

July 8, 2018 Sermon

“The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence”

Text: Exodus 3:1-6

A man sat at a Metro station in Washington DC and started to play the violin on a cold January morning. He played six classical pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, it was calculated that 1100 people went through the station but only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed or applauded. The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother tugged him along, but the boy continued turning his head the whole time. The violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the renowned violinists in the world playing on his violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days before playing in the subway, Bell sold out at a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 each. Joshua Bell playing incognito was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste & priorities of people. How do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent in an unexpected context? Do we pay attention when something awesome and wonderful comes to us? or are we too hurried and busy that we don't even have the time to stop and listen?

What gets your attention? Have you noticed how difficult it is to always be present to where you are in any given moment? To be Here. Now? For many of us, we are always tempted to be partially somewhere else. If we desire authentic spirituality, we need to pay attention to where we are now; to resist escaping and evading. Barbara Brown Taylor quotes painter Georgia O'Keefe who said, “No one sees a flower, not really, to look at a flower takes time, like having a friend takes time.” Every day I hear people say, “I don't have time: I'm out of time.” I find myself saying it too, but the truth is: we have all the time there is. We just make decisions about how we use it.

The practice of paying attention really does take time. Most of us are moving so quickly that our surroundings become no more than the blurred scenery we fly past on our way to somewhere else. We pay attention to the speedometer, our smart phones—the cacophony of sounds our phones make, schedules and calendars; all of which feeds into our illusion that life is manageable. Meanwhile, none of these meets the first criteria for paying attention—which is to

remind us that we are not gods. As Taylor shares in her book, paying attention requires a willingness to take a detour, even a side trip, that is not part of our original plan.

And then there was Moses in our Exodus passage today. Who can forget Moses? that baby who started out as a refugee hidden in a basket, adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, lived to be a prince who, in a fit of compassion and outrage defended his Hebrew heritage by killing an Egyptian. Moses run for his life after that incident, became an exile in the desert of Midian, married Zipporah, one of Jethro's 7 daughters and became a settled, domesticated sheep herder, a husband and a father. Despite his so-called secured life, the Moses we meet today is a Moses who seems to be bored—a modulated, moderated, midlife Moses with a comfortable, cautious, careful outlook on life. A Moses who "has nothing to get excited about." A Moses who seems to have had all the passion squeezed out of his life. Yes, Moses' life has become predictable, his God has become vague, and his dreams and gifts have become buried in the dust of the desert.

Our text for today tells us that Moses led his sheep across the arid sand to a place called Horeb. The word "Horeb" means "wasteland," and we must wonder if it describes not only the terrain of the desert, but also the terrain of Moses' soul. It was at that point in his life, that Moses needed to accept the "challenge" – only this time, it was not the sound of Joshua Bell's violin that awakened his senses but a burning bush that was not consumed. When God finally appears into Horeb, God converts this wasteland into a holy ground and dares Moses to return back to hell-hole Egypt to rescue his people. *As Moses led his flock. ²The angel of the Lord appeared in a flame of fire out of a bush; Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight." God called, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."*

Moses turn aside and look. His curiosity leads to a theophany - an appearance of the divine; it also leads to an epiphany – a recognition of God's presence. A voice comes from the bush announcing that Moses is standing on holy ground and must give proper reverence to the Holy by taking off his shoes. If you noticed something like a burning bush out of the corner of your eye, you'd turn aside, you'd get off the path and pay attention. But so often, we have this tendency to walk on by, not notice, not even get involved. We're busy. We'll come back later. Our time is precious. Rational thoughts also keep us from turning aside: we don't believe in visions – in theophanies or in epiphanies. We have reasons to keep on walking. But Moses

turned aside. He got off the path. Heard God called to him. Took off his sandals and paid attention.

What is this practice of paying attention? We pay attention in order to offer reverence. Reverence requires a certain pace. It requires a willingness to take detours, side trips, which were not part of the original plan. Philosopher Paul Woodruff says that “*Reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods. Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self- something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding.*” God fits that bill for sure, but so do other things: birth, death, relationships, nature, truth, justice, wisdom, love... Reverence stands in awe of something – something that dwarfs the self, that allows human beings to sense the full extent of our limits – so that we can begin to see one another more reverently as well.” If you don’t view God with reverence, chances are you won’t be able to view your others with reverence either.

I love this God of Moses who chooses surprising ways to appear in a rather unconventional way. In the midst of Moses’ boring, predictable life, God appears in the form of a burning bush. Fire! Finally, there is something spectacular enough to get Moses’ attention, something hot enough to spark curiosity. Out there, in the wilderness, Moses is called not into the waiting arms of a peaceful God, but straight into the flaming rage of a burning bush that was not consumed. But I think we can assume Moses was consumed *with* questions—questions about his family back in Egypt, the state of his people, God’s plan for him. No matter what he was consumed *with*, Moses was about to be consumed *by* God.

Burning bushes happen to us, too, in the midst of our comfortable, seemingly meaningful lives, sometimes in ways that threaten to consume us. We lose a job or a parent dies. Relationships become shaky. Conflict erupts in the church or family or work, and we feel like our guts are pulling apart. An old anger bursts into bitter flames, feelings of envy or judgment toward others begins to escalate. All of a sudden, we look at the world, and feel despair at all the pain and all the injustice and all the violence and suffering. These are burning bushes, and they are meant to get our attention. They are, in some instances, God’s way of blasting through our peaceful, tranquil lives. "Take your shoes off. You are standing on holy ground." Draw away the covering that has protected you. Clear away the barrier between yourself and the earth so that

your bare feet may touch and sink and take root in this holy ground. Let this living soil coat your skin. Dig in, feel your way, and find your balance here upon this mountain, so that its life becomes your life, its fire your fire, its sacred sand and loam and rock, the ground of your seeing, speaking, and calling.

Like Moses, our lives too, are filled with all sorts of calls that need our attention and they come from all kinds of directions. Some of us struggle to hear our call; we don't see clearly what we are supposed to be doing in the world. I believe God sometimes calls us to do the things we are most afraid of doing: returning to a place which you would rather forget; facing a burning issue which could blow up in your face or lose your status; listening to a voice which calls you to pay attention to what must be done or walking straight up to the fire of your own heart, and hearing the voice which calls you to move into the center, rather than standing on the margins of your own life. Our calling may come through our hands that want to create or cook or plant or paint, or a voice that needs to sing or speak, or a powerful mind that has to learn or a heart that wants to give. Our deep vocation emerges through our willingness to listen for God in the midst of uncertainties, challenges or difficulties in life. Who do we listen to in order to figure out our sacred calling? What voices are we hearing and what are those voices saying to us about who we are and how we should live? What is it that is burning passionately in your heart?

“There is no one but us,” writes Annie Dillard in her poem, *Holy the Firm*. “There is no one to send, or a clean hand or a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us.” God’s call to each one of us is as heartbreaking as it is joyful. It’ll make us scared, frightened or cry as it makes us laugh aloud or celebrate. Pay attention. The bush is burning. It burns for you and for me. When we take the time to turn aside and see, God calls to us. Let us enter into the spiritual practice of paying attention to where God is breaking through into our present, everyday lives, so that we can begin to see one another more reverently as well. Amen.

“The Practice of Encountering Others: Community & Hospitality”
Story of Mary & Martha (Luke 10: 38-42)

Today is Canada Day and we are expecting some guests this afternoon to celebrate this annual holiday. Some of you will know this by now that when I am hosting a gathering, I do have an automatic transmission that kicks into Martha gear. I like to have everything in order. The house is mopped, the carpets vacuumed, the counters tidy, the bathrooms washed, menu for the meal is set, groceries listed to be picked up. I am a “Martha” through and through! It’s not just at home but here too at BCUC. People often tell me, “I know how busy you are.” Sounds like they need to apologize for interrupting me. And that puts me in an awkward situation because even though my day seems full, I don’t want people to feel apologetic about calling me or talking to me if need be. Although sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the many things that needs to be done, people to visit, calls to make, books to read, or sermons to write, I do honestly appreciate having you knock on my door or calling me on the phone or sending me an email so I can be present for you. I am just a human being – I tell myself – and there are times when I feel as frustrated as Martha in our passage today. But the truth is I love what I do, I love being a minister. I love being your pastor. And what excites me the most is the need to upgrade myself with fresh learnings, new ideas, evolving theology, progressive dialogues. The lectionary group keeps me on my toes as well as conferences like the Festival of Homiletics or the Queen’s Theology Conference. I am not just a Martha. I am also a Mary.

In our Gospel story today, we see Martha, being Martha –doing what she does best. Prepare a meal. She wants everything to be perfect. She wants the meal to be one that Jesus will always remember. Not just because she's a perfectionist, but because hospitality is a bedrock value in first-century Palestinian village life. It is a point of honour for families and villages to welcome guests and offer them the best they can offer. She wants to treat Jesus the way she thinks he deserves to be treated as an honoured guest. In this story, Mary isn’t helping in the kitchen. She isn’t doing her customary womanly duty. Instead of helping with all the tasks of cooking or serving in that day, she’s sitting with Jesus and the men which leave a double duty for her hardworking sister Martha.

Martha notices this and she notices that Jesus doesn’t seem to care. I’m sure some of you have done this! Martha rattles the pans in the kitchen a little louder and bangs the ladle on the table than she needs to. She clears her throat a few times and coughs as she sets the table. She gives

her sister a scorching look as she brings Jesus a cup of cool water. But Mary is not paying attention to Martha, as are the disciples. Mary is engaged in a theological conversation. She cannot be distracted at the moment. Jesus is right in the middle of an explanation when Martha finally blows. She storms in from the kitchen and confronts, not her sister or the other guests, but the honoured guest: “Jesus, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” How many times have we asked that question or prayed that prayer? “Jesus, do you even care? Aren’t you impressed with how hard I am working? Won’t you send me some help, or give me some rest?”

BBT was at least 30 years old before she learned that she was an introvert. Before she learned about this, Taylor thought she was shy and antisocial. At other people’s parties, she stayed in the kitchen to help instead of mingling with others. When she read about the story of Martha and Mary, she concluded that Martha might be an introvert. She found chopping potatoes far less exhausting than talking to people, and besides, she could hear everything people were saying without having to come up with something to say herself.

Makes you wonder how Mary and Martha got along ordinarily. Maybe Jesus was getting caught in a family dynamic here. Martha sounds here a lot like the jealous older brother in the parable of the Prodigals. Was she always picking on Mary, always putting her down? Was Mary typically irresponsible and insensitive to her sister, unwilling to do her share around the house? Are we dealing with two personalities here, the responsible versus the carefree? The academic versus the pragmatic? The introvert and the extrovert? Sometimes we take roles in our families and fight over the roles we have chosen. Who made Martha responsible for everything? Maybe it’s the culture. Maybe it was her own personality. Maybe because she was older than Mary. On the other hand, some things have to get done! Can we blame Martha for getting upset about Mary’s irresponsibility? I do that too! Who hasn’t felt that way before? Call me “Martha,” but I see her point. It isn’t fair! I want Jesus to honour Martha’s anger. I want him to correct the injustice. I want him to say, “Mary, you are excused from this conversation - go and help your sister!” I want him to say, “Martha! I am sorry! We’ve all been insensitive to you. We’ll all pitch in, and then you can join us, too.” But Jesus doesn’t say any of that. Instead he calls her by name, “Martha, Martha.” I love that part! He calls Martha by name, with compassion and concern and love. He calls her by name, not once, but twice, because that is usually what it takes to get our attention. Jesus tells Martha to “chill out!” Instead of taking Martha’s side, Jesus affirms Mary’s choice.

Well, Mary's quite the rebellious one, isn't she? She refuses to play the role expected of women in the first century.

After all, in first-century Palestine, women did not sit in the same room with men engaging in faith-talk like we're doing today. Women were domestic – their only sphere is the home and all the tasks that come with it: cooking, cleaning, raising a family. It was unheard of for a woman like Mary to learn with the men. Call Mary of Bethany an early feminist- stepping into a man's world so that she and her daughters might have the same access to a theological education as the men in her community. Mary sees herself on equal opportunity with the male followers and would not miss this rare opportunity to sit with Jesus.

Many sermons have been preached about the value of Mary as a model of reflection, a model of contemplation and theology. You know the argument. Martha labours on and on, but it is the contemplative one, Mary, whom Jesus honours. I strongly feel that this is a huge misunderstanding. There is a danger to this story if interpreted as if the sisters were in competition. The danger, according to Karoline Lewis, is its invitation to what is better. To put one expression of belief, of discipleship, of service, of vocation, against the other. ...When we make these kinds of moves and assumptions, we rarely stop to think about what we then assume about Jesus. To favour Mary is to say Jesus discounts service. To favour Martha would be to say service is all that matters. Clearly, both matter, if you read the Gospel of Luke carefully. So, this story cannot be about who is better or what is better, but rather about acknowledging that even a woman can be a disciple -- can sit at the feet of Jesus and learn. This story is not about which is better. Because service and learning are both hallmarks of following Jesus.”

What has this story got to do with the spiritual practice of encountering others? How is this story relevant as we offer radical hospitality and community building? BBT uses the wisdom of the Desert Fathers – these are monks who live as hermits – some would be 30 miles apart from his nearest neighbour - away from the hustle and bustle of the world. They live in seclusion feeding their souls through spiritual practices but they also labour in order to feed their physical bodies. These monks who lived all alone came together from time to time to celebrate communion and share a common meal. They discussed issues and problems that had arisen in the community. Even if they lived 30 miles apart from each other, they know deep in their heart that they needed one another. The wisdom of the Desert Fathers, according to BBT, includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbour as the self – to encounter another

human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is to recognize another you out there – your other self in the world.

I am not an advocate of the belief that contemplative life modeled by Mary is to be preferred over the life of service modeled by Martha or vice versa. For me it must be a balance of both: learning and doing, reflection and service, worship and work – they must both go hand in hand. I don't read this story as Jesus elevating one aspect of the life of discipleship over another, discounting the need for service and exclusively commending the ministry of learning. In his commendation of Mary, Jesus is not elevating her over her sister. Instead, he is affirming the legitimacy of focusing on the role of a student of scripture. We are to spend quality time sitting and learning whenever we have the chance. Endless working and active involvement without learning and contemplation end in aimless “doing”. On the other hand, too much focus on intellectual pursuit and doing rituals without practice of the faith is exhausting and hopeless.

Jesus uses Martha's serving hands and Mary's contemplative heart in making a point about the balance that is essential in individual lives and in building communities of faith. Jesus is urging us that we need both the ministry of reflection and study of Mary and the hospitality and service of Martha in order to experience the wholeness of God's Spirit in the world. We need both at home, in the church, in our communities. We need this balance in our own lives!

“Mary and Martha”. Theology and praxis; prayer and good works; spirituality and pragmatism. Both are needed. Both are important in the life of the Spirit. Karoline Lewis puts it beautifully: “Mary and Martha cannot be about the better thing that means who is better, who acts better, who can be better. The better thing is the invitation to believe that you are who God sees you to be. This is not a story about comparison but completion. Not about who is better, but when is better. Not about what is better, but why it is better. Are you a Mary or a Martha? I hope not. I'd rather that you be Mary and Martha. In God's Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

- 1- grandrapidsfumc.org / Time For a Change: A Change of Mind: Mary and Martha Luke 10:38-42
- 2- Keep It Simple: Reflections on Mary and Martha from Luke 10:38-42 by [Alyce M. McKenzie](#), July 14, 2013.
3. Karoline Lewis – workingpreacher.org

The Practice of Waking Up to God: Vision

Text: Genesis 28: 10-22

I woke up one day this week watching in horror and listening intently how political, religious and social activists across the United States and many parts of the world raised their voices in protest against Trump and his government, when heartrending news coverage of crying children -- some of whom were kept in cage-like detention centers were out in the open. I swear I could not believe what I've heard and seen especially in this day and age. CNN reported that about 2,300 children were being separated from their families at the border since Trump rose to power. A ninth-grader in McAllen, Texas, was taken from his mother. He was riding in a car with friends last spring when the car was pulled over. The teenager, brought illegally to the country by his mother as a baby, was unable to show identification. Police called immigration officials, who arrested the boy and sent him to a shelter for unaccompanied migrant children. Without the protesters and pressure from political, religious and social leaders, I believe, Trump will not budge. Finally, he succumbed to the protesters demand and on Wednesday this week, he reversed his argument that he had no authority to stop separations of undocumented immigrant families at the border, therefore signing an executive order to keep parents and children together. And I said to myself. God is still alive and present. God speaks through the voices of those who will not keep silent when the powers of love and justice and compassion is trampled by the powers of hate, bigotry and indifference. Stories like these awaken me and think of where God is in the world and then bring me to a vision of hope.

Many of us still believe that God is found only in so-called "holy" places and "sacred" things and "godly" people – in the Bible, in the four corners of the church building, in the things we do and say when we come together as a faith community. We hang or post or even wear a cross or a fish symbol or a Christian slogan, whether it be a bumper sticker, a t-shirt, a song, a mug, a sign. But one of the things that Barbara Brown Taylor believes has been saving her is waking up to the reality that anywhere can be a place where God may be encountered – that everywhere is the house of God. When we allow ourselves to "experience" God's presence only in those places that we have labeled as "godly", then we greatly limit our experience of God.

Today we enter into the *Practice of Waking up to God* through the story of Jacob – the episode after he tricked his father Isaac and twin brother Esau of his birth right. We know for a fact, according to the story, that these twins wrestled in their mother Rebekah’s womb throughout her pregnancy, and Esau was born with Jacob hanging on to the heel of his foot. This rivalry between the brothers continued throughout their lives, and it was exacerbated by the fact that their parents each had a favorite son. As Father Isaac was nearing death he wanted to bestow his blessing upon his oldest son, Esau, as was the custom. Mother Rebekah conspired with Jacob and they tricked Isaac into bestowing that blessing upon Jacob. When Esau realized what had happened he was out for blood. When we catch up with Jacob this morning, he is on the run from his enraged and heartbroken brother Esau, who is out for revenge. Jacob was running away. Running away from home – running away from the comforts of a good home – running away from his roots and place of safety and sanctuary – he was running because of the sins he committed against his father and his brother.

Most of us, I suspect, know what it is like to live life on the run. Some of us are running from our past, trying to escape guilt, pain, failures, disappointments. Some are trying to get away from the losses and brokenness of life. Sometimes we just want to leave behind the parts of our lives or ourselves we dislike. Other times we are running toward the future. Life on the run is a search for something or someone new; a job, a relationship, an adventure. Maybe it is the search for answers. Who am I? What is this life all about? What’s my purpose? Others, driven by a mid-life crisis, chase after meaning and youth. Most of us know what it is like to live life on the run due to schedules, chaos, and the busyness of life. Life is measured by accomplishments and to do lists. Demands and expectations chase us.

Alone and afraid, Jacob flees to Haran. But he has to pass through the wilderness to get there. He isn’t particularly looking for God. He certainly doesn’t expect God to show up. And still as the Genesis storyteller declares, Jacob encountered God. Not in a face-to-face encounter, not in an earthquake or thunderstorm, not through music or another human being, but through a vision. In a dream. After running all day, Jacob was exhausted. He decides to go to sleep and finds a stone to use as a pillow. A vivid dream unfolds: a ladder stretching to heaven with the Angels of God ascending and descending. This is the story where the familiar repetitive hymn we learned in Sunday School comes from – *We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder*. Jacob’s ladder reveals the

connection between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, the uncreated and the created. It appears at every moment in our life, even life on the run. The ladder Jacob saw was not in a physical location. It was within him. It was not a vision but a dream. But the ladder isn't the point of this story. The important part of the story is that *God shows up*, and Jacob awakens to God's presence. And then God's voice. *Remember, I am with you; I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.* Jacob named the place Beth-el which literally means House of God. The world is a hard place, full of stones. Yet it is a place of grace. When the sun has set and darkness takes over you can only stop and lie down. It is a point of surrender but not a place of giving up. We stop running from life, ourselves, and more importantly from God. The darkness teaches us that we are no longer in control of our own destiny. Now God can appear and speak. We see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

The God Jacob never paid any attention to breaks into his dreams. And speaks: *I'll stay with you always.* When Jacob leaves his dream state, not only does he awaken from sleep; he wakes up to God. Refreshed with a new vision. Same desert wilderness, but something was different. And he exclaims: *"Surely God is in this place,—and I didn't even know it! How awesome is this place! This is the gate of heaven."* Through Jacob's dream, God reveals that the ladder of love, life-giving opportunities and connection are found deep within ourselves, a place so deep that it is seen in the gift of a dream. We call it Jacob's ladder but it is actually God's ladder placed in each one of us, in the hard stoney places, in the in between places – in places we never would have expected. *"Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it."* Having woken up to God, Jacob knew he had to mark the spot. BBT says: *"When God encounters us in our ordinary lives, then we have a choice: we can keep on going and ignore what has happened, or we can set down an altar.* We can mark – even just within ourselves – that moment, that spot, as holy." And that's what Jacob did – he took the stone from under his head and tilted it heaven-ward. He anointed it with oil, marking the place as an altar and named it Beth-el. The House of God. The place where he experienced Divine Presence, the Sacred, the Holy that holds everything in place, by whatever name you call it.

I love what Taylor writes towards the end of this chapter. *If there is a switch to flip, I have never found it. As with Jacob, most of my visions of the divine have happened while I was busy doing something else. I did not make them happen. They happened to me the same way*

a thunderstorm happens to me, or a bad cold. My only part is to decide how I will respond, since there is plenty I can do to make them go away... I can set up a little altar, in the world or in my heart. I can stop what I am doing long enough to see where I am, who I am there with, and how awesome the place is. I can flag one more gate to heaven—one more patch of ordinary earth with ladder marks on it—where the traffic is heavy when I notice it and even when I do not. I can see it for once, instead of walking right past it, maybe even setting a stone or saying a blessing before I move on to wherever I am due next. Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.

Have you ever thought about where you intentionally meet God? Can you remember the times or places where your spirit awakened to the presence of God, to have an encounter with the sacred or the holy perhaps more than any other time or place? What places in your life have been particularly holy for you? Where and what are your altars, and how do you acknowledge them? What parts of your life are lived on the run? What are you searching for? What are you running from? God is constantly breaking into our world, trying to get our attention. Let the sun set and do not be afraid. God's ladder is and always has been within you. No matter who you are, where you go, the circumstances you face, or where you run to the ladder of connection goes with you. It is a part of you. Wake up and see that the dream has come true. "Surely the Lord is in this place and I now know it."

I close with these lyrics of U2's song "Yahweh" that offers a perspective on how, by God's grace, we are able to transform ordinary things, people and places into something special:

"Take these shoes / Click clacking down some dead end street
Take these shoes / And make them fit.
Take this shirt/ Polyester white trash made in nowhere

Take this shirt/ And make it clean, clean

Take this soul / Stranded in some skin and bones

Take this soul/ And make it sing". Amen.