyce started to sing. Now, her preparations complete, she sat off in the corner of the room, her eyes closed, her rich alto voice filling the room, as she sang "Amazing Grace."

And no sooner had she sung, "Grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home," then my Grandad took one final breath, and breathed his last.

Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament — even death.

And if God can do that with death, just imagine what God can do with life — if we will but turn aside and look.

Amen.