A Bend in the Road  
(Exodus 3:1-4 / Repentance)  
By Win Green

Every once in a while we come to a bend in the road where we can choose between two pathways: We can choose the well worn path that we’ve always chosen, or we can choose to take a new road.

As you know we’ve been publishing short messages to our community via the Extremely Local section of the Miami Herald, so I’m always on the look out for a catchy phrase. Peggy Perrine recently shared one about change which I liked. It’s this:

“If you always do what you always did you’ll always get what you always got.”

I heard something similar years ago from a friend of mine who is an alcoholic.

“Insanity is when you keep doing the same old thing and expect a different result.”

Insanity is continuing to do what we’ve been doing and expecting something to change… like continuing to over eat and expecting the scale to go down… over spending and expecting our savings to go up… or taking more time at the office and expecting more love at home. Obviously change is necessary if we are ever to break out of the insanity of our lives, and if this change is ever to occur we must choose a new pathway. When we come to the bend in the road we must turn from our well worn pathway, and take the road less traveled.

One of my favorite poets is the New England poet Robert Frost who wrote:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

The Road Not Taken

But the trouble is change is difficult, and the truth be known, most people resist it. Even if our lives are not happy, at least they are predictable and can provide us with the security of the familiar. Some of us resist change for fear of the unknown. We’ve heard the expression; a bird in the
hand is worth two in the bush… The sad irony is that some of us are willing to settle for a lot less. We settle for the bad rather than risk any changes for the good. When the bend in the road comes we think about it, agonize over it, dream about what it could offer, but all too often we refuse to take it because we’d rather not risk the unknown.

There is an amusing new Television commercial showing a man agonizing in front of his computer screen. It is obvious that he wants something, but he is anxious and unsure of himself. He paces the floor, he cracks his knuckles, he bites his nails, and he waves in arms as he debates insides himself. Then comes the fateful moment. He approaches his computer, places his trembling finger over the clicker, pauses for an instant, and then clicks. The camera turns to the computer screen and behold it says, “Your purchase has been made.”

Folks are having a hard time trusting internet purchases, but shopping by the internet is a change that is inevitable. Indeed, I read the other day that many of America’s most exciting companies today are those that have no buildings at all. Some of us are going to make this change into the computer world and profit from it, and some of us are going to be left behind. But one thing is certain, the change is coming and it’s coming fast.

Moses and the Bend in the Road.

The Bible tells us that Moses is a man whose life brings him to two great bends in the road, which resulted in tremendous change.

The first came when he is forty years old. Moses lived as an Egyptian prince, but he committed murder and so he had to flee for his life which changed everything. For the next forty years Moses lives as a shepherd in the desert wasteland of Median. There he marries. There he raises two children. There he learns the ways of a desert nomad. His life changed from being a bachelor prince to a family man shepherd. You would think that this would be enough change for any one person to endure, but when he was eighty, yet another bend in the road appeared, he sees a burning bush in the desert, and again Moses was forced to change.

This morning I want to talk about this change that Moses had to go through, and the changes that we must go through if we are ever to get connected with God and grow in our relationship with Him.

I. Turning Aside
When Moses saw the burning bush the Bible tells us that his response was to turn from what he was doing to take a closer look. Different Bibles translate verse three from the ancient Hebrew differently:

“When Moses saw that the bush was on fire and that it didn’t burn up, he went over to investigate.” (Exodus 3:3, LB)

“So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up.” (Exodus 3:3, NIV)

Usually I prefer the modern translations of scripture. But for this particular verse I like the old King James translation because it offers the most beautiful and accurate understanding. In it Moses says:

“I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” (Exodus 3:3, KJV)

The key words here are “turn aside.” “I will now turn aside and see this great sight…” When Moses saw the burning bush, he turned aside, which is to say he turned away from what he was doing so that he could turn toward the burning bush. I suppose it could be argued that Moses was being irresponsible to leave his sheep and waste his time checking out some burning bush. But Moses decided to take a chance and turn away from what he was doing to find out more about the burning bush.

Some of us don’t take time for wonder. When something catches our eye but we ignore it. A child’s eye they instinctively turns to something new, but many of us have trained ourselves to avoid such distractions. We’ve been educated to focus our attention, and for the most part this is good. But it is possible to be too focused. Some of us are so focused on our careers, on our financial circumstances, or on our families and we don’t see the big picture nor do we take time for wonder. We get so busy in our routines that we don’t take time for wonder. God could be doing wonderful things all around us, He could be putting burning bushes all around you, but it doesn’t do much good if we don’t take the time to see it.

Recently, I extended a special invitation for someone to join our Church’s upcoming mission team to Cuba. I guaranteed that they would see some of God’s wonders… how He was transforming the lives of people. Their answer was predictable, “I’d love to go, but I’m too busy!” Now I
have no doubt that they are busy, but when are they ever going to turn aside and take time for God. I can tell you right now time for God is never found, it is taken. It must be set aside. God needs your attention before He can show you His wonder.

When I was a boy of four my mother was raising five kids so she was busy and distracted. When I wanted to get her attention I would climb up on her lap, grab her by the face and turn it toward me so that she had to look at me. I made her physically turn toward me. Sometimes I wish God would do that with me... grab me by the face and turn my attention to what He is doing! But God never makes us do anything. He wants us to turn toward Him by our own choice. He never forces us. He just puts burning bushes in our lives to see if we will turn aside to take a look.

II. God Is Not Convenient!

Let me share with you a spiritual principle: God is not convenient. God does not come to us when it’s convenient. God did not come to Moses at a convenient time. Moses didn’t have the time. It wasn’t responsible for him to leave the sheep behind. He had no idea what the burning bush was, and he could have very easily dismissed it as not his concern, but he didn’t. He turned. To take a bend in the road you’ve got to turn. If you want your life to change, you’ve got to turn. If you want God in your life, you will have to turn… turn away from all the many of the things that distract you from Him.

Jesus tells a great story about taking the time to turn aside for God.

There once was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among robbers, who beat him and left him along the side of the road. It happened that a priest passed by where the man lay by the roadside, but he did not turn aside for he didn’t feel as though he had the time. Not long after a Levite, a religious man, passed the spot where the man lay, but he too did not turn aside to help because it just wasn’t convenient. But a Samaritan came by, (the Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews), and when he saw the beaten man lying along the side of the road he turned aside, took the time, and took care of him.

After telling this story Jesus said to those listening that this is what a true neighbor is someone who takes the time to turn aside from their routine for someone else.

Last December while I was in Paris, I was walking down a street late at night. I was looking for a place to get something to eat when I saw in front of me a man sprawled out in the middle of the sidewalk. It looked as
though he had passed out from drinking, but it wasn’t clear. He could have been beaten up, had a heart attack, been the victim of an epileptic fit…. What shocked me more than the man sprawled out on the sidewalk was how people didn’t bother stopping for him. It was bitter cold, and the sidewalk was freezing, but no one hesitated so much as an instant for him. They just stepped over him.

I’ve noticed that here in our community we don’t turn aside much for our neighbors let alone God. We busy ourselves with our many appointments, and yet we don’t connect with the people closest to us: God and neighbor. Our burning bush that calls us into God’s service might well be our neighbor.

III. To Turn Is To Repent!

In the Bible, to turn means to repent. When you repent you turn away from self-centeredness toward your neighbor. You turn away from your sins toward God. You turn away from the many distractions of the world toward the priorities that matter most.

Most people know what their priorities should be; they just get distracted. Most people know the importance of their neighbor’s welfare, but they just get distracted. Most people know the goodness of God, but we just get distracted. A relationship with God is established when we turn away from all these distractions toward God. The Bible is full of promises for people who make this turn in their lives.

“… Fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”

(Proverbs 3:7)

“… For God will speak peace to His people… to those who turn to Him in their hearts. (Psalm 85:8, RSV)

At some point in our lives we have to make a decision. We have to decide whether we are going to turn aside for God. It’s more than just believing in the existence of God, or praying to an unknown deity. It’s about deciding to take a giant bend in the road… to change the direction of our life. It’s shifting the direction of our life from our way to God’s way. It’s deciding
that our career, our prosperity, and even our family are all to be guided by our God.

Christianity proclaims that we must all make a serious turn in life if we want to enter into a relationship with God. A relationship with God is not a convenience, an accident, or a function of time and wisdom, or a privilege of heritage. Each of us must decide whether or not we want a relationship with God, and when we decided that we do we must turn away from our sins and turn toward Him. The message of the Old Testament prophets and the Message of Jesus were the same, “turn from your sins to God!” There is nothing complicated in this message. There is nothing vague or uncertain. We must all turn away from what we know is wrong and turn to God. For all of us that means heading in an entirely new direction. It means taking the bend in the road and walking down the road less traveled. Most people don’t want to take the bend in the road, because they want to walk with rest of the crowd. They believe that there is safety in numbers. But there isn’t. The Bible says clearly that most people are headed for destruction. Most people are traveling a self-destructive, self-centered, and self-absorbed life that will lead to an unhappy end. Here is what the Bible says,

“... The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14, RSV)

But to take the bend in the road that leads to God promises the fruits of God’s Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Goodness, Kindness....

VI.
Not Nice but New!

The Christian Faith is all about change. Unfortunately, too many people assume it’s all about being moral and ethical, but that’s a wrong assumption. Christianity is about allowing Jesus Christ into your heart so that he can change your life. He is how St. Paul describes it:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV)
God did not bring us here to be nice people. He brought us here to be new people. He called us together as a church to change us. And I’m not just talking about minor adjustments. I’m talking a complete reordering of our priorities, our values, and our commitments. We are not here to be nice but new, and that means that we are here to be changed by God.