

Standing on Holy Ground
Psalm 24 and Exodus 3:1-12
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Marianne Cotter, Pastor

Thomas Berry (1914-2009) was a Catholic priest, theologian, historian and cosmologist. He devoted his life to studying the universe, the earth and humans beings' relationship to both. Through books such as "Dream of the Earth" and "The Universe Story" Thomas Berry had a tremendous impact on the environmental movement.

Thomas Berry said knowing God means knowing well the place where we live. In his 1992 book "The Great Work" Thomas Berry said each era in human history has had "a great work." For the ancient Greeks, it was understanding the human mind. For Israel, it was to articulate a new experience of the Divine in human affairs. For Rome, it was to gather the peoples of the Mediterranean together. For medieval Europe, it was to give shape to the Western World in its Christian form. The great work of India was to lead human thought into spiritual experiences of time and eternity and their mutual presence to each other.

The great work of our present time is to find ways to live sustainably upon the earth. This work belongs to all people. Our great work means seeing our inter-connectedness with all of creation. "Our great work is learning how to discard the mindset of seeing of the land and its resources as something we can control and exploit. Thomas Berry said that knowing God means knowing well the place where we live. They knew about the sacredness of the land. We must learn from indigenous people, who know their region well and are intimate with their surroundings.

Thomas Berry's whole life's work can be traced back to an experience he had as a boy growing up in North Carolina. Once Thomas found himself walking through a meadow covered with lilies. He was not conscious of an "aha" moment but more a sensitivity that grew from that day so his life's work became devotion to this idea: "whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good." That became his life's orientation. "It's that simple" he said. The evolving biosystems in this meadow deserve to be themselves and express their own inner quality. They had intrinsic value. For him that was the beginning of his religious sensibilities. For Thomas Berry "awe" had its origins in looking deeply in a patch of meadow and contemplating "the infinite number of interrelated activities that take place there, the most mysterious it all become."

I want to connect Thomas Berry's story to the story of Moses today. Both stories together help us see that place where we are right now is holy ground. Today in the scripture from Exodus we heard a story from the life of Moses. It was about a time when Moses came to know the place where he was. It is the story of his remarkable encounter with God through nature on the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai). Listen again to verses 2 – 4 four of Exodus chapter 3: 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. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' 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.'

Next Moses learns God's name (Yahweh, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be") and discovers this is the God of history, known to his ancestors. Moses takes off his sandals as a sign of respect and is given a commission: go back to Egypt, for I have heard their cries and I want you to deliver them for me.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says about the story of the burning bush was about paying attention. Rabbi Kushner writes it "was more a test than a miracle." "God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention – pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention."

Listen again to Verse 2 and 3: (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." First Moses sees the bush that is burning but not consumed; and his attention stays focused there. This

Moses paying attention. He was paying attention to where he was. He was Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro. In his life up until then, his attention had wandered before. Back in Egypt he was a Hebrew man, being raised in the court of Pharaoh's daughter. He was royalty; he was enslaved. He was privileged; he was poor. His attention kept wandering back and forth. When he saw an Egyptian overseer mistreating a Hebrew slave, Moses was enraged. He acted out of impulse. He struck the overseer and the man died. Moses fled Egypt and now was trying to make a new life for himself in Midian. He was now a father, and a shepherd. And now, if Rabbi Kushner is right, Moses was tested; and he passed the test. His attention was focused on where he was: here on the mountain of God by on a bush that was burning yet not consumed.

What Moses did on the mountain of God, what Thomas Berry did in that North Carolina Meadow, is what God asks of each of us. Could the spiritual practice the world needs right now simply be paying attention to where we are in this world? Paying attention to our corner of the earth? And to see the holiness of creation: to see that there is another world, a holy world, right here within this one, which becomes obvious when we pay attention. Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, theologian who was drawn to the Christian faith though she was never baptized. Simone Weil was a woman of remarkable insight. She said if you distill all religious practices down to their essence you find it's all comes down to paying attention. Prayer is in its essence paying attention. And the only form of self love humans should indulge in she said was humility, which she defined as Attentive

patience. Simone Weil says we are asked not to consume the world – we are not to see God for what God could do for us – but simply to pay attention to the world, simply paid attention. This is the foundation to an ethical, a moral life.

Psalms 24 teaches us that when we pay attention to creation, we see God is the owner of everything. We are dependent on the reign of God. One of the main images for God in the ancient Hebrew scripture is found in verses 7-9 of Psalm 24: the holy one who met Moses on the mountain is the king of glory. “Who is the king of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the lord mighty in battle. The Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory.” This King of Glory founded the world on the seas and established the earth on the rivers (here the psalmist is saying God reigns over all the forces of chaos, symbolized by seas and rivers). God is the owner of the world, not us. The take away from Psalm 24 for us is if God owns everything, then we are a pretty small part of the totality of all that is; we are left in “wonder, awe and praise” in the face of a universe so vast, so majestic. We mistakenly think earth’s resources are there for our use, we imagine we are separate from creation as though we are not made of the same substance, as if we could exist for a moment without air, as if water were something we can create, as if our lives are not completely dependent on what comes from the earth, the soil, the ground.

So, here’s what all this has to do with us. If paying attention is the root of all spiritual practices, then when we pay attention to where we are in this world, by God’s grace the Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer is revealed to us. Was there a “Moses moment” in your life? Was there a time when being in nature you became aware of the presence of the living God? Do you have a special place, where you go to feel connected to God? For me that special place is Lake Mendota. I grew up about a mile from there, and as a thirteen year old I would ride my bike and walk along the lakeshore path. It was there - -before I ever went to church or Sunday School – that I felt the presence of God for the first time in my life. It was being in nature that I sensed a presence of something greater than myself. Ever since, Lake Mendota has been a sacred place, a special place.

What I hope you will take away from this sermon is a word of encouragement: cultivate a relationship with the place where you are. See this place as holy ground, sacred ground. That process can begin right now. Paying attention to where we are begins with paying attention to our bodies. We pay attention to being in this present moment, attentive to our bodies. We are not disembodied spirits. Just as we are connected to our bodies, we are connected to the earth. The temptation to hate or continually control our bodies is related to the hatred, denigration and need to control the earth. Honoring our bodies can be a way of honoring creation, honoring the earth. God chose to become a body in Jesus Christ. Paying attention to our bodies can be a kind of spiritual practice. One way we do this is Noticing our thoughts – discovering we have choices whether to act on the thoughts that arise – realizing we can simply let them go -- Listening to, paying attention to, accepting our bodies in their fragility, vulnerability, strength or weakness, and can a way of paying attention to the holy.

So, here's the good news: we are on holy ground, with sacred bodies. We are humble before a universe so grand and in awe of a ruler who has ordered everything that is. We are on a journey. We are paying attention. And we rejoice to be part of this universe – which Thomas Berry called the “celebration that is life.” Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.