

## ***Turn Aside***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 25, 2016  
Texts: Exodus 3:1-15

Life is pretty hum-drum most of the time. We pretty much know what each day will bring before it arrives. We have our comfortable daily routines – when we get up, what we have, or don't have, for breakfast, when we have dinner, when we go to bed and what we do to fill the hours in between. This is the stuff of life each day and, let's face it, it's usually pretty predictable. Let's face it – we *like* predictable! We like predictable because that means everything is okay. Life is the way it's supposed to be. Whether we're working and juggling kids or retired and juggling multiple activities, we like things to be predictable. It makes us feel safe. It makes us feel in control. It makes us feel like, whatever is going on, whatever challenges we may face in any given day, we can manage it, we can handle it – because overall life stays pretty much the same from today. And that feels good.

The only problem with all this is that life rarely remains predictable for long. Something always happens to gum up the works, usually when we finally feel like we're in a good spot. No major worries on the horizon. Health is okay. Family is okay. Life is good. We relax, just for a moment and then, there it is. That thought that things are just a little *too* good. Surely that other

shoe is going to drop, we start to think. What will it be? An unforeseen health problem? A family issue? A problem with the car, or the house, or the car *and* the house? Before you know it, we have ourselves tied up in knots because things are going too good! How crazy is that? Geesh!

Is any of this sounding familiar?? Based on my conversations with folks, I think it does sound familiar to most people. Life in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world is simply angst ridden and it's really, really difficult to escape it or set aside, even for a little while. Some would argue there is just too darn much information available to us all the time. We are literally suffering from information overload as a result of the 24 hour television news cycle in which small things are blown into huge incidents, just to round out the next hour of broadcasting. We have instant access to the latest micro-moment of human stupidity because someone somewhere recorded it and posted it on Facebook or Youtube. And even if we ourselves aren't glued to a cell phone 24/7, we undoubtedly interact with people who are who are only too happy to tell us all about it. No wonder we get anxious if too much time passes without a crisis or problem. We've been conditioned to expect one to pop up at any moment. As a result, we are in a constant state of readiness for worry. And, dear friends, that is not the kind of life God wants for us. That is not the kind of life Jesus came to teach us about. That is not the kind of living that

will make the world into the place of shalom – all encompassing peace – which God intended from the moment of Creation. So, what are we supposed to do?

Such is the challenge of the life of faith and it should be fairly obvious by now that there are no easy answers for us as we seek to figure out God's will for us, God's need and desire for us, in this life God has gifted to us. Prayer and reflection are obvious answers and we certainly do that here each week. But we need to do more to tease out all the possible answers to this question of what we are supposed to do in this world as the people of God. Certainly in addition to prayer the study of the scriptures, the ancient recorded struggles of other people of God trying to answer the same question is the best place to begin our search for answers. But, as those of us participating in Bible study a few times each month have realized, studying the Bible is no simple or easy task. The Bible is big and complex and contradictory and confusing and overwhelming. On one page you're reading about God's abiding love and a few pages later you're reading about God's anger over some sin we're hard pressed to understand. How can both of these descriptions of God be accurate, we wonder? Who is God and what is God saying to us in these pages and stories? What is allegorical and metaphorical and what is fact? How can the Bible be a roadmap to faith if we don't know how to read it so that it makes sense? Yes, to all of the above.

Yes, the Bible is confusing and contradictory. Yes, the Bible depicts God in many ways, some of which don't make sense. Yes, the Bible is allegorical and metaphorical and yet does contain some facts history has proven true. Yes, we need to know and understand this confusing pile of pages we call the Bible in order to figure out, at least in part, what God is saying to us right here, right now. Yes, the Bible can help us figure out what it is God needs us to do right here and right now. But how?

I have a suggestion on that but I have to warn you it comes from a sort of sideways perspective. It comes from a concept I think many of you are familiar with, the idea of having a mentor. Mentors are individuals equipped to play a key role in one's development in many of aspects of life, from professional to parenting. They are especially valuable as we seek to understand and grow into the role of being someone who loves and follows Jesus. Mentors have been part of some Confirmation curriculums for two decades or more, and for good reason. A mentor in the church is someone more experienced than you in their understanding and practice of the Christian faith who agrees to companion you, to talk and walk with you through the process of deepening your understanding of God through learning, prayer and practice. In short, a mentor is someone who willingly and knowingly agrees to be your trusted friend on your journey of faith.

Mentors are vital in growing from a head understanding of faith to a heart understanding. And I believe everyone here this morning had at least one mentor in the faith or you wouldn't be here. This mentor or mentors might have formally held that role in your life but more likely they just did it, without you or they really understanding that's what they were doing. I've been blessed with several – my mom, Mrs. Thornton the Sunday School Superintendent of my childhood, Dr. Good and Dr. Krieg during my college years and Dr. Jordan and Dr. Schussler Fiorenze at Harvard. And truthfully, many, many more besides. I'm sure you can think of the people in your life who are the reason you are here today and I urge you to ponder them for a bit today. How did they make faith real to you in such a way that you knew you needed and wanted to be here today? Once you've thought about that for awhile, then I want you to consider who it is you've been a mentor for. Even more importantly, who might you be a mentor for? What would it take for that happen?

Now in addition to real life mentors, we also have biblical mentors – folks in the Bible whose stories reveal what's possible when a personal encounter with our living God happens. The Bible is filled with them. Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah, Peter, Paul. And of course, women too – Sarah, Ruth, Esther, Mary. Some you might not even remember or realize the role they played in God's grand plan – Tamar, Rahab, Deborah,

Junia, Prisca. Some of them aren't even named – the woman who saved Elijah, the woman at the well, Peter's mother, the woman with the alabaster jar – but their imprint on our faith is beyond question, even though we don't know their names.

And why is that? What do they all have in common? What is it about these heroes and heroines of the Bible that makes them worthy of our attention, our prayerful consideration at this point in our lives? Well, the most obvious thing they all have in common is this – like Moses in the story of the burning bush we read this morning, they all turned aside. They turned aside from their normal, everyday, humdrum lives because God intervened in those lives in ways not to be ignored or discounted. And they followed the path God laid out before them, trusting God each step of the journey from who they had been to who God needed them to become. It is in this legacy of faithful reaction to God's acting in their lives that they are our mentors. It is in their example that we find the guidance we need, the truth about God and God's role in our lives that we seek.

This is nowhere more clear than in this story about Moses' theophany – his direct, personal experience of God. This encounter happened because Moses responded when God got his attention with a burning bush. It's pretty typical of divine encounters – a spectacle attracts the person's attention (burning bush); God's voice booms out (“Moses, Moses!”) ; the person

reacts with humility (takes off sandals); God makes a big promise (deliverance of God's people crying out in despair); the person's hesitation ("I can't do this"); God's assurance ("Yes, you can.") Particularly noteworthy in this story is the back and forth between Moses and God about God's name. This is the first place in the Bible where God's name is revealed. "I Am Who I Am" he tells Moses. And actually, God's name is even more nuanced than this because the tenses in Hebrew are not clear. This means God's name is also "I Will Be Who I Will Be." Think about that. God's name, God says, is "I Am Who I Am" and "I Will Be Who I Will Be." You can't know me in the way you know other people, other things, even other so-called gods, is what God is telling Moses. I don't have a name. I can't be confined by words or thoughts or descriptions. I am a God of being and a God of action. And I am asking you, Moses, to be a person of action on my behalf.

This indescribable God, this ultimately unknowable God was asking Moses to do the impossible, trusting that God would make it all possible. God invited Moses to turn aside from the life he had built for himself as an exile from Egypt in order to become the person God had always intended him to be. And the only reassurance God gave to Moses was that God would be with him, this "I Am Who I Am," this "I Will Be Who I Will Be" would be with Moses every step of the way as Moses enacted in faith the impossible task God placed before him. It is this that makes

Moses a mentor for each of us. Not a conventional kind of mentor, true. We can't speak with him. We can't ask him our questions. But we can read his story, ponder his story, pray about his story and its relevance to us and in that is how he becomes a mentor for everyone who seeks to turn aside from all life's distractions in order to turn toward God. Was there a real Moses who did all the things described in the book of Exodus? I don't know for sure. No one does. But I do know something happened and someone made it happen and to me, that someone was Moses. I do know that Moses teaches us by his example what it means to know God. He teaches us that you can only truly know God if you are willing to turn aside from your own plans in order to turn toward God to be part of God's plan.

Dear friends, knowing God happens when you step out in faith to be who God needs you to be in *your* life each day. We're not all heroes. We're not all destined for big things. None of us is going to change the world on our own. But, if we turn aside from all those things that pull us away from God and become active participants in God's plan, anything can happen. Pharaohs can change their minds. Seas can part. Bread can appear from heaven. Walls can tumble down so that new lives can be built. Anything can happen when we try to be who God asks us to be. And isn't that what it's all about? Amen.