

# Turn Aside

Exodus 3: 1-15



©Rev. Sarah Cooper Searight  
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church  
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I am not from Houston, but I am from Texas—a longhorn, born and raised.

Like many of you, I have spent this last week consuming the pictures and stories from news outlets, to the Weather Channel, to social media wherein the true force of community organizing that such platforms allow has been amazing to witness. Friends who live nearby to the affected areas are connecting emergency demand with crowd-sourced supply. Children of friends are setting up lemonade stands to collect money for relief agencies. Colleagues in Austin and Dallas and Shreveport are mobilizing their congregations and surrounding communities to pack clean-up buckets and hygiene kits for the ongoing work of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

Our eldest daughter has also become interested, finding pictures from the newspaper and asking us to tell her about them. We've assured her that no one in her family is directly affected, but nevertheless, she persists. In her curiosity, she has learned that the flood waters have risen this week not only in Houston and Dickinson and Beaumont, but also in Mumbai, India, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, and various regions of Nepal.

The monsoon season in these Asia Pacific nations has been devastating this year.

Though perhaps only a little more so than last year, and the year before. The monsoon seasons in these Asia Pacific nations have been increasingly devastating, caused by deforestation, erosion, and rising waters.

Maggie's catch phrase for when she is curious has become, "I'm interested in that." For leeches (seriously). For lightning bugs. And now, for floods. She sees pictures of people passing their kids from rooftops and into boats, wading through waste-deep water, herding their cattle through what appear to be rivers if the street signs weren't a dead giveaway otherwise.

As much as I encourage it, I will say that it is tricky work to attend to the curiosity of a child.

How much do you say?

What do you say?

How honest are you to questions that are deeply honest?

I wonder if this is how God felt that day in the wilderness when all of the sudden there were footsteps along the dusty trail. Moses, the shepherd appeared, trailing his father-in-law's flock.

God, parent to all of these—Moses, sheep, fathers-in-law—must have wondered in that moment, will he notice? And if he does, what will I say? How honest will I be when his questions come up?

We could imagine that Moses had seen many things out there in the wilderness, while keeping track of those wondering sheep. Snakes, scorpions, and other stinging things-check! All kinds of bushes and brush-check! Miles and miles of sky-check!

I wonder if he was naturally curious, or if he'd grown into it by virtue of being a Hebrew raised by Egyptians; slowly coming to realize that things were not as they seemed. From last week to this one, we've skipped some fairly significant parts of Moses' own story.

That time when he finally knew the hard enslavement of his people or when he killed the Egyptian who had brutally beaten one of the Hebrews with no one else in sight. That time when he was no longer in the protected class, and fled from Pharaoh and when he came to Midian, met and married the priest Jethro's daughter.

Moses has seen a lot since we first met him. And now, this: a bush burning but not consumed. He couldn't help it. His curiosity got the best of him. Moses stopped, turned aside to take a closer look; it was then that God knew it was time to say something.

Studs Terkel is well known for his own curiosity. "I don't have to stay curious, I am curious, about all of it, all the time," he once said. "Curiosity never killed this cat" — that's what I'd like as my epitaph."

Though he died in 2008, Terkel made a name for himself over a lifetime as a champion of the everyman. He was an oral historian who interviewed pretty much anyone, though he made a point to stay away from politicians and actors. Terkel's approach became the inspiration for the much loved Story Corps, an initiative to record and save stories shared between people with the mission to more deeply connect us to one another.

In fact, at the opening of the very first Story Corp recording booth in Grand Central Station in 2003, Terkel was an honored guest. There he said that with this opportunity, "we shall begin celebrating the life of the uncelebrated— of those men and women who have made all the wheels go around. We know there was an architect, but who hung the iron? Who was the brick mason? Who swept the floors?" When we show interest in the lives of the people around us, Terkel believed, "suddenly they will realize, their lives have a meaning."

I find this last statement a little grandiose on the face of it, for my curiosity about another surely does not give the meaning to their life. Yet, I do agree that the more we show interest, the more we are truly interested in the people and places and world around us, suddenly those people and places, this world of ours has different meaning. All of it matters.

We are invested in what we know and who we know.

That is, it seems, what Terkel intended in the end with his oral history—to examine life, to show how it flourished in so many different ways with so many different people, and to get us more deeply invested in one another.

Not all of us are always as curious. In fact, with all that we have going on, it is quite easy to narrowly focus: On what is important to me, what is important to my family, what is important to my community. Call it self-preservation, or selfishness, we are quickly consumed by the immediate need within and just outside of "me".

The speed of current events in our world does not help in this regard. There is so much going on all the time and all around us that nothing sticks for much longer than a day or two. And when it does, we are often weary of it and are ready to move on. I think we feel overwhelmed by the scope of need. I think we feel inadequate, unprepared, powerless.

We teach our children to be curious. We want them to want to learn. We show them pictures and introduce them to people and give them experiences that we hope will broaden their world, with the same hope that maybe it is even broader than our own. But sometimes we forget curiosity is still our job, too.

The good news is that we are not made to be so insular. We are made in the image of God: The One who in Godself is three-in-one, the One who is in constant relationship, the One who sees and hears and knows the suffering of her people and who comes down to deliver them, to save us. The good news is that our curiosity will not lead us down paths untrod by our God, or into situations in which God is not already at work.

Moses was curious. That curiosity led to call. Like the other shepherds we know so well who were tending their flock by night, the angel of the Lord appeared and a new course was set by God and for God's people.

And then there is this: our reformed tradition has a special place for curiosity—faith seeking understanding, we say. The life of curiosity is key to how we understand not only ourselves and our world and one another, but also, God.

Moses did not enter into this new call without question and a yearning to know God more. In fact, the conversation between these two—and it was truly a conversation—led beyond the revelation about God's faith in Moses' ability, and to a name for God. A name tied not only to past promise fulfilled, but to the present situation of suffering, and the a for all generations.

Imagine what is out there for us to learn—for I know that so many in this place like to learn. Love it, in fact. Just imagine who or what is out there, through whom God might speak. As we've talked in this year about being a more missional congregation, it is this base curiosity that can drive us. Who are our neighbors? What are their stories? How is God continuing in us the concern that is always God's, moving people from slavery to freedom?

Just think that for a five and a half year old: Curiosity about a storm, leads to questions about the people effected, leads to interest in why such devastation, leads to learning about climate change, leads to queries about where else this might happen, leads to learning about why this seems acceptable in some places but not in others, leads to...God knows where else. God knows. God sees. God hears. God sets aflame our hearts for one another. God has already turned to us. God invites us to see, to take off our shoes and wade into this holy, muddied, ground; whether we are five and a half or fifty-five.

But first, turn aside, for that bush over there is burning but it is not consumed.

I wonder... why?