

THE BURNING BUSH

Exodus 3:1-15

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on September 3, 2017, the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he 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 out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?'

God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." ' God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations....'

On this Labor Day Weekend, I want to begin by thanking you for the gift of vacation, the gift of time away.

We left Alexandria early on August 14 and flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and then drove a couple of hours to Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian conference center where my wife spent most summers of her childhood and youth at retreats led by her clergy-father. Five days later we flew to Boston and then drove five hours north to Swan's Island, Maine. We arrived home – nineteen days later – this past Friday night.

To leave the density of Alexandria and the intensity of Washington and to experience, in the course of three weeks, desert sunset and sunrise, the Big Dipper over two states three thousand miles away, the solar eclipse, vast, ever-changing sky, beautiful ocean waters, rocky coast line, and thick forest is a humbling pilgrimage.

Even with limited access to news and the technology in which it is now delivered, and therefore with only incomplete awareness of the ravages of floodwaters in a city where I once served a congregation, I could not help but think how vast this nation's land is and waters are, how diverse our topography, how much our land and seas are uninhabited and in many ways uninhibited, and how absolutely quiet many parts of America are. The phrase "from sea to shining sea" kept floating through my mind.

I was also taken by the sheer beauty of the people of each location: Native Americans with drums and circle dances, the committed creativity of artists who settle in the desert, visitors to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, a reunion of Peace Corps volunteers from the mid 1960s, and then hard working lobstermen and lobsterwomen who have lived their entire lives on one small island in the Atlantic. I was appreciative of the small but well-tended library in each location. All these combined to confer a sense of blessing for which I am grateful to God, and a sense of hope concerning God's ultimate care for our nation, our world, and every human being who lives "from sea to shining sea" and beyond. There is plenty to challenge and undercut this sense of hope, but ultimately, I believe it is well-founded, and for that I am grateful.

I.

Most sermons I have preached this summer have been drawn from the book of Genesis. Between the close of this book and the opening of the book of Exodus, which follows, over four hundred years human history passes, and there is precious little evidence among the people of Israel that God, their God, is anywhere to be found.

- A new king has arisen in Egypt,¹ who doesn't know his Egyptian history, and therefore doesn't know about the Hebrew slave named Joseph, who four centuries earlier had saved the Egyptians from famine by leading them to store food during a time of plenty and in the process become breadbasket for the world in the years of want that followed.²
- This new king doesn't know that in the midst of saving Egypt Joseph had also saved his own brothers, unknowingly, and then had reconciled with them and attributed it all to God, whom Joseph had said was working in the background all along to take his brothers' evil intentions and use them for good.³
- All this new Egyptian king knows is that Hebrews are to be slaves of the Egyptians: yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Now when the king receives evidence that the Hebrews are multiplying faster than he is comfortable and might be able to stage a rebellion or join an invading enemy, he imposes more ruthless work requirements for the 18 to 20 hours a day they make brick and mortar, thereby leaving Israelites neither time nor energy nor place nor privacy nor dignity nor hope for that most sacred and intense human instinct: the desire of one person for another person. The king seeks to reduce the population of Hebrew slaves by eliminating anything conducive to the attraction of male to female, female to male, and the offspring that result.⁴

But his efforts at zero population growth do not succeed. Children continue to be conceived and infants born to the Hebrew slaves. The king then instructs Hebrew midwives to slay male infants on the birth stool; but when two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, refuse to do so, they are blessed with families of their own. In response, the

¹ Exodus 2:8.

² Genesis 41.

³ Genesis 42-45; see also Genesis 50:20.

⁴ Exodus 1:7, plus 8-22. For information about the degree to which Midrash maintains that the work increase was aimed at controlling sexual activity, and the ways especially Hebrew women resisted this, see Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), pages 18-21 and 56-80.

king decrees that “all the people” of Egypt shall throw any boys born to Hebrews into the Nile River. The king thus makes participation in ethnic cleansing a requirement of citizenship.⁵

But after a *long* time – note the stress on the word “long” – this particular king dies. He is the only major character in the story who is never named. Perhaps sensing an opening for hope, the people of Israel are finally able to move from silence to groan under their slavery, and to cry out. Out of their slavery they cry for help. Their cry “rises up” to God.⁶

The narrator ends these two chapters of Poe-like horror stories with these words:

God *hears* their groaning...
God *remembers* his covenant...
God *looks upon* the Israelites...
And God *takes notice*...⁷

It has been a long four hundred years.

II.

Our passage, Chapter Three, then opens with an adult named Moses keeping watch over the flock of his father-in-law Jethro in an adjacent land named Midian. Moses has been introduced to us in the previous chapter:

- He was a Hebrew baby, whose *mother* had hid him from the king for three months, who had then placed him in a basket on the Nile when she could hide him no longer.
- He had then been spotted by the *daughter* of the Egyptian king who had recognized him as a Hebrew baby but who had had empathy for him and ordered him “drawn out” of the water by a servant, and who had allowed a bystander to secure a Hebrew nursemaid for the infant.
- The bystander turns out to be the infant’s older *sister* Miriam, who retrieves their own mother Jochebed to nurse the infant boy.⁸

The king’s daughter then names the infant “I drew him out of the water” – which in Hebrew is the word *Moses*.

When we join Moses as an adult tending his father-in-law’s flock, Moses sees a bush that is “blazing” with fire, “and yet [the bush] is not consumed by the flames.” It burns and burns and burns but does not burn up.

In what turns out to be one the most fateful moments in human history, Moses stops the sheep and says:

I must turn aside
And look at this great sight
And see why this bush is not burned up.

“I must turn aside.”

⁵ Exodus 1:8-22, especially verse 22 concerning the decree.

⁶ Exodus 2:23-25.

⁷ Exodus 2:25.

⁸ Exodus 2:1-10.

The next words the narrator uses are significant. They read:

When

The Lord *saw* that [Moses]

Had turned aside to *see*,

God called to Moses *out of the bush*,

“Moses, Moses!”

Moses answers “Here am I!”

After Moses’ response, God continues:

I have *observed* the misery of my people...

I have *heard* their cry...

I *know* their sufferings...

And I have *come down*

To *send you* to Pharaoh

To “*draw them out*” of the land of Egypt...

Although it will take several more turns in the conversation before Moses finally agrees to go, his agreement will ultimately lead the people of Israel

- To institute and celebrate Passover⁹
- To cross the Red Sea into the land of Canaan
- To move from slavery to freedom¹⁰
- To receive the Ten Commandments¹¹
- And under Joshua to enter the land promised to Abraham and Sarah.¹²

All this happens after Moses turns aside to pay attention to the burning bush. Without such turning aside, these events may not have happened, or happened in a different way with a different set of characters.

III.

What can we make of this story? Let me share three brief learnings.

(a)

About this story, Elizabeth Barrett Browning has written:

Earth's crammed with heaven,

And every common bush afire with God,

But only he *who sees* takes off his shoes;

The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.¹³

⁹ Exodus 12.

¹⁰ Exodus 14-15.

¹¹ Exodus 20.

¹² Joshua 3.

¹³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, From “Aurora Leigh” available in Nicholson, D. H. S., and Lee, A. H. E., eds. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917; Bartleby.com, 2000. www.bartleby.com/236/. [9/3/2017].

I have always understood this quatrain to mean that God is present in nearly every place and person in creation, but that in order to experience God's presence we must keep our eyes open, stop and look at the burning bushes we encounter, and then be willing to do something entirely out of the ordinary – take off our shoes – less the presence pass us by. I still hold this to be true, but reading Moses' story this year has led me to take this poem one step further.

Even though I am a lifelong Presbyterian who always emphasizes the sovereignty of God, I am intrigued by the concept in our passage – articulated by Jewish scholars – that even though God himself has responded to the cries of human suffering and come to dwell with and among his suffering people, God still holds back from acting until one of those people, namely Moses, stops and notices the burning bush. Remember, it is only when Moses stops that God speaks. It is as if God has confined himself within the burning bush – just as the people of Israel are trapped within slavery – and until someone listens, God will not emerge from the bush.¹⁴

I know this is different from one of my major themes in preaching and teaching, namely, that God is active in the world, that we are called to join God in his activity, but that if we do not answer that call, it will not deter God from acting.

I still believe this. But I am intrigued and challenged by the idea text that perhaps God will remain within the burning bush until he finds someone willing to join him in the effort of setting his people free. It is intriguing to think that God may have the power to draw us out of whatever we need to be drawn out, but perhaps God holds back until we are willing to join him in what he is doing.

An intriguing thought.

(b)

That leads to my second and briefer comment. Wordsworth has written, famously: “The Child is father of the Man.” Wordsworth is saying that every experience we have as a child gives birth to who we are as an adult. “The Child is father of the Man.”¹⁵

Think of everything in Moses' childhood that could lead him, alone among passersby, to “turn aside” and look at the great sight of the burning bush.

- Born into slavery and genocide
- Held, nursed, and hidden by his biological mother
- Placed by her in a basket on the Nile River
- Drawn out of the river by the a servant of the daughter of the Egyptian king
- Handed to and held by that daughter
- Held and nursed once again by his biological mother
- Named by his adoptive, royal mother
- Born Hebrew, raised Egyptian
- Birth mother Hebrew/adopted mother Egyptian

¹⁴ See Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, “Imitations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” quoting his own poem, “My Heart Leaps Up,” from which this quote is taken. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood>.

Is there any wonder why Moses may have been uniquely prepared to be the person in whose presence the God of the burning bush would reveal himself allow himself to be drawn out into the world of speech and action, of liberation and deliverance? Is there any question that nearly *every* experience of Moses' early life prepared him for the life he would lead in adulthood and in history. "The Child" was indeed "Father of the Man."

(c)

This leads to my third learning. A saying from the Book of Proverbs is often associated with Moses in ancient Jewish scholarship. It is Proverbs 22:15:

Without counsel plans go wrong,
But with many advisers they succeed.

Jewish scholars see this proverb as referring to *God* as the one who seeks counsel, advice, and assistance of Moses in drawing the people of Israel out of slavery and into freedom. They even use the phrase "human involvement *in* salvation" to describe the role Moses plays with God.¹⁶

As a lifelong Presbyterian, I have spent my life saying that salvation is a *gift* of grace that comes from God alone, thus I am not entirely comfortable with the idea of "human involvement in salvation."

But I will say this: There is something to be said about God waiting until he has found a Moses before undertaking the massive historical movement of drawing his own people out of slavery and into freedom. Perhaps it is teaching us that God is waiting to find a similar receptivity in us before undertaking the massive movement of drawing us out of whatever slavery in which we are confined into the freedom and salvation God has for us. Perhaps God is waiting for "many advisers" like you and me with whom God will work so "God's plans succeed."

I started this sermon with a witness
To the vastness of land and sea and people of the earth
And my renewed sense that God will care for us all.

But the story reminds me
That we have a role to play in that care.
We must become one among God's "many advisors"
That help God's plans "succeed."
We must have confidence
That everything we have experienced
Plays a role in preparing us for that task:
That the child is indeed the parent
To the youth, the young adult,
The man, the woman.

When we see that bush burning,
We must turn aside,
See that great sight,
Listen to the voice that may speak to us,
Calling our name. Amen.

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¹⁶ Zornberg, *Moses*, 30.