

Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Cor. 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

“Moses 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.”

There is a phrase that is frequently used among clergy, especially clergy who are having trouble getting their sermons written because other pressing matters keep coming up and distracting them.

The phrase we share with each other, or tell ourselves – sometimes on a daily or hourly basis, is this: “The distractions are the ministry”.

This is not meant to minimize the value of crafting sermons, or any of the other projects and works that take time in a priest’s week. But it is a warning against tunnel vision. It is a reminder that we cannot let ourselves get consumed by a full to-do list so that we ignore or become frustrated by the other unexpected calls to ministry that we regularly receive: medical emergencies, or requests for assistance by people in need, or feedback – constructive or not-so-constructive – that actually reveals a need in the parish or a need in the person making the complaint.

A priest’s day is sometimes completely taken over by items that weren’t on the to-do list. And these are often the holiest days.

And this advice of course does not apply only to priests. “The distractions are the ministry” for every disciple of Jesus – baptized and commissioned to serve. It’s a reminder to always be ready to make time for people. People bump into each of our lives all the time calling us into ministry and love.

Moses was busy with the task of keeping track of a large, rambling flock of sheep in our passage today, when off to the side of his path, perhaps on the edge of his vision, he noticed something strange. Some thorny desert bush was burning – perhaps not so surprising in itself. But as he gave it some more of his attention, he saw that it just kept burning – on and on, without getting burned up.

And so Moses said to himself, “I must turn aside and look at this”. And when God saw that Moses had paused from the task he was busily in the middle of – had stopped and turned his attention aside – God called to him.

Up to this point in Moses’ life, we have no record in Scripture of Moses having thoughts, or conversation, or a relationship at all with God. God must have been with him watching out for him, because Moses survived the attempted massacre of the Hebrew children when Pharaoh’s daughter found him in a basket in the river.

But what Moses thought of that event, we do not know. What he thought of God up to then we do not know. But now, as Moses turns aside to this burning bush, a deep, life-altering, passionate relationship begins between Moses and God.

There are so many instances when our turning aside could change the course of a life. You may have had brief, powerful encounters or long-term relationships with people you might almost have never met, had you not stopped and made time for someone, or if they had made some small, different choice that day. I think back on some moments and relationships in my life and it's kind of scary how close we were to missing each other – and how rich my life is because we didn't.

God calls us to be attentive to the people around us. To be mindful of distractions that turn out to be the central thing. He calls us to set the to-do list down, set the phone down, set our fears and social anxieties down and be attentive. The quiet voice of God calls out to us in the needs and hopes and lives of the people around us. So many seeming distractions are our ministry.

But it can be so easy to miss opportunities. And I feel the sense of urgency that brings in Jesus' parable today. He tells of the fig tree that is living and growing but just isn't bearing fruit. And the gardener is asked to cut it down to make room for a more fruitful tree.

But in his mercy, the gardener says, "No, give me one more year. Let me attend closely to this tree – care for it and fertilize it, and give it one more chance. Let's see if this is the year that fruit ripens." And so they wait.

But time is not limitless. We don't have forever to attend to those around us. Right now is a very important time. The present is the time we have for ministry. The present is really the only time we truly ever have.

And so we are called to watch and pay attention in this moment. We are called to look for the needs of those around us. To love and be interested in and care for the people around us.

God calls us to see and care for and form relationships with new and unexpected people who cross into our lives – at work, or school, or here in this church community – wherever we find ourselves.

Is there someone you don't know in the pew beside you, or in front of or behind you? Is there someone new, or someone you've worked with or gone to school with for years, that you don't know? Who knows what need or pain or gift they might be carrying with them? Who knows how much they might need you as a friend? How much you might need them?

Turn aside, and make time for them, and learn about them. And love them. Jesus teaches us that "perfect love casts out fear." And though we are all still working toward perfect love, we can experience it partially – if we look at another person with care, and empathy, and interest in them. A true interest and concern for another person helps push away our shyness or worry about what they will think of us, and our preoccupation with our own concerns.

And this empathy, this love for others, this willingness to turn aside – to be distracted from our busyness or our worries – this is our ministry. So look around you. Turn, and see, and care, and love. And God will call you into service and into relationships of love. And our lives and our community will be enriched, and blessed, and made full through our attention and our care.