

If we had a group of people and put each person, one after another, into the same work situation – each person might respond differently there. One person might find deep peacefulness and better concentration working alone, while someone else could feel like they were going crazy because there was no one to talk to or bounce ideas off of. And I think we’ve all been in situations where we’ve experienced having our minds zone out while we were doing a familiar or very repetitive activity. Or perhaps we’ve experienced having our bodies work on “auto pilot” while our minds took off to replay a hurtful conversation, or some other negative thing again and again. . . . Having time alone with our thoughts can result in any number of outcomes.

A couple weeks ago *The Post-Crescent* ran a comic strip from Lynn Johnston’s “For Better or For Worse” that was first used on August 10, 1991. To set the scene: teenager Michael Patterson has been working at his Aunt Bev and Uncle Dan Cruikshank’s farm for the Summer. Michael has been writing letters home to his girlfriend, Martha, but she has not been writing back to him. Both Aunt Bev and Uncle Dan have compassionately provided a listening ear to Michael, but he remains bewildered by Martha’s lack of response. In the first panel of the comic strip Uncle Dan asks Bev, “How’s Michael? Still brooding about that girl?” Bev says, “Uh huh. I sent him off to swath the big field. That ought to keep his mind off things.” The final panel of the strip shows Michael nearing the center of a big field and he’s thinking, “Crop farming is like being in love . . . it keeps you going around and around in circles.” . . . While his Aunt Bev thought this work would distract him, Michael’s mind simply continued to stew about Martha – albeit in a reflective fashion. Michael has at least learned something about the nature of farm work: while it requires all of your attention some of the time, it can also provide plenty of time for your mind to wander as the work gets done.

In our reading from Exodus, Moses was busy “doing the work” of shepherding – and because there was nothing out of the ordinary going on, I imagine that his mind was also wandering a bit. Yes, Moses was doing what he would automatically do: he kept an eye on the flock while also watching his own footing as the terrain started getting steeper around Mount Horeb. But at the same time he could also think his own thoughts as the flock grazed. He could do that until something unusual and threatening caught his eye: fire. Flames in the wilderness could mean an unchecked wildfire – and a very dangerous situation for Moses and the flock to find themselves in. So Moses had to switch from casual autopilot to hyper alert. And then he needed to **STAY** hyper alert when he realized he was in the presence of something that was even *more* dangerous than a wildfire: Moses found himself standing on holy ground in the presence of God.

Were you surprised that I said that was a super dangerous situation for Moses to be in? You shouldn't be. . . . Just take a moment and consider how it would feel if you suddenly found yourself not only with a herd of animals on a lonely hillside – but standing on HOLY ground in God's presence, hearing God speaking directly to you – BY NAME. How quickly would the boring, ordinary surroundings around you be transformed by the glorious presence of God? . . . Now remember that you did not get any advance warning to wear your best outfit, to have your hair cut, or even to wipe the dust off your face before God showed up here. . . . You also can't change what God has come to ask you to do. And if you can imagine yourself hearing what Moses heard from God – it would sound like God had a nifty plan for ending your life in the very near future: all you have to do is go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves leave – because God wants ALL of them out of Egypt. . . . Do YOU feel ready to rush off and make that happen?!

Bless his heart, Moses didn't even start by thinking about Pharaoh. No, Moses knew he had to be concerned about whether the *ISRAELITES* would believe a word he had to say if he went to them and said, "The God of your fathers sent me to you." Moses thinks the suffering slaves are going to think that sounds like a lousy joke. "Hey, did you hear the one about the Israelite baby boy who was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up in Pharaoh's household; and then as a young adult he killed an Egyptian who was roughing up an Israelite slave? And Pharaoh was ready to kill him for doing that! The guy got out of Egypt by the skin of his teeth! You'd think he'd be smart enough to stay gone. But now this fugitive is back in Egypt and he's claiming that God wants Pharaoh to free ALL the Israelite slaves! Isn't that the most hysterical thing you have EVER heard! Wait until Pharaoh gets wind of it! That fugitive is going to be deader than dead when Pharaoh's men get ahold of him!" . . . Moses KNOWS the Israelites are not going to be flocking around him if he shows up again in Egypt. People will probably go out of their way to stay clear of him. Moses is a troublemaker! And no Israelite wants to stir up trouble with Pharaoh. Life is already hard enough. . . . Go away, Moses! Leave us alone!

Moses knows what he's up against if he goes back to Egypt. . . . What he doesn't know is what it would be like to go back to Egypt as God's change agent, and to have God with him. Moses isn't sure he wants to know what that would be like. But God remained adamant that Moses should find out what that's like. . . . Now if you were Moses, wouldn't that seem a little dangerous to you?

We're not Moses, but at any time we could come upon the holy. We could find ourselves standing on holy ground. We could discover how dangerous this holy place can be. We could find ourselves close enough to hear God speak clearly to us – and to know that there is no doubt that God IS speaking to us, and not to somebody else. And God could ask us to do something that seems like it's too much for us to do. That it would be

ludicrous for us to even consider doing it! But God could remain adamant about staying with us to get it done. And then we would need to remember that if the God of our ancestors in faith went with them and didn't let them down – then this could be our time to trust that God will be with us in what God would have us to do.

Perhaps we are already standing on holy ground. And from out of the flames of social isolation, pandemic, inequity, and economic despair can you hear God calling out to us to help our neighbors in need? To find a way to ensure that people have enough to eat. To connect with people who feel that no one cares what happens to them. To show up in the lives of other people even if it's just taking the time to walk around the block with them; or to leave \$10 for the person behind us in the check-out line; or to share some information about who is hiring; or to keep an eye on the kids out playing in the yard. . . . Maybe it seems a little dangerous for us to stretch ourselves right now. But God says that God will go with us IF we will do what God needs us to do.

Amen.