

Title: Once Is Never Enough!  
Date: 2/16/2022  
Texts: Psalm 46 Exodus 3.1-14  
Series: Anew! Playing In Scripture with Fresh Eyes, Ears & Heart  
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Exodus 3:1-14 (NRSV)

**3** Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. **3** Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." **4** When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." **5** Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." **6** He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

**7** Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, **8** and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. **9** The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. **10** So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." **11** But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" **12** He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

**13** But 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?" **14** God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'

My younger brother was quite the actor in high school, and in preparation for a role in a play or musical, he would read the script over and over and over, marking it up every time and then he would gather with the other cast members, and together they would read through the script many, many more times. Part of each reading, whether done individually or together, was exploring the story from different angles and perspectives. Reading the part as a young person, or as an older person, changing the gender and the social status, and the economic reality of the character, seeing how the story changed if different verbs or different verb tenses were inserted or if a different accent was used.

All this reading allowed the story time to sink into the depths of the actors' being. Most of the time the performance given at the end of this long reading process adhered to the script pretty closely but the performance was deeper, richer, more nuanced for all the time and energy invested in the multiple readings, and multiple perspectives.

This deeper and repeated reading of a script by thespians preparing for a performance, is pretty much the complete opposite of how we've been taught to read scripture here in church and the opposite of how we have been trained to experience scripture being read to us. Instead of a whole story, we may just hear the few verses the preacher wants to deal with in the sermon. Oftentimes we're reading for speed – needing to get done with a daily bible reading before a favorite show comes on, or because we're tired and want to go to sleep at the end of the day. Maybe we're trying to get through the whole bible in a year, and there isn't time to linger and reading a passage over and over again just isn't in the cards!

In these weeks when we're taking a mini-refresher course on how to read scripture for the formation and re-formation of our faith, refreshing this knowledge in celebration of those in the 2022 confirmation class who formally joined the church last week, refreshing this knowledge because it has possibly been a long time since we went through confirmation or Sunday school and learned about reading scripture.

In this time of refreshment, I want to invite us to read scripture as if we are actors preparing for a performance...reading and rereading a scripture passage, a scripture story over and over and over again, utilizing all the different perspectives and possibilities for the reading that our imagination can muster. Most of our reading will probably be done individually, but what if even two or three of us came together to work through a passage of scripture? It could be amazing!!

As a starting point, a starting story, I'd like to suggest this morning's lesson from Exodus 3. Perhaps it is a familiar story, but even if it is not, the story of Moses and the bush, which is on fire, but is not being consumed is a story filled with creative and imaginative possibilities for our growth as children of God and disciples of Jesus. Right now, I'm only going to focus us on the first verse of the story as an example of the richness that multiple readings of a scripture passage can offer us, which leaves many other verses for us to work through on our own!

The burning bush is where Moses encounters God in an unexpected and life-changing way. Yet, he is not looking to have his life changed. In fact, after all the drama in the early years of his life, which are described for us in the first two chapters of Exodus, after this drama, Moses has seemingly settled into a quieter and calmer existence of tending his father-in-law's sheep out in the middle of nowhere! It seems that Moses has embraced an intentionally bland existence, but then in the second phrase of verse one, there are two little shifts.....a verb change, and a place change, and the bland, low-key comfort Moses has chosen, vaporizes into holy ground.

Verse 1b says, "he (Moses) led his flock beyond the wilderness, and they came to Horeb, the mountain of God." Moses, who is seemingly content to live a no-drama life, suddenly decides to stop following his flock around, and lead them. Certainly, shepherds lead their flock from time to time when it is necessary, to green pastures, and beside still waters, and in paths of righteousness, and even through the wilderness. But not Moses. (p.150) Moses – and here's where the second little shift occurs, Moses leads his flock beyond the wilderness.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the wilderness is understood to be a place so remote, and so extreme, that those who find themselves there must rely on God for everything – water, food, shelter, survival, grace. So, Moses leads his flock beyond the limits of their knowledge and comfort and safety...and, only then, in their unknowingness, are they in a position to see it..."it", being, Horeb, the mountain of God where a bush is burning; a bush that for all we know has been burning there for years, waiting for Moses to come..." (p.151)

Two subtle shifts in a story, lead to unexpected newness, lead to a holy encounter –both of which are easily missed...easily missed except that Moses, when he gets to the mountain of God out beyond the wilderness...Moses takes the time to look! He puts down his shepherd's staff, he sticks the iPhone in his pocket, he sets aside the remote, he disengages from his own agenda, his own busyness...and Moses takes the time to look.

Looking is an art that the world in Moses' day, and in our day, has been largely forgotten but in an act of reverence, an act of resistance, an act of unbelievable courage, and act of love, Moses turns aside and looks, and finds himself on holy ground, asking questions that unsettle Pharaoh, asking questions that transform God's people forever. (p.152) Now, not every verse of a story in scripture may be packed with such gems of meaning and possibility awaiting our discovery but allowing ourselves the time, and giving ourselves permission to read the same story, the same lesson, over and over again, always holds the potential of great discovery; of revealing gems that will guide us to holy ground, and potentially change our lives forever! And, if we can learn this much from our brief focus on Moses and his sheep, imagine what is possible when we consider the Gospel stories of Jesus?!

And this possibility takes us right to our spiritual homework assignment for the week. This week, let us find a scripture story that intrigues us, but which we don't necessarily know well and let us read this story at least 10 times and maybe more, reading it as if we are an actor preparing for a performance...reading from different perspectives; reading with different voices; reading with others; paying attention to subtle movements, to unanticipated verbs, to unexpected shifts. Let us be curious enough to set aside our normal distractions and look to intentionally that we can see where holy ground – in all its forms – appears and then, when we discover that God has once again brought us onto holy ground, let us listen carefully, and then go and do what God is telling us!

This is not difficult spiritual homework? Right?? ☺ God is continually inviting us beyond.....beyond what we know; beyond what is familiar; beyond what we consider safe. God is calling us to serve by daring to walk on holy ground –not just once – but every day of our lives? Will we go?

Hey, what is that over there? Is it a little flame??

Pray with me.....Amen!!!

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Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word In Community*