

*Looking Around for God*

Exodus 3:1-6

You know that story about Moses and the burning bush that we read just a few minutes ago? I've always wondered what that burning bush actually was. If we take the story very literally—if we read it as though there actually was a one-time magical, miraculous moment when God appeared in a fire that super-naturally “filled but did not consume” a living plant, we limit the story's power. It becomes something that might have happened once, but it can never happen again. It was an appearance of God that was a life-changing experience for Moses, but it's not an experience we can hope ever to have for ourselves.

On the other hand, we might think about it this way: that it was such an astonishing moment for Moses, that the only words he could find to describe it were about it being a miracle. Well, that kind of astonishment is something we can all relate to. So maybe Moses came back and told his family and friends that he saw what *looked* like a bush that was on fire...but it wasn't burning up!

Maybe Moses was in the middle of praying or meditating that day he was out tending his father-in-law's sheep, so attuned to the presence of the holy in him and around him, that when he looked up, the fire was in his eyes, and *whatever* he saw nearby would have looked charged with light.

And while we're wondering...Have you ever noticed, when you've heard that story of Moses finding God in the burning bush, the coincidence that the bush and the holy ground are right there where he is standing—precisely in that spot—as if he had just stumbled across God in the course of his everyday work? That oddly, God did not say to Moses, “Just walk up a quarter mile more, and you'll find the right spot?” or “This is a beautiful place. It would be a good place for a retreat; come back when you've got more time.”

No...Moses was in the middle of his work day His eyes were firmly fixed on the bedraggled sheep he'd been charged with and the scrubby bushes they were scarfing up for food when the great “I Am” appeared in front of him and said, “Take your shoes off. That patch of dirt you are standing on—yeah, that one—is holy ground.”

No doubt Moses could have just kept walking. He might have explained away the brilliant color in the middle of that scruffy bush by saying, “Huh! That sun sure is bright today,” or “That's funny; I almost thought I heard someone saying my name. It must be time to get home for dinner.” But he didn't. He stopped and asked, “What is this? Who are you? Tell me.”

I wonder how many burning bushes I've walked right by in my life. I wonder how many times God has tried to get my attention, put some trace of holiness in front of me that should have dazzled me with beauty or poignancy or moved me with compassion, and I just kept walking because I had important work to do.

I think maybe all those curing blindness miracles that Jesus did were trying to tell us that our inability to see God is not a problem in the landscape (or in these pictures hanging in the sanctuary this morning); it's in our eyes. That holiness is right here under our feet; only we often don't recognize it. Because maybe we're looking for the wrong thing. We're waiting, watching, for something that will transport us *out* of normal life and into some spiritual-feeling realm. But in fact the presence of God is right here. And what it does is connect us more firmly to our real life.

Some wise teachers have believed that the whole mission of Jesus was to reveal—to open up so we could see—the places where God is hiding on earth. In the unwashed faces of children, in broken bodies, in prison inmates and desperate refugees, in the call of our thirsty earth for water and for care. Maybe the places where God is trying hard to make himself visible to us are not retreat settings, or even a beautiful sunset, but right in the middle of the messy, out-of-control life that is ours.

I read a story this week about a young man named Damien Durr. Damien grew up in Ohio, in one of those communities where there is never enough money for schools. Damien's father, grandfather and aunt all died at about the same time, just as Damien was starting high school. Those deaths shook him, but he kept going. His father had expected him to graduate from high school, and he was going to do it—no matter how hard a time it was for his family. And then Damien hit a roadblock. He failed the math section of the proficiency test that was required for high school graduation. He took the test again...and then again. He went to summer school; his mother hired a tutor. But still he could not pass the test, because his regular math classes had never taught him the knowledge or the skills he needed.

And so, at the end of his senior year in high school, Damien could not graduate. It was the rule. It's not that he wasn't smart enough; his offense was that he had wasted twelve years of time in classrooms where he hadn't been taught what the state expected him to know. And so his life got derailed, almost destroyed. Years later he says, "I felt shame and embarrassment...a kind of intellectual inadequacy...There was this test that kept telling me I wasn't good enough. I knew I was more than a test score, but at the time it was hard to separate what the test told me I was and where I found myself in life."

Without a high school diploma, Damien spent several years working jobs that required very little of him. He was arrested several times, always looking for creative ways to get money. Finally Damien met someone who stopped and looked at him long enough and with enough compassion to see in him something more than failure. Someone who saw something in that discouraged, defensive, angry face that told her to take a risk on this troubled boy. And so she did. A woman who hardly knew him at all became Damien's mentor and coach and champion. She stayed with him all the way through a GED, and then college, and then a Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt University.<sup>1</sup> Damien Durr is now a social and emotional counselor at a high school in Nashville.

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<sup>1</sup> From Marian Wright Edelman's Child Watch Column, at [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), September 19, 2015.

Mother Teresa used to say that she served the lepers and the poor and dying in Calcutta not because Jesus told her to, but because it was *Jesus* who was leprous and destitute and dying in the streets. She saw God in every human being. When she saw someone who was dying she didn't have to *imagine* it was Jesus; for her it really *was* Jesus, in a disguise he often wears. When she wanted to see God, she didn't look up and away from the sick people and squalid conditions next to her; she looked right at them. And she would say to each person she met *Namaste*, which means "the God in me recognizes the God in you."

In her book *Carry On Warrior*, Glennon Doyle Melton says she too started to practice a teeny little bow of her head and breathing a quiet *Namaste* to everyone who crosses her path, whether it's a child or a clerk at a store or her husband. And she says this about what happened when she practiced *Namaste*: "It's *working*. I'm starting to see God everywhere. It's like that little bow of my head snaps me out of the horrible trance I allow myself to get lulled into each day."<sup>2</sup>

"The horrible trance I allow myself to get lulled into each day." I know. I have one too. That trance in which I completely lose touch with my need for something greater, something that ties all the random pieces of my life together. And then when I do remember it's God, I often think I have to look for something extraordinary, something that will give me a spiritual, magical sort of *feeling* to be sure that God is there.

When in fact, there is holiness all around me. The only glasses I need to see it come with an open heart. God is hiding right here, in the people in front of you, in the place where you just happen to be standing. Holiness is just waiting to be seen and touched and discovered—not apart from your ordinary life, but in it.

*Namaste*. The God in me recognizes the God in you...and in this place.

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<sup>2</sup> From Glennon Doyle Melton, *Carry On Warrior*, at p. 190-191.