

It All Began with a Burning Bush

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Rev. David Schultz

Old Testament Lesson, Exodus 3:1-15

3:1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵ “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹² And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

¹³ Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’”

“This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.

Sermon, “It All Began with a Burning Bush”

A guy goes to the doctor. "Doctor," he says. "I need your help. I think I'm a moth."
"I can't help you," says the doctor. "I'm just a general practitioner. What you need is a

psychiatrist."

"I was on the way to the psychiatrist," says the guy. "But then I saw your light was on!" (From *A Prairie Home Companion*).

Fire has a way of capturing our attention. And it does not matter if the source of the blaze is a simple candle, a plume of smoke rising from a farmer's burn pile or a more tragic situation such as a house fire. We become like moths and we're drawn to the flames.

Maybe it took fire to capture Moses' attention.

He was tending to his father-in-law's sheep out in the wilderness when he saw a bush blazing away. Strangely enough, however, it was not consumed by the fire.

And then—like a moth—Moses was drawn to the flaming bush. There something even more remarkable happened: God appeared to Moses. And God spoke to Moses, revealing his nature as well as his plan and his compassion for his people.

It's a fitting story for this day which marks my 40th anniversary of pastoral ministry. If you know the story of Moses, then you know he was raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter until he killed an abusive Egyptian and then fled out into the wilderness where he spent 40 years as a shepherd. No, I haven't killed any Egyptians—or anyone else for that matter. But I have spent the past forty years as a pastoral "shepherd" of sorts, serving in Texas and in some of the smaller communities of Illinois; Aledo is the largest city we've lived in since transferring into the United Methodist Church back in 1994.

Sometimes it felt like we were out in the wilderness, which has prompted Candice to compare me to Moses: patiently shepherding the flock while seemingly forgotten by God, the district superintendent, and the bishop. For Moses, the real fun began after forty years as a shepherd. That's when God met him in the burning bush and told him that it was time to deliver God's people. But it all began with a burning bush. And that leads me to wonder: how might a burning bush change my life? In response to that question, I'm going to offer three ways in which we might be changed by encountering a burning bush.

First, encountering a burning bush would bring more mystery into my life.

(And who doesn't love a good mystery?)

When Moses encountered his burning bush, he was mystified. "What's going on here?" he asked. "I can't believe this! (It's) amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?" Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*. He had no explanation for it and he never would. Nonetheless the burning bush changed his life forever. For that matter, it changed the life of two nations forever—Israel and Egypt. Many would go so far as to argue that the burning bush changed the course of human history.

And today we are no closer to solving the mystery of the burning bush than Moses was.

But do you realize the Bible is filled with mystery? Indeed, the Bible is based on mystery. Creation is a mystery. Salvation is described as "a mystery." The whole idea of the Great God of the Universe allowing his Son to be reduced to something resembling

the seed of a human being—so small and so insignificant—that it might impregnate a humble Jewish girl—is mind-boggling. It's a mystery.

Then that God-child grew up and in adulthood was crucified on trumped-up charges. Yet his death would save humanity from hell and restore us to eternal fellowship with God. No wonder Paul called it a mystery.

But that's not the end of the mysteries: Baptism is a mystery. Holy Communion is a mystery. Paul described the return of Christ as a mystery. And the list goes on.

Sometimes the church gets a bad rap as being "boring." And yet those same people making that claim will stay home to watch reruns of *Law and Order*. Why? Because they love a good mystery.

I believe it's time for the church—and the people who attend church—to reclaim the mystery of salvation; to reclaim the mystery of baptism; to reclaim the mystery of Holy Communion and to reclaim the mystery of Christ's return.

I believe it's time for us to say, "I can't figure it all out, but I'm okay with that. I'm going to follow Jesus."

I believe it's time for Christians to seek their burning bushes. If we would find those bushes and embrace the holy mysteries they represent, church would become more exciting and we would bring more people into the kingdom of God. We would change their lives and ours, fulfilling our mission.

Secondly, encountering a burning bush will give me a better understanding of a God who wants to get personal with me.

I know it sounds as if I've just contradicted myself. How could I have more mystery and yet have a better understanding of God? But look at the text: On the one hand Moses never figured out the mystery of the burning bush. On the other hand, God revealed himself to Moses, saying, "I am the God of your father: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

In other words, we won't figure everything out, but we will figure out everything that we **must** know.

And what must we know?

We must know that God is the Great I Am, the One who was and is and ever shall be. We must know that God is eternal, that he will never be consumed by fire.

We must know that God is a holy God deserving of holy behavior on our part. That might mean that when we're in God's presence we should remove the dirty sandals from our feet—or whatever else in our lives might be dragging the dust and filth of this world into the holy and pure presence of God.

But we must also know that God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. In other words, he's a God who is never content to know us casually.

I could tell you that I know Cubs' former right fielder Sammy Sosa because I've seen him play at Wrigley Field—I even watched him autograph a baseball for my sons. But if I called him up and said, "Hey, let's get together for lunch sometime," Sammy would say, "Do I know you?" And I'd have to admit that I don't.

I could tell you that I know Christian recording artist Amy Grant because I shook her hand once—Candice and I even had lunch with her one time, along with 200 other youth

workers. But if I called her up and said, “Hey, let’s get together for lunch again;” she’d say, “Do I know you?” And I’d have to admit that no, you don’t.

Our God is a God who is never content to know us from a distance. Rather, our God is a God who willingly enters into covenant relationships with us as he did with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Look at these three: Abraham, a man of faith—yes—but also man so lacking in faith that when he and his wife went on a second honeymoon to Egypt, he said to her, “Don’t let on that you’re my wife because you’re so beautiful that I’m afraid the Egyptians will kill me so they can marry you.”

Apparently, Sarah was so unaccustomed to hearing her husband say that she was beautiful that she went along with the idiot! And yet, God was not afraid to claim the bum and describe himself as “the God of Abraham.”

Then there’s Isaac, a truly unremarkable fellow who as a lad nearly let himself be killed by his father. Then as an old man, he believed any old story his children cooked up. And yet, God was not afraid to claim him as his own and describe himself as “the God of Isaac.”

And then there’s Jacob, a schemer who was willing to cheat the people closest to him—including his own twin brother. And yet, God was not afraid to claim him as his own and describe himself as “the God of Jacob.”

We will never figure out all the mysteries of theology—whether or not Adam and Eve had bellybutton or whether or not God can make a rock so big that he can’t move it—but we must figure out that God—though he is holy and eternal—God is on our side. God wants to know us personally, no matter how sleazy or stupid or scheming we might be. The Great I Am is also the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.

Thirdly, encountering a burning bush would mean that I have a place in God’s plan for the redemption of the world.

The truly remarkable part of this story is not that some bush burned without ever turning to ash; the truly remarkable part of this story is that God had observed the miseries of his people in Egypt. God had heard their cries and had made up his mind that he was going to deliver them into a land lush with milk and honey. Furthermore, God was not going to deliver them by himself; he was appointing Moses as his point man for the job.

That’s the way God always works, isn’t it? Good things happen whenever a man, a woman or a child decides to team up with God in order to bring some measure of deliverance to the world.

Make no mistake about it: Moses had a whole pickup truck full of excuses—reasons why he couldn’t become the deliverer God wanted him to be. But God knew otherwise because God knew something Moses had not yet comprehended: God knew that Moses would not be going it alone; God knew that God would be with him.

What has God called you to do? Is God calling you into full-time service? Or is God calling you to reach out to just one neighbor? There are scores of people out there who are crying out for some form of deliverance. You have that deliverance. It may not seem

like much and you may think you're pretty insignificant; Moses felt that way. Thankfully, none of us has to go it alone. Hear the word of the Lord: "I will be with you."

"I will be with you." That fact should make all the difference in the world—that fact, plus one little sign.

In verse 12 God says to Moses, "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." That suggests that a more accurate translation of verse 12 would be:

"This experience with the burning bush shall remain in your memory as a sign for you that it is I who sent you. And when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship me once again on this very mountain."

And so I ask you one more time: Is God trying to capture your attention? Have you encountered your burning bush?