

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Exodus 3:1-14a pg 50 OT

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

⁵"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"¹² And God said, "I will be with you. ... ¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I am who I am."

PSALM 139: 1-10

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O LORD, you have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. ⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

“Here”

I have been very excited for this day to come, the day when I could begin our summer sermon series. Each summer I try to do something a little different...Two summers ago, we studied, *“The Lord’s Prayer”*, last year, we talked about *“The Things People Think are in the Bible but Aren’t”*. This summer, in preparation for the Vital Congregations Initiative, I thought it appropriate to spend some time considering the topic of “Spirituality”. A great resource I’ve found is a wonderful book called “Naked Spirituality” by Brian McLaren. His approach is to strip away the symbols and status of public religion, the trappings of which often get the focus, and instead attend to what Jesus wants us to focus on, what is underneath, the well-being of the soul. And indeed, we all can agree that Jesus wants us to focus on our spiritual life, which is a Spirit life, a life lived in the Spirit.

Probably each of us have had that most memorable encounter with the Spiritual life at different points and in different ways. Maybe yours was in a small fellowship group in high school or college, or maybe it was at summer camp or when you were in the middle of some traumatic episode in your life, or a when you had a brush with death. Maybe you recall it happening while walking along the beach, watching the waves pound the shore or when you were on the proverbial mountaintop looking out across the plains at sunset. Maybe someone close to you was transformed before your eyes, and you felt the contagion. Maybe you can’t remember. But when it happened something changed inside of you. A kind of rebirth happened like what happened to the woman at the well when she was talking with Jesus about living water. You had a feeling of being seen and known, named and loved by someone bigger than the sky. I remember as a young person having a sense of being filled up one Sunday afternoon as I lay on my back, hands folded behind my head, watching clouds move so fast over my head. I remember being filled up with a sense of presence, of God’s presence in me, of God loving me. It was a feeling like I was going to just spill over with it all. This is what the psalmist is describing when he says, *“O Lord, ... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”*⁸ *If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*⁹ *If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

¹⁰ *even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps 139:8-10).*

Teresa of Avila wrote of such a relationship, “*Love once said to me, ‘I know a song, would you like to hear it?’ And laughter came from every brick in the street and from every pore in the sky. After a night of prayer, He changed my life when He sang, ‘Enjoy Me.’*”¹

I have had many experiences in my life when I have felt similarly, and for days and weeks afterward, I’ve felt like I was just basking in the Light of God’s presence. But the fact is that while spiritual experiences like this are wonderful, they are not very dependable. I’ve often longed, especially when dry seasons came, for ways that could’ve helped me live with God, in a day by day, moment by moment walk, something that I could’ve done, that I could be doing, that could keep me be more regularly renewed, restored and filled up. I’ve longed for a “reasonable practice”, like a garden tool which could help ensure that the seeds planted in me bear fruit, that the soil gets loosened and weeds and stones are regularly removed.² Have you not felt like this? Have you not, particularly when times are tough? For this reason, this summer, my plan is to, for a time, leave behind our more theological study and get much more “down in the dirt” and “practical”. I hope, I want to try anyway, to guide us into having deeper experiences of God, to help us to center our lives with simple, doable, durable practices to sustain an encounter with God using what McClaren suggests...simple single words. Hopefully, these practices, repetitive uses of these single words, will become to our souls what the rhythms of breath, sleep and pulse are to the body: constant, natural, life-giving.

The first practice is part of what we might call a spiritual awakening. The word is “Here”. (*repeat*). Saying “*here*” is a way we name where we are and declare ourselves present to God’s presence.”³ The truth is that we live always in the presence of God. In fact, we cannot NOT live in the presence of God, for, as CS Lewis says, “the world is crowded with God”⁴. And this is the way God wants it. God does not want to be a distant, absent, far-away diety. Our

¹ Teresa de Avila, “Laughter Came from Every Brick” in *Love Poems from God. Twelve Sacred Voices from East and West*, ed., Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 276.

² Marjorie J. Thompson. *Soul Feast. An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. (Louisville: WJKP;2014), 11.

³ Brian D. McLaren. *Naked Spirituality. A life with God in 12 Simple Words*. (New York: HarperCollins; 2011), 33.

⁴ CS Lewis. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Quoted in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook. Practices That Transform Us*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press; 2005), 60.

Scriptures attest to the fact that well before God came to be one with us as Jesus Christ, God was tenaciously sending the message that God's greatest desire is to have the relationship of an abiding presence with Creation...God in us and we in God...to be HERE.⁵ In our text today, after God had actually spoken to Moses (*"Moses, Moses"*) and appeared to Moses in a bush that was on fire but not consumed, Moses still needed to be told that God was present with him in his bringing the people out of Egypt. *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt"*? said Moses. *"And God said, "I will be with you. ..."*

Yes, we cannot NOT live in the presence of God. But we CAN ignore, we can evade, we can be so preoccupied with our "to do" list or so over whelmed by the pace of life that we forget to look for God in our day. Practicing the presence of God, saying, *"here"*, is a way of keeping our souls awake to God and teaching ourselves to pay attention. It's as simple as what we've all done hundreds of times when the teacher or the leader begins to take attendance. Inge, Pat, Janice, Mike, Kathy. We respond. *"Here"*, right? It says to the leader and most importantly to ourselves that we are letting ourselves be found, that we are ready to participate. The same is true with our becoming present to God. We did this this morning in our "Call to Worship". We do it each Sunday morning. We are not attempting to summon God who may be otherwise absent or asleep, but we are summoning ourselves to be present to attend to God in our midst. We're each of us saying, *"Here I am, Lord, on this day, in this place, in my own situation, awake, present, and ready to be spiritually encountered by you. Here, I am, just as I am."*

Sometimes, it's true that we need to withdraw from the frenzy of our world, and go to a place that is less busy and less filled with distractions in order to say, *"Here"* with any real expectation that we can really open ourselves up to a spiritual experience. Jesus did this. Again, it is not that God is more present in the quiet and solitude, it is merely that there are less distractions. I love the quote by Anthony Bloom, *"You will find stability at the moment when you discover that God is everywhere, that you do not need to see God elsewhere, that God is here, and if you do not find God here it is useless to go and search elsewhere because it is not*

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1,2nd ed, trans. G..W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 641.

God that is absent from us, it is we who are absent from God."⁶ The purpose of disciplining ourselves to practices like "here" is such that wherever we are, we may be practicing awakening. We need learn to stay awake to God's presence even in the midst of the chaos. This discipline is often associated with the 17th c French monk, Brother Lawrence. He longed to maintain an ongoing conversation with God no matter what he was doing. He wrote, "*I make it my business to rest in Christ's holy presence which I keep myself in by a habitual, silent and secret conversation with God. This often causes in me joy and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others.*"⁷

Friday, this practice sustained me. I was at a Presbytery meeting in San Antonio. I had to meet with the Executive Presbyter. I wasn't nervous, per se, but I did want to choose my words carefully and succinctly for she's a busy person, and I knew I'd get only a short minute to make my comments. I was thinking about the conversation I would likely have on my drive in as Kathy and I managed the interstate traffic. Since I was driving, I did not close my eyes, mind you, but I did offer my "breath prayer". That's what the ancient mystics called this, this practice of spiritual awakening. Mystics such as Julian of Norwich (14th c) placed a great value on such spiritual practices, with the goal of attaining a stillness of the heart and oneness with God. They used to pray what they called Breath Prayers because they can be said with a single exhalation. This is one... "Have mercy on me, Lord Jesus Christ, son of God. Have mercy on me, Lord Jesus Christ, son of God." Regardless, I prayed, on Hwy 410 as we headed in, "Here, I'm here, God. You're here. We're here, together." Amidst all of those cars going in an out and around me, I was able to hold that awareness that here, now, in the busyness, I was with God. I held that here-ness and near-ness as we went into the crowded church narthex and found our way to the registration table, then into the common area where we weaved our way through the people, all talking and balancing their plates and coffee cups, and finally into the Sanctuary where we found our seats. There I spotted Sallie up front, and again I whispered,

⁶ Quoted in: Esther de Waal, *Seeking God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), 65.

⁷Brother Lawrence. "*The Practice of the Presence of God.* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos;1999), 2.

“Here, Lord, I’m here with you. You’re here with me.” Throughout the afternoon, between the hellos and handshakes and hugs, between the items of on the agenda, until I got my moment before worship to talk with her and speak my important several minutes with her, I tried to stay centered in the presence of God, simply breathing, “here, here, here,” staying awake to God’s presence all around me.

So, brothers and sisters, our first spiritual word, of this summer sermon series, our first word is truly significant, and so appropriate for the process of becoming more spiritually aware...that is, to assume a position of being open of heart with “*here*”. I hope this week you’ll try it. Through many small pauses, wherever you are, during your days, I hope you will begin a habit of slowing down and taking some deep breaths, relaxing, and “letting the weight of your soul rest on the love and the presence of God”⁸. Before you pick up the phone or answer that email or respond to that text regarding whatever concern is demanding your attention, listen for the living God to be calling your name as God called “*Moses, Moses*” inviting your reply, “*Here, I am*”. Or in the quiet of your heart, begin the conversation yourself by addressing God, with whatever name you are drawn to use, “*I’m here, You’re here. We’re here together.*” Then slowly let your “*here*” be moved to wherever it needs to go. Who knows where your “*Here*” will take you.⁹ It’s just the beginning.

Amen and Amen.

⁸McLaren

⁹McLaren.