Sunday, August 29, 1999
HOLY CURIOSITY
Exodus 3:1-15

There's an old saying, "Curiosity killed the cat." It is sometimes used to discourage children and adults from asking too many questions. I don't know if curiosity has killed any cats, but the lack of curiosity in human beings keeps us from learning and growing intellectually and spiritually. The lack of curiosity as we travel our spiritual journey can keep us from knowing and experiencing God and from continuing to mature in our faith.

Although many of us know that old saying, hopefully few of us follow its advice. Jesus never discouraged curiosity but rather encouraged it. Our faith calls us to always be curious and thereby open to new truth. As our forefathers and mothers in the Congregational tradition were boarding the ship named the Mayflower to come to this new land, their pastor, John Robinson's parting words were, "Remember there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

The reason we have both public and private schools and colleges and universities is because we affirm the value of curiosity. This past week, schools began their fall season all across the country. It's an appropriate time to celebrate the importance of being curious. Being created in God's image, we are born with a holy curiosity. Boredom is the opposite of curiosity.

Imagine the vacuum in our religious experience if we would eliminate from the Bible all questions and answers. How impoverished our faith would be without the curiosity of Moses watching a burning bush and being curious about what it meant, and Job questioning God's justice, or the lawyer asking Jesus, "What must I do to find eternal meaning in life?" When Jesus asked him what the law said, the lawyer replied, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him he had given the right answer, but the lawyer's curiosity continued with a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered his curiosity with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Unwilling to walk old paths merely because they are ancient, curiosity asks, "Why?" Standing before a bush that seems to be burning without being consumed, inquisitive faith asks, "What's the meaning of this?"

Every advance in our human condition has come about because of the holy curiosity that resides within us. It is a gift of God. All scientific research, all medical research, all religious research begins with curiosity. Because of holy curiosity, individuals through the ages have discovered God in the common places of life and work, and they were uncommonly transformed.

The story of Moses and the burning bush is a good example. His holy curiosity transformed the years he seemed to have wasted. It also gave him a new understanding of God and a new understanding of what his life's purpose was still to be.

Here's what happened according to the story in Exodus. Moses was the adopted son of Pharaoh and widely accepted as an Egyptian, although he had Hebrew parents. He had both opportunities and advantages denied to other Hebrews. Above all other privileges, he enjoyed freedom.

Despite his opportunities and advantages, he had a rapid collapse from Egyptian favor. Seeing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses killed the oppressor. The Egyptians accused him of murder, and he fled to the land of Midian. Now he lived as a shepherd. The Midianites accepted him, and he married a Midianite woman.

Considering Moses' potential, we might conclude he wasted those years while being a shepherd. There are few more remote and insignificant places than the region where Moses now lived. However, the story is telling us that no matter how negative our circumstances might be, if we allow our holy curiosity to work, new opportunities appear where and when we least expect them, and our lives can be transformed.

Moses's years as a shepherd gave him time to think, to mature, to learn from his mistakes, and to be open to experiencing the power of God in unexpected ways. Unknown to Moses during his exile from Egypt, God was preparing him for unique leadership if he was willing to accept it when the time came.

Holy curiosity caused Moses to discover God's fuller revelation. According to the story, "The bush was blazing yet it was not consumed." Other shepherds in the wilderness might not have taken much notice. In this kind of environment, it was not an unusual sight. There are bushes all around that seem to be on fire. What seems to be different here is that this bush was not being consumed. The holy curiosity of Moses caused him to investigate further. He did not run away or ignore this incident.

There are people who travel to all kinds of special holy places in the world and try various strange and exotic religious movements in an attempt to discover God, and yet miss God in some of the common, everyday places of life and work. Remember, Jesus said, "The kingdom (or presence) of God is within you and among you." The Apostle Paul discovered in his own experience, "God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being."

One of the barriers to discovering God in everyday life is that we can have the attitude that God is found only or mainly in places, actions, and words that are labeled "religious" or "holy." We like to separate things into categories of secular and religious, but with God, there is no such separation. The creation stories tell us that God created all that exists and saw that everything that had been created is good.

It is said that the 14th-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, looked at a little thing, a hazelnut, and through viewing it attentively, realized aspects of God.

I'm told that Hasidic Jews believe that in creating the world, God shattered and scattered the splendor of God in hidden sparks that are present in everything and every possibility.

That description resonates with me, and I hope with you. This past week, I've been reading a new book written by a research scientist who has a holy curiosity about everything in creation. The book is called Natural Prayers and the author is Chet Raymo. He is a professor of physics and astronomy at Stonehill College in Massachusetts.

Like Moses, his holy curiosity continues to lead him to a new understanding of God and of his purpose in life. He sees God as working through the evolutionary process that "reaches inward to embrace the ceaseless dance of DNA and outward to the spiraling galaxies, a story that places human life and consciousness squarely in a cosmic flow of complexifying energy."

He quotes Thomas Berry, a Roman Catholic priest and cultural historian. According to Berry, “The universe, the solar system, and the planet Earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.”

Because of their holy curiosity, scientists like Chet Raymo, Thomas Berry, and others see research, adoration, and reverence of the creation as being synonymous.

Moses met God in a burning bush, and the commonplace became holy. Other persons had seen such bushes and experienced nothing unusual. Moses had heretofore seen bushes like it and noticed nothing extraordinary.

I am convinced that we often miss God in our burning bushes because our holy curiosity has fallen asleep or because we do not associate God with the commonplace. Yet think of the many ways God comes to us in the ordinary events of life, which can be our burning bushes. God comes through a deed of kindness, an understanding spirit, a sympathetic word, a child’s inquisitive, upturned face, the New Testament’s cup of cold water, and the love of one person for another. Even the crises, problems, and burdens of life mirror the reflected presence of God. The burning bushes are everywhere. But like Moses, we need to exercise our holy curiosity and turn aside to look.

I am also convinced through my reading and study of the Bible and church history that God encourages a holy curiosity.

Years ago, Henry Jones delivered the Gifford Lectures in Scotland. The title of the lecture series was A Faith That Inquires. The lectures were later published in a book. One person seeing the title of the book said, “But is its title not a bit of a contradiction? A faith that inquires?”

There is no contradiction between faith and honest inquiry, between faith and holy curiosity. To the contrary, there is something essential missing in a faith that is unwilling or afraid to turn aside to the impartial weighing of any fresh evidence. God rewards the spirit of the fearless and painstaking investigator. I believe one of God’s greatest gifts to the researchers of our day and to all of us is what we commonly call the “scientific method.” It is a way of structuring our curiosity in our attempts to pursue the truth.

Not only does God encourage a holy curiosity, God rewards a holy curiosity that has enough faith to “turn aside to see” and to ask, “Why?” The same God who implants curiosity in our personalities responds positively to the spirit of conscientious research and honest investigation. When we do not exercise our God-given curiosity, we can miss God’s presence because of our laziness or unwillingness to examine and understand, and because we forget that God’s revelation to us is never finished. Sometimes too, we convince ourselves that we are too busy to “turn aside and see.”

In addition, we need not worry that honest intellectual inquiry will destroy our faith. In the “creationism” and evolution discussion, we need not worry that the teaching of the theory of evolution will weaken our faith because scientific knowledge can never invalidate religious faith. Rather, on the positive side, scientific knowledge can lead to the restatement of the ways and means of God. As a matter of fact, each generation bears the responsibility of restating the ways and means of God. That does not mean that God changes, but that our

understanding of God grows and changes as we gain more knowledge of the creation and confront new circumstances.

There's one more important element in this story of Moses and the burning bush.

In the story, Moses asks God to reveal God's name. According to the story, God said to Moses, "My name is, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" Then God went on to say, "When the people of Israel ask who sent you to lead them out of Egypt, tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

What is the meaning of this? God is saying, in effect, "I will be whoever I will be." I am beyond human description in words. You cannot contain me in any of your creeds or doctrines. Note also that God is saying, "I am a verb, not a noun." You can know me most fully through my actions.

Some time ago, someone gave me a bit of poetry by Helen Mellicost, which reads:

"I was regretting the past and fearing the future. Suddenly God was speaking, 'My name is I AM.' I waited, God continued, 'When you live in the past with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not 'I WAS.'

"When you live in the future, with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not 'I WILL BE.' When you live in this moment, it is not hard. I am here. My name is 'I AM.'"

Holy curiosity is a gift from God. Pay attention to where your curiosity leads you. Be like Moses in this story. Do not be afraid to turn aside and look. Frequently, God is found in the common, ordinary experiences of everyday work and life. Burning bushes can be found anywhere. Your holy curiosity can lead to knowing and experiencing God more deeply.

As I conclude this sermon, ask yourself these questions: What are some of the burning bushes in your life where maybe you could have met God if you had taken notice? Some of them you might have walked by and not turned aside to look more closely.

What are some of the burning bushes in your life where you've stopped to look and where you've met God?

You can be sure of this: sometime in the very near future, if you use your holy curiosity and turn aside to look, you are going to experience the holy presence of God, and it will likely be when you least expect it. When that happens, you can also be sure that like Moses in your burning-bush experience, God will reward your curiosity and transform any of the past years you might consider to have wasted.

Curiosity may not kill cats, and it will not kill you. Rather, pay attention to your holy curiosity. It is a gift from God. Keep it active and working, and you will strengthen your faith and fulfill your God-given potential. Amen.