

Exodus 3:1-15
August 28, '11

"TURNING ASIDE"

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF INTRIGUING PHRASES IN THIS GREAT & FAMILIAR PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE.

PERHAPS THE MOST OBVIOUS ONE IS THE NAME OF GOD – "I AM WHO I AM."

WE'LL COME TO THAT LATER.

ANOTHER IS THE PHRASE THAT WE'VE USED FOR THE TITLE OF THIS MESSAGE – "TURNING ASIDE."

WE'LL COME TO *THAT* LATER AS WELL.

THERE'S ANOTHER PHRASE HERE, THOUGH, THAT I FIND, NOT ONLY INTRIGUING, BUT RATHER
FRIGHTENING AS WELL.

IT'S FOUND IN THE VERY FIRST VERSE – "BEYOND THE WILDERNESS."

WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES THAT MEAN?

I SUPPOSE IT COULD BE SEEN IN A POSITIVE LIGHT.

IT COULD MEAN THAT ONE HAS GONE INTO THE WILDERNESS & EMERGED ON THE OTHER SIDE, WHERE
THE WILDERNESS IS NO MORE.

BUT IT MIGHT ALSO MEAN A PLACE THAT IS FOUND A STEP BEYOND THE WILDERNESS – AN EVEN WORSE
PLACE THAN THE WILDERNESS ITSELF.

AND WHAT *IS* THE WILDERNESS?

IT MAY MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE & DIFFERENT THINGS AT DIFFERENT TIMES.

WE ALL FIND OURSELVES IN THE WILDERNESS ON OCCASION.

AND I WOULD IMAGINE THAT MOST OF US HAVE ALSO TRAVELED EVEN BEYOND THE WILDERNESS – TO A
PLACE THAT IS EVEN WORSE THAN THE WILDERNESS ITSELF.

SOMETIMES THOSE VISITS BEYOND THE WILDERNESS LAST NO MORE THAN A MOMENT & SOMETIMES WE
MAY BE TRAPPED THERE FOR YEARS.

LET ME GIVE YOU A PERSONAL EXAMPLE OF THE FORMER.

THERE WAS A PERIOD OF TIME IN MY LIFE WHEN NEARLY ALL OF MY TRAVELING WAS DONE BY
HITCHHIKING.

GIVEN THE RARITY OF THAT PRACTICE TODAY, IT TELLS YOU SOMETHING OF MY AGE.

I REMEMBER ONE EVENING, HITCHHIKING TO WORK.

I HAD TO TRAVEL FROM A CITY ON THE FAR EAST SIDE OF THE DETROIT AREA TO ONE ON THE FAR WEST
SIDE.

I LEFT ABOUT 9:00 AND HAD TO BE THERE AT MIDNIGHT.

MY FIRST RIDE LEFT ME IN DOWNTOWN DETROIT – IN A PLACE THAT WASN'T VERY COMFORTABLE.

TO ME, IT WAS A WILDERNESS.

AFTER ABOUT 10 MINUTES OF WAITING, I GOT ANOTHER RIDE.

THE CAR WASN'T MUCH TO LOOK AT & SEEMED LESS THAN ROAD-WORTHY, BUT IT WAS A RIDE.

A LARGE YOUNG MAN WAS DRIVING & AN EVEN LARGER MAN SAT NEXT TO HIM IN THE FRONT SEAT.

I OPENED THE BACK DOOR & HOPPED INTO THE BACK SEAT.

I TOLD THEM WHERE I WAS GOING & THEY SAID THEY WERE GOING THAT FAR & WOULD DROP ME OFF AT THE EXIT I NEEDED.

WE TRAVELED JUST A FEW MILES ON I-94 WHEN THE DRIVER SUDDENLY EXITED, TRAVELING EVEN FURTHER INTO THE CITY IN A PLACE I'D NEVER BEEN & NEVER INTENDED TO GO.

I GENTLY REMINDED HIM THAT I WAS GOING TO BE GOING FURTHER & SUGGESTED I JUST GET OUT & WAIT FOR ANOTHER RIDE.

HE TOLD ME WE HAD TO MAKE A STOP BECAUSE HE HAD TO GET HIS WALLET.

WE DROVE FOR A COUPLE MINUTES, FURTHER INTO THE WILDERNESS OF THE CITY & THEN TURNED DOWN – NOT A STREET – BUT AN ALLEY.

WE WENT ABOUT 50 YARDS DOWN THE DARKEST, SCARIEST ALLEY I'D EVER SEEN.

THE CAR STOPPED & I KNEW I WAS GOING TO DIE.

BOTH GUYS GOT OUT OF THE CAR & ONE OF THEM SAID, “WE’LL BE RIGHT BACK.”

I WAITED FOR A FEW SECONDS, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO, WHEN I SAW FOUR GUYS WALKING DOWN THE ALLEY FROM THE OTHER DIRECTION, TOWARD THE CAR.

THEY WERE ALL LARGER THAN THE OTHER TWO.

IN THE MOMENTS THAT FOLLOWED, I CAME TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS MEANT BY THE SAYING – “MY WHOLE LIFE FLASHED BEFORE MY EYES.”

I HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FEW MINUTES, BUT I DIDN’T WAIT AROUND TO FIND OUT.

I OPENED THE DOOR, JUMPED OUT OF THE CAR & STARTED RUNNING AS FAST AS I COULD.

I DASHED OUT OF THE ALLEY AND RAN BACK TOWARD THE FREEWAY, DODGING CARS AS I WENT & I SPOTTED A GAS STATION & RACED INSIDE, WHERE I DID SOMETHING I'D NEVER DONE BEFORE – I CALLED A TAXI!

THERE’S A GOOD CHANCE THAT THE 4 GUYS IN THE ALLEY WONDERED WHAT IN THE WORLD THE CRAZY GUY THAT EMERGED FROM THAT CAR WAS RUNNING FROM & WHEN THE OTHER TWO RETURNED WITH THE WALLET, THEY MAY HAVE BEEN SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THEIR PASSENGER HAD DISAPPEARED.

I’LL NEVER KNOW.

BUT I DO KNOW THAT IN THOSE BRIEF MOMENTS I FOUND MYSELF MOVING FROM THE WILDERNESS TO A PLACE IN THAT DARK ALLEY THAT, FOR ME, WAS “BEYOND THE WILDERNESS.”

THIS IS PERHAPS WHERE MOSES WAS.

HE WAS BEYOND THE WILDERNESS WHEN HE FOUND GOD – OR WHEN GOD FOUND HIM.

IT WAS A MOST FASCINATING ENCOUNTER.

NOTICE THAT THE PASSAGE SAYS MOSES “TURNED ASIDE” AND THAT’S WHEN IT HAPPENED.

THAT’S WHEN GOD SPOKE TO HIM.

NOW WHAT DOES *THAT* PHRASE MEAN?

LISTEN AGAIN TO WHAT IT SAYS – *“MOSES SAID, ‘I MUST TURN ASIDE & LOOK AT THIS GREAT SIGHT...’”*

HE TOOK HIS EYES OFF OF EVERYTHING IN FRONT OF HIM.

HE DIVERTED HIS VIEW.

HE CHOSE A NEW DIRECTION.

THEN, AND ONLY THEN, DID GOD SPEAK TO HIM.

“WHEN THE LORD SAW THAT HE HAD TURNED ASIDE TO SEE, GOD CALLED TO HIM OUT OF THE BUSH...”

WHAT DOES THIS SAY TO US?

WHEN YOU HAVE YOUR EYES FIXED ON SOME PLAN, SOME DESTINATION, SOME PRE-DETERMINED GOAL –
- OR WHEN YOU’RE SIMPLY LIVING LIFE AS IF YOU’VE ALREADY ARRIVED – DOING THE SAME THINGS
YOU’VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO DOING –

- YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SEE GOD’S PRESENCE UNTIL & UNLESS YOU *“TURN ASIDE.”*

ONLY WHEN YOU’RE WILLING TO DO SO – ONLY WHEN YOU’RE WILLING TO TURN ASIDE FROM YOUR *OWN*
PLANS, YOUR *OWN* SCHEDULE, YOUR *OWN* PRE-DETERMINED PATH THROUGH LIFE – WILL GOD BE ABLE TO SPEAK
TO YOU.

AH, BUT WHAT ELSE DOES THIS PASSAGE SAY TO US?

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LEARN FROM MOSES & HIS JOURNEY *“BEYOND THE WILDERNESS?”*

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THAT CONNECTION IS MADE?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MOSES TURNS ASIDE, WHEN GOD SPEAKS & WHEN MOSES LISTENS?

INITIALLY, IT’S ALL GOOD, ISN’T IT?

GOD HAS SEEN THE PLIGHT OF GOD’S PEOPLE – THAT’S GOOD.

GOD IS GOING TO INTERCEDE – GOOD AGAIN.

GOD IS GOING TO FREE THEM FROM BONDAGE – THAT’S EVEN BETTER!

BUT NOW COMES THE PUNCHLINE OF THIS DIVINE JOKE THAT GOD IS TELLING MOSES.

*“YES, I’M GOING TO DO ALL THIS, MOSES. AND GUESS WHAT. YOU’RE GOING TO BE THE ONE TO MAKE IT
HAPPEN!”*

“COME AGAIN, LORD? WHO DID YOU SAY WAS GOING TO MAKE IT HAPPEN?”

AND SUDDENLY, ALL OF THOSE GOOD THINGS DIDN’T SOUND SO GOOD AFTER ALL.

AND, LET’S FACE IT – THEY *WEREN’T!*

THIS ENCOUNTER WITH GOD BEGAN AN AGONIZING & STRESS-FILLED & TUMULTUOUS TIME FOR MOSES –
40 YEARS OF STRUGGLE!

ISN’T THAT TRUE OF OUR OWN LIVES, THOUGH?

THINK OF THE THINGS THAT SOUND SO GOOD INITIALLY THAT ARE FOLLOWED BY STRUGGLE.

A YOUNG COUPLE DECIDES TO HAVE A BABY.

IT’S SO EXCITING & SO WONDERFUL.

THE BABY ARRIVES & SUDDENLY YOU THINK, *“UH OH! WHAT HAVE WE GOTTEN OURSELVES INTO?! WHAT DO WE DO NOW?!”*

A STUDENT LONGS TO BE ADMITTED TO THE COLLEGE OF HER CHOICE.

SHE DESPERATELY WANT TO GO THERE & FINALLY, THE ACCEPTANCE LETTER ARRIVES!

IT'S SO EXCITING & SO WONDERFUL.

BUT SHE ARRIVES ON CAMPUS, FAR FROM HOME & BEGINS CLASSES & SEES ALL THE WORK & STRESS IN FRONT OF HER AND SHE THINKS, *“WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO?”*

SO MUCH OF LIFE IS THAT WAY.

WHAT SEEMS SO GOOD IS FOLLOWED BY TREMENDOUS STRUGGLE.

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED WITH MOSES.

IT ALL SOUNDED SO GOOD WHEN GOD INITIALLY LAID OUT THIS PLAN TO FREE THE ISRAELITES.

BUT WHEN MOSES REALIZED IT WAS ALL GOING TO BE UP TO HIM, HE BALKED & PUT FORTH ONE EXCUSE AFTER ANOTHER AS TO WHY HE WASN'T THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB.

THE FIRST THING HE WANTED TO KNOW WAS WHO WAS PUTTING HIM UP TO IT.

WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THIS ENTITY SPEAKING TO HIM FROM A BURNING BUSH?

THE NAME HE WAS GIVEN – *“I AM WHO I AM”* – IS NOTORIOUSLY AMBIGUOUS.

AND THAT'S THE POINT!

GOD IS SAYING TO MOSES – *“DON'T TRY TO BOX ME IN. DON'T TRY TO COMPLETELY KNOW ME BECAUSE YOU NEVER WILL.”*

THE GREAT JEWISH SCHOLAR MARTIN BUBER HAS SUGGESTED AN EVEN MORE INTRIGUING TRANSLATION OF GOD'S NAME – *“I WILL BE WHATEVER I WILL BE.”*

IT SUGGESTS AN ONGOING & CHANGING GOD – A GOD WE CAN NEVER FIGURE OUT.

HERE'S THE THING – ONCE YOU SIGN ON TO FOLLOW THIS GOD, YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE IT'S GOING TO TAKE YOU.

YOU SIMPLY TRUST THAT IT WILL BE THE RIGHT PLACE.

I HEARD A GREAT EXAMPLE OF THIS RECENTLY.

A COUPLE HAD A MILESTONE ANNIVERSARY TO CELEBRATE.

THE HUSBAND MADE A PLAN BUT WOULDN'T TELL HIS WIFE WHAT IT WAS.

HE GAVE HER VAGUE INFORMATION AS TO HOW LONG THEY'D BE AWAY & THE PROPER CLOTHES TO PACK, BUT OTHER THAN THAT, SHE DIDN'T HAVE A CLUE AS TO WHERE SHE WAS GOING.

WHERE SHE ENDED UP WAS AN ANNIVERSARY TRIP TO HAWAII!

PLEASE DON'T MISUNDERSTAND.

I'M NOT EQUATING THAT HUSBAND WITH GOD, BUT THE SAME PRINCIPLE APPLIES.

WE LEARN WHO IT IS WE CAN TRUST & KNOW THAT WHEREVER THEY TAKE US WILL BE A GOOD PLACE.

TO KNOW GOD, TO TRUST GOD IS TO GO WHEREVER GOD LEADS YOU.

FAITH HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A FULL-CONTACT PARTICIPATION SPORT.
YOU CAN'T JUST SIT BACK & EXPECT TO REALLY KNOW GOD.
SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TURN ASIDE FROM THE DIRECTION YOU'RE GOING.
SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TAKE A RISK.
SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TRY SOMETHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY.
SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO REACH FOR SOMETHING YOU THOUGHT UNREACHABLE.
SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO STEP OUT BEYOND THE WILDERNESS TO SEE WHERE IT IS THAT GOD IS TAKING
YOU.

I FIND IT INTERESTING THAT IT WAS THERE – BEYOND THE WILDERNESS – THAT MOSES ENCOUNTERED
GOD.

WE FREQUENTLY HEAR PEOPLE TALK ABOUT WORSHIPING IN PLACES OTHER THAN A CHURCH
SANCTUARY.

SO OFTEN, THOUGH, WHAT PEOPLE SAY IS THAT THEY CAN WORSHIP GOD ON A BEACH OR ON A BOAT OR
IN THE FOREST.

THAT'S NOT WHERE MOSES MET GOD.

MOSES MET GOD BEYOND THE WILDERNESS – IN A PLACE THAT WOULD SEEM TO BE THE MOST UNLIKELY
PLACE OF ALL TO ENCOUNTER THE DIVINE.

SOMETIMES WE NEED TO TURN ASIDE FROM THE PLACES WE THINK ARE THE MOST LIKELY PLACES FOR
US TO BE.

SOMETIMES WE NEED TO SEARCH OUT THE NOOKS & CRANNIES OF THE WORLD AROUND US & HEAR THE
CRIES OF THE PEOPLE WE MIGHT NOT ORDINARILY HEAR.

DON'T TRY TO BOX GOD IN WHEN YOU ATTEMPT TO HEAR THE DIVINE CALL IN YOUR LIFE.

"I WILL BE WHATEVER I WILL BE" MEANS THAT GOD IS CONSTANTLY SETTING SOMETHING NEW IN FRONT
OF YOU – AND BESIDE YOU.

IN MY EXPERIENCE "BEYOND THE WILDERNESS" IN THAT ALLEY, IT DIDN'T END WITH A TAXI.

IN FACT, LIKE THE FOUR GUYS WALKING IN THAT ALLEY & THE TWO I HAD INITIALLY ENCOUNTERED,
WHEN THE DRIVER OF THAT TAXI SHOWED UP, HE, TOO HAD TO WONDER, *"WHERE'S MY RIDER?"*

BECAUSE AFTER PLACING THAT CALL, I STEPPED PRECARIOUSLY OUT OF THE GAS STATION & STOOD
NEAR THE CURB, WAITING FOR THE CAB.

I LOOKED ACROSS THE STREET & UP CAME AN OLD, FADED GREEN VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE WITH A
CALIFORNIA LICENSE PLATE ON THE FRONT.

I'M SURE THERE WAS ONLY ONE SUCH VEHICLE IN DETROIT.

IT WAS MY ROOMMATE & WHY HE WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WILDERNESS AT 11 O'CLOCK ON A FRIDAY
NIGHT, REMAINS A MYSTERY TO THIS DAY.

BUT THERE HE WAS.

SUDDENLY SOMETHING BAD TURNED VERY GOOD AS HE DROVE ME SAFELY (AND ON TIME) TO WORK THAT NIGHT.

THINK ABOUT IT WITH MOSES.

THE “SOMETHING GOOD” THAT HE HEARD FROM GOD WITH THE DIVINE CONCERN FOR THE ISRAELITES THAT SEEMED TO TURN BAD WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT HE WOULD BE IN CHARGE, EVENTUALLY BECAME GOOD AGAIN AS THEY MADE THEIR WAY TO THE PROMISED LAND.

THOSE PARENTS WHO EXPERIENCE PANIC WHEN A BABY IS BORN ARE FILLED WITH EXCITEMENT & LOVE AS THAT CHILD GROWS & MATURES.

THAT STUDENT WHO BEGAN A RIGOROUS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE, GRADUATES & SEES A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY STANDING BEFORE HER.

WE ALL HAVE EXPERIENCES THAT TAKE US “BEYOND THE WILDERNESS.”

BUT IF WE’RE WILLING TO “TURN ASIDE” FROM OUR OWN PLANS & PROCEDURES – IF WE’LL OPEN OUR EYES TO SEE THE PRESENCE OF GOD – IF WE’LL TRUST IN WHERE GOD IS LEADING US – WHO KNOWS, WE MIGHT JUST WIND UP IN A PLACE THAT’S EVEN BETTER THAN HAWAII! AMEN.

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