

Looking for God

Exodus 3:1-6

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Can I ask you a question? What do you think is the job of the pastor?

If you could describe it in a single word, a single phrase, a single sentence — how would you describe what you think my job is?

...

This isn't a rhetorical question. I'd like to hear what you think.

(Allow time for thought and response — counselor, caregiver, preacher, teacher, leading worship, spiritual leader, presiding over ordinances/sacraments, etc...)

You know, it's a strange thing being ordained as a pastor in a tradition that holds to the "priesthood of every believer." Technically, nothing we just named requires the one doing it to be ordained in the Baptist church.

Anyone of you could lead any one of those things. Myra Cobb could do the Welcome. Harold Miskel could offer the Invocation. Lydia Martinez could sing the Musical Offering. Alicia Mitchell could read the Scripture. Betty Lee could preach — and would probably do a better job at it than me. And Jack and Betty Fannin could lead the words of institution during communion. I'm willing to bet they have the words memorized.

Think about it. You don't need an ordained pastor to do worship. So what good am I?

The Baptist and Mennonite traditions both descended from the Anabaptist tradition. Whether you realized it or not, we're closely related to each other. The Mennonite pastor and writer, Melissa Florer-Bixler, says this:

"Mennonites (and we might add Baptists, too) are priests by nature of our baptism, and any priest-by-baptism can preside over communion and preach — each according to their gift and calling within the body of the church.

For centuries, Mennonite pastors were chosen by lot or election from within their community. They pastored for a season before returning to their labors. More often than not, these men tacked the responsibilities of preaching and accountability onto their work of farming or carpentry or smelting. Early Anabaptists derived this practice from the book of Acts, where the inner circle of Jesus' followers is replenished after the betrayal of Judas."

This is where it gets really interesting.

She goes on: “There’s an old story that in the 16th century, Anabaptists (*our great, great, great, great, great grandparents*) chose the least essential person in the community as their pastor. (“*Why?*” *you ask.*) That way, when persecution came and the pastor was inevitably killed, the community wouldn’t lose an essential service like a cobbler or a mason...” (“As a pastor, it’s my job to pay attention,” *The Christian Century*, September 2023).

Even the early Anabaptists knew that *anyone* could be a pastor. So... I ask again. What am I good for?

It’s interesting if you really stop to think about it, because most trained therapists will do a better job of counseling than me. Most anyone with an MBA and any managerial experience at all will be a better administrator and supervisor than me. You don’t need to be ordained to be an effective teacher in the church. Anyone with bookkeeping experience is more trustworthy with our accounting than me. There are lots and lots of capable public speakers sitting right out there who can write and deliver a sermon just as effectively as me. And as Savannah proved a few weeks ago, she could do our welcome to worship just as good, if not better, than me. Not one of those things requires a theological education or an ordination.

So what is the job of a pastor for the community of faith?

I believe that at it’s core, at it’s deepest place, in it’s most substantive form, the role of the pastor is to be the one on the lookout for burning bushes – to be on the lookout for where God might be breaking in. Then to point it out and to say to you, “Take the shoes off your feet, because the place where we are standing might just be holy ground.”

When I am doing my real work for you, that is what I am doing. Not printing bulletins or managing the webpage or even preaching, but helping you to look closely and carefully at your own life for where God might be present and encouraging you to pay attention.

The place where Moses was standing was *not* holy ground. Or at least it didn’t seem to be. He had led his flock into territory that unless sheep eat dirt, doesn’t exactly qualify as good pasture. In that arid, treeless expanse, any kind of bush would stand out like a sore thumb. But this one was on fire – sitting there by itself surrounded by rocks and dirt and nothing else, burning... but not burning up... *That* caught Moses’ attention. That made him turn aside and take a closer look.

It’s funny, you know – at the end of the day, we see only what we’re looking for. You look for the worst in someone, and I promise you will find it. You look for the best in that same person, and you will find that, too.

The Presbyterian pastor, Erica MacCreigh, tells the story of Father Robert and Sister AJ:

“Every afternoon, Father Robert took a thermos of coffee and his little dog, Pugsley, on a leisurely walk through the woods. Sister AJ rarely joined them. She didn’t much like the dog, and frankly, she got more without the Father under her feet.

But as the aging priest grew less steady on his feet, Sister AJ began accompanying him. Father was thrilled to have her company, though he tried her patience by stopping every few yards to point out a particular flower, a certain rock, the tracks of raccoons, and spiderwebs. He often paused in these moments for prayer, his face upturned toward the sun, smiling beatifically, blissfully unaware that Sister AJ was dodging poison ivy to chase Pugsley, who had a habit of wandering off.

One day, the priest and the nun were out walking when Father Robert paused... *again...* to consider the lilies, and Pugsley paused to anoint the soil. With Father’s eyes closed and Pugsley indisposed, Sister AJ, standing a few feet behind them, said in a low voice, ‘Father, pick up Pugsley and walk slowly over here.’

Oblivious to any earthly thing, Father Robert held his hands toward heaven and said, ‘Sister, sister. Choose the better way of Mary.’

To which Sister AJ said again, this time through gritted teeth, ‘Father. Pick. Up. Pugsley. And come. Over. Here. *Now.*’”

What Sister AJ saw, and what neither Father Robert nor Pugsley saw, was the bear 15 feet away, weighing its odds of scoring a dachshund for dinner.

When Sister AJ told that story to all of her friends, they all laughed at the characteristic absentmindedness of Father Robert, and congratulated Sister AJ for saving their lives. She replied to them, “Are you kidding? If that man and his fool dog hadn’t stopped right then and there, I would have walked us straight into that bear and it would have picked off all three of us!” (“Exodus 3:1-15,” *The Christian Century*, September 2023).

We see what we focus on. But it’s equally true that what we focus on determines what we do *not* see. Maybe we don’t see any burning bushes, because we simply aren’t looking for them.

Our culture tells us that our lives aren’t valuable unless we are busy getting things done, unless we busy are being productive, busy meeting goals, busy 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.

What if Moses had been in such a hurry — so focused on getting those sheep to water or to an actual pasture — that he never bothered to turn aside?

He could have chosen to focus on the task at hand. He could have ignored the bush, could have gone on with getting those sheep to pasture or to water. He *could* have, but instead he took note, he turned aside, and he himself on holy ground.

Maybe we don't see any burning bushes, because we aren't looking for them.

And maybe we aren't looking for them, because we assume that God only ever shows up to the Moseses of the world – the special people, the ordained people.

Do you know what I love most about this story?

That word that is translated as “bush” in this story is actually a relatively rare Hebrew word in scripture, showing up only a handful of times in all of the Old Testament. There are other words that mean bush in Hebrew, but this one only pops up a few times, and so the ancient rabbis of the Jewish faith came to understand this word as describing one of the most obscure, scrawny little thorn bushes you could imagine – an absolute waste of space in the wasteland of the desert. This little scrub did nothing, provided nothing, could be used for nothing. And yet, they would point out, *that* is precisely where God decided to show up.

Do you hear what I'm saying?

I have a sneaking suspicion that most of us aren't on the lookout for the presence of God in our lives, because we think of ourselves in the same way that those ancient rabbis thought of that obscure, scrawny, useless bush.

“What good am I?” we say to ourselves. “What could I possibly be good for?”

But, if God shows up in a plants like that, then don't you think God might want to show up in your life, too?

You might think your life isn't worthy of a visit from the Almighty, but God disagrees.

God isn't far away or distant from you. God doesn't keep you at arm's length. God doesn't abandon you when life gets hard. God doesn't desert you when life feels like the wilderness.

No matter where you go or what you're facing, God is already there waiting to meet you.

There's another tradition among the ancient rabbis of the faith. It's said among some that this bush was always there, was always on fire – from the beginning of time – but that Moses was the first one to stop and pay it any attention, to turn aside and attend to it.

Maybe God doesn't show up just once in awhile. Maybe God has always been present with you, has always been burning within you. Maybe all that's missing is our attention.

The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, said it like this:

"The 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 black berries."

How much holy ground have we tread and not ever noticed, simply because we weren't looking?

I have told you this story before, but Jim Whitford once told me that we all like to watch "reruns," so I shouldn't be afraid of telling some stories again.

My last living grandparent – my grandad – died in November of 2018. Grandad's health had been failing for sometime. Mom had been taking care of him much of the time, but he also had a home health worker named Joyce, who came in and cared for him many hours a week, too.

Well, on that day in November, mom called me early in the morning. She told me that they'd had to call an ambulance, that grandad was in the ICU, and that dad was out of town helping care for his sick sister and couldn't get back.

I could tell mom was exhausted, physically and emotionally. She needed someone to walk the next few days with her. So I cancelled all my appointments and booked a flight to Texas. I arrived late that night, and mom and I decided to get a good night's sleep and go see grandad in the morning.

When we walked into the hospital room, grandad was already non-responsive. He had a ventilator and tube filling his mouth and throat. He was gaunt, unnaturally pale, and his hair and beard were unkempt – something I don't remember ever seeing before.

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

All together, we made the decision to remove the ventilator. Grandad wouldn't want to be kept alive like this. Once they took it out, the doctors told us it was just a matter of time. And so we sat – for what was only a couple of hours, but that felt like an eternity.

Finally, my mom and I decided to go down to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee. No sooner had we sat down than mom got a call. We were getting close, we may want to get back up there as quickly 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.

Joyce got up and started clipping my grandad's fingernails. And then she lifted the blanket off 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 thin, grey hair. With a long q-tip looking swab, she cleaned grandad's teeth. She got a wet cloth and, between desperate gasps for 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 heave for air, I held his hand and mom held his foot and we started to cry. 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 in that moment the veil between this world and the presence of God grew thin. No sooner had Joyce 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.

We should have taken off our shoes, because in that moment we were standing on holy ground.

What is my job?

My job is to remind you that if God can do that even in death, just imagine what God can do with your life.

Amen.