

August 31, 2008
Exodus 3:1-15
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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On Call

We waited a long time for summer – but haven't these recent days been glorious? Have you taken the time to wiggle bare toes in the grass? Today I want to begin with Mary Oliver's poem entitled

The Summer Day.
Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself
out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth
instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous
and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and
thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open,
and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention,
how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your
one wild and precious life?

For Mary Oliver one aspect of prayer is paying attention. For Mary Oliver this particularly means paying attention to the natural world. My husband, Ron, planted a

small garden for us this year and I realize how much attention I have been paying the plants. It has been fun to hunt for cucumbers hiding under the vines, which might get eaten before they get into the house, and to smell the ripening tomatoes. At the same, have you noticed that some leaves are starting to turn? There is a hint of another season to come.

Paying attention is central to today's story. As Moses was keeping the flock he saw a flame of fire in a bush, but the bush was not consumed. Now, he might have thought, "I didn't have enough sleep last night. I must be seeing things." Or, "That's crazy. I can't be real." And kept moving to get away from such a strange thing. However, Moses says, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight." In other words he paid attention to what was right before him, weird as it was.

This part of the story gives me pause. What if Moses had hurried on because... he had an appointment with an important client. In this story God's invitation to Moses requires Moses to be paying attention. God didn't force Moses to notice. God didn't jump out of the sky like a mighty angel shouting, "Shazaam." God waits for Moses to turn aside and when God sees that Moses has turned aside then God calls out, "Moses, Moses!"

Does that mean God has been leaving clues all along the way, and I/we have been too distracted, or too disoriented by the clue to

notice? In a way too busy world, it would be easy for each of us to miss a “flame in a bush.” Have you ever realized after you drove yourself along the familiar route home that you don’t have specific memories of anything you saw along the way? Maybe Moses noticed that day because he was in new territory.

Maybe that’s why a break from our routine sometimes provides a crack in our veneer to allow God in. I’ve known a few people who had a vivid sense of God speaking directly to them. But more often it seems that people experience God’s message through active service such as washing dishes at Midcoast Hunger, through paying attention to their own inner journey through journaling or meditation, through dialogue with others in a Bible Study group, or in sitting on a rock watching a blazing sunset. There are many ways that God comes to us, but we need to be paying attention. Some might say, we need to be “on call.”

“On Call.” Parents of young children are always “on call.” People raising livestock are always “on call.” In olden times, when there was less delineation of responsibilities in a community, everyone was on call. If there was a fire, the church bells rang and people came running to help. If someone was missing, the community went looking for them. Now, we have fire departments and police and doctors and medical staff take turns being on call. Yet, parents are still pretty much “on call.”

As a pastor, in some ways I am always ‘on call.’ And it is right to call me in an emergency. But, I want to tell you that I appreciate that you call me at home only when it’s something that can’t wait ‘till office hours.

I’ve come to realize that some of you in the business community experience many work interruptions during your personal time. Email and cell phones are great in many ways, but they have made it harder and harder for people to actually have Sabbath time – to truly have time away from work – time to rest. And we all need time to rest and re-create, because when God comes calling, it may take everything we have, like Moses.

In the story, God comes to Moses, because God, too, has been “on call.”

I have seen the misery of my people...

I have heard their cry ...

I have come down to deliver them...

Great, God. We’re a little afraid to say it, but it’s about time. That’s exactly what we were hoping for. You take care of it.

By the way,

How can you let those things happen?

We have a few questions, as a matter of fact.

Why are people in such bondage?

Why do little children die because they

don’t have clean water and basic

sustenance? Why is there so much warfare?

Why are people having trouble breathing the air around us?

We’re glad that you’ve seen our misery and heard our cry. And that you have come down to deliver us. By the way, when you have it taken care of would you send out a group email and let us know.

God has a different approach in mind.

God’s going to send Moses to deal with the political mess in Egypt. Go to Egypt, go to Pharaoh and tell him to “let my people go.”

Why Moses? Because Egypt is part of his story. He’s even been in the Pharaoh’s household.

Often what God asks of us connects with something in our story. Even the most painful parts of our story can sometimes be used to work for justice and to act for peace.

This is huge. What does God promise Moses? “I will be with you. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. I will be with you.” That’s the heart of God’s promise – then and now. It is an incarnational promise. It is the heart of the Christian message, that in Jesus of Nazareth we experience “God with us.” As disciples of Christ, we are called to embody that presence with one another, which is what Paul is reminding us of in the letter to the Romans today. That we are “on call” to be about the work of the Holy in our everyday interactions with one another.

But who are we to do that? We’re not up to it? Deep down, we know just how flawed we really are. Moses wasn’t dumb either.

“You’ve got to be kidding, God.” He’s not perfect for the job. First of all, he’s a marked man. Remember, he killed an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew and when Pharaoh heard of it, he was out to get Moses. Second, of all, as is mentioned in a later passage, Moses is not eloquent. “You want me to be your spokesman. You need to get better ears, God.” But God says, “Yes, you, Moses.”

I suspect God is saying a similar thing to us, “Yes, you, First Parish church. I already know you’re not perfect. But I’m calling you. I want you to pay attention to what is happening right around you. I want you to be on call for the messages you sense are coming from the Holy. And I will call you, too, to work for justice and act for peace.”

We, individually and collectively, like Moses, will have reasons, even good reasons, why we are not up to the task. But

God will keep the call before us because it is part of our story.

In her book *Holy the Firm* (Harper Collins, 1997), Annie Dillard speaks of the human propensity to resist tackling the big things, because we know we aren’t the right people,

*There is no one to send,
nor a clean hand
nor a pure heart
on the face of the earth,
nor in the earth,
but only us,
a generation comforting ourselves
with the notion
that we have come at an awkward time,
that our innocent fathers are all dead
as if innocence had ever been
and our children busy and troubled,
and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready
having each of us chosen wrongly,
made a false start, failed,
yielded to impulse
and the tangled comfort of pleasures,
and grown exhausted
unable to seek the thread,
weak, and involved.
But there is no one but us.
There never has been.*

And God promises,
“I will be with you.”