

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on February 28, 2016 Exodus 3:1-15 & Luke 13:1-9	On the occasion of the Third Sunday in Lent, C

### Spiritual Manure

Moses was just minding his own business. Well, I guess technically he was minding his father in law’s business, since it was his sheep that he was tending, but he certainly wasn’t expecting anything unusual to happen to him that day. So when he saw a burning bush, it really caught his attention. So much so, that he decided that he must “turn aside” to see this strange thing. And Moses did indeed turn aside, and God, once he had his attention, spoke to him and put his life on a whole new course, and used him to bring his people out of slavery and into the land that had been promised to their ancestors.

I suppose you could say that if Moses had failed to turn aside that day, not only his life, but the lives of all the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, would have gone very differently. How often does God fail to get our attention? How often do we fail to turn aside to hear the message that God has for us? What does it take to get us to turn aside? Sometimes it takes a tragedy to get our attention. Kind of like when a person has a mild heart attack, and then finally attends to the doctor’s advice to lose weight, eat better, and exercise. We sometimes call that a *wakeup call*. Or it could be worse. It could be the death of a friend, a coworker, someone who is your contemporary, that gets your attention and motivates you to make changes in your life. These are examples related to our health. What about our spiritual health? How does God get us to turn aside when it comes to paying attention to our spiritual life and health?

It could be a tragedy that does it. It may not be so dramatic. It could be as simple as a significant birthday that gets us thinking about how our life is going, and our spiritual life in particular. I’m not suggesting that God causes tragedies in our lives to try and teach us a lesson,

far from it. However, God can use whatever happens in our life, good or bad, to work out God's own purposes. For Moses it was a burning bush. What would it take for you to turn aside and listen to God?

As human beings, our capacity for self-deception and rationalization is truly impressive. We can convince ourselves that everything is going great, even when we are falling apart inside. Isn't that how we always answer that question? "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great, how are you?"

"I'm fine too..."

What if we answered questions like that truthfully? "How are you doing?"

"Well, you know, I've been a little depressed lately. I find it hard to concentrate sometimes, and I just don't know if I'm on the right path anymore."

Can you imagine the response you'd get to an answer like that? "Oh... yeah, well, I'll give you a call. We'll do lunch sometime. Okay, have a great day."

We don't have to be honest with everyone we meet every day, but we do need to be honest with ourselves. Unfortunately, sometimes it really does take a shock for us to pay attention to what is right in front of us. We somehow find it easier to ignore, deny, avoid, or minimize when there is a problem in our own soul. When we fail to pay attention to something, it will often fail to function. Then we won't be able to ignore it anymore.

Jesus tells the parable about the landowner who was looking for fruit on a fig tree growing on his property. He was frustrated by its lack of fruitfulness. He instructed his gardener to cut it down, so it wouldn't be wasting the soil anymore. The gardener was a wise man who realized that the tree just needed some attention. So he persuaded the landowner to let him tend to it with fertilizer and water, and perhaps some strategic pruning. Then, he told his boss, if it

fails to produce again next year, cut it down. But if it does produce, then he would not have wasted the soil or the effort to care for this tree.

The things that we pay attention to in our lives will blossom and bear fruit. The things that we do not pay attention to, will falter and fail, and perhaps even die. When things go wrong, then we will feel the effects and finally pay attention to it. Pain is a common indicator that something is going wrong. Do we need to wait until we feel pain? Do we need to wait until something in our life has gone terribly wrong, before we turn aside and listen? What is it in your life that needs your attention right now? What steps can you take today to make a difference?

Jesus teaches us with his parable that we need to be willing to turn aside and to take the time to give attention to the things in our lives that are important. If we don't, bad things can happen. With the right attention the fig tree in the story certainly will bear the fruit the landowner is looking for. Just as Moses' willingness to turn aside, and be distracted from his well set plans for the day, to hear the voice of God call to him, and to be used by God, finally to produced the fruit of freedom for God's people.

If you turn aside and listen to God, how might he use you today?

Amen.