

Sermon: "Notice"
Scripture: Exodus 3:1-12
Date/Location: August 9, 2020 Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Preacher: Grace Boyer

This summer I have been reading a book on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and doing its 8 weeks of meditation exercises. In these unprecedented times, it is part of my personal coping strategy.

Mindfulness is focusing one's awareness on the present moment. And though it draws heavily from Buddhist meditation, it is not a religious practice. It is instead a therapeutic practice grounded in a scientific framework. It also holds similarities to the Christian spiritual practice of Centering prayer. However, in prayer you focus on being in God's presence, while in Mindfulness, you focus your awareness on your own mind and body in the present moment, without judgement.

Central to the practice is noticing. Noticing your 5 senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. Noticing the pattern of your thoughts and feelings. Noticing the effects on your body. Because while our minds may suppress painful memories or feelings, the body remembers.

I share this with you, because I saw how much "noticing" plays a part in our scripture passage today. Moses is out tending the sheep when he notices a strange sight. A bush with a flame of fire coming out of it, blazing. Yet it was not consumed, it was not burned up. He notices it. Now, it may seem obvious that Moses would notice the unusual sight of a burning bush when he walked by, but it wasn't a given. How much of life around us do we walk by and not notice, our minds on something else? Moses could have been consumed by his caring for the sheep and missed it many times.

My husband and I have a running joke about the fact that I will notice when a plate is moved one inch in a kitchen cabinet, but large items escape my notice. Things like sculptures or buildings in plain sight. The year we lived in Seoul, Korea, there was this large, beautiful sculpture outside a train station we used regularly, and I had been there 3 months before I noticed it. So, the phrase, "remember the statue in Seoul!" is used regularly in our house, when I overlook the obvious.

Another example of this, this past week I visited someone outside in their yard. After I left, I realized I had no idea what the outside of their house looks like, would not recognize a picture of it. Because I was so focused on seeing the person, I paid no attention to the house on whose front steps he had been sitting when I arrived.

Moses noticed the burning bush. It was not a given. He was in the frame of mind to finally see it. And then he took the second step to turn aside and explore it up close. By noticing and turning aside to explore, those two actions changed his life. If not, he may have spent the rest of his life shepherding the sheep in Midian.

But, I've gotten ahead of myself. Let's back up, because a lot has happened since last Sunday when we heard the story of Moses' birth. Moses has grown up bi-culturally in his biological mother's home who was a Hebrew slave, and in his adopted mother's palace, who was the daughter of Pharaoh. The Pharaoh who was oppressing the Hebrew people. Moses is a part of both cultures, but not belonging or being accepted fully in either.

One day, after he had grown to adulthood, Moses went out to observe his people. Biblical scholar Dr. Walter Brueggemann points out that while others might have seen the beauty, splendor, and order of Egyptian culture, what Moses notices is the forced labor or slavery of his people. And that is the moment we learn that Moses identifies more with his Hebrew roots than his Egyptian privilege.

Moses sees an Egyptian striking a Hebrew slave, and Moses intervenes and strikes the Egyptian and the Egyptian dies. The next day Moses sees a Hebrew striking another Hebrew and intervenes again this time using his words. When news of this reaches Pharaoh's ear, Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses, and Moses flees into the wilderness of Saudi Arabia a broken man. He comes to a well and sits to rest, and then comes to the defense of seven sisters, daughters to the priest of Midian. Shepherds were driving the sisters away from the well, and so Moses helped the sisters water their flocks. He is welcomed by their family, enveloped and accepted by this Midianite family, marries one of the sisters, Zipporah, and becomes a shepherd living off the land. He has a son and gives him a name that means alien or sojourner. His time with them and their full acceptance and love begin to thaw and heal him. But he was still running from his past. Faulkner writes, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Moses was avoiding his past and hiding out in Midian.

Meanwhile, as Moses settles into life Midian, things are happening in Egypt. In the verses just before what Donna read, we hear, "*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*" (Ex 2:23-25) God took notice of them. Actually, the word is stronger. It is the Hebrew word "to know"—to fully, intimately know them and their sufferings.

So, God steps into Moses' life in Midian. Waking him from his routine as a shepherd. God draws Moses' attention with the burning bush, and calls him use his unique background as a Hebrew slave and Pharaoh's grandson to intervene on behalf of the enslaved Hebrew people. Moses is overwhelmed by that thought, not thinking he was capable. But God had noticed Moses' character, his heart, that he repeatedly intervened on the side of the victim: the Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian, the Hebrew being beating by a stronger Hebrew, seven sisters being harassed by shepherds. Moses grew up seeing first-hand the injustice against his people, and his propensity, his heart was to come to the defense of the defenseless. He was exactly the person God wanted to call.

There are three things that I notice about this passage:

--That God hears the cries of God's people and responds. Like a parent who hears the cries of their child and responds. Or in the words of the Brief Statement of Faith, "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still." There are many people crying out in our world today, and it gives me hope that scripture says God observes, hears, knows, comes down and delivers.

--That God notices the character gifts of Moses, and calls him to act. Then and now, as individuals and as a church, God notices our gifts and calls us to act with justice, kindness, mercy. This does not stop just because of the coronavirus.

--That God offers assurance that God will be with Moses. And promises that when the people are brought out of slavery in Egypt, they will worship God on that mountain. For a Hebrew slave, whose time is not their own, to have the space and time to worship together was an assurance of freedom. In this time of pandemic, perhaps we have a better sense of what a gift worshipping together is.

Our call to worship today came from Psalm 122:1, I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" What you did not see in that video happened later. Harriet asked her mother, "When is next church day. I want church day." It's a precious gift to worship together.

This week I invite you to take a few minutes to notice. Either daily or once this week. Notice what you see, hear, feel, think. Notice the sky at the stoplight. Notice where there is beauty, where there is tension, where there is sorrow or injustice. See where your heart goes. Because the first step to being open to God's presence and God's calling to be a people who seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God ... the first step is to notice, and make space for God to act. And to rest in the promise that God sees, hears, acts, notices, calls, and promises to be with us. That too is worship.