

“And So We Go”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Exodus 3:1-15

If I saw a burning bush, I’d put it out. Wouldn’t you? Fire’s dangerous. It can hurt you. It can become uncontrollable and spread. So off to get the hose or something to scoop dirt on it or maybe a tarp to smother it before the lawn or the house or the forest starts blazing.

Of course, I’d be in a hurry and probably wouldn’t notice if the bush wasn’t being consumed. You’d just assume that was happening, because a non-burning bush on fire is impossible, and nobody bothers to check and see if the impossible is happening. And even if I did notice, my first instinct would be to not believe my own eyes. There must be a logical reason, like a hallucination.

Or maybe, just maybe, my curiosity would get the better of me, and I’d just stare and wonder in awe “how could this be possible?” But part of me would want to run away. An unburnable bush defies understanding and explanation. Better to get a safe distance away, because who knows what might happen next?

And if what happened next was a voice coming out of the bush claiming to be God, I might exclaim, “Jesus Christ!” and the voice would reply, “Close, but not quite,” and then I’d yell “God Almighty!” and then I’d hear, “Bingo! But watch how you use my name, young man.”

It’s hard to imagine, what that would be like or how we might respond, though it’s worth thinking about. God may have moved past the whole set-a-bush-on-fire-but-keep-it-from-burning phase. However, like Moses, God does come to us, often in unexpected ways, and God

does summon us to stand on holy ground with reverence and to listen and obey, and sometimes God tells us to do strange and risky things, just as He did with Moses.

Of course, Moses is a special case in so many ways. As an infant he escaped death thanks to his clever mother, and after a short cruise on the River Nile – where somehow he wasn't eaten by crocodiles – he was rescued by a princess and grew up in the opulence of Pharaoh's palace. Later on in life, outraged by an overseer whipping a slave, Moses killed him and ran away from Egypt. And now, here he is, settled down, minding his own business, herding sheep out in the middle of nowhere, when God shows up in a rather flashy way to get his attention, and it worked.

“Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’” Brave man, that Moses. He stopped and turned aside and looked and wondered why. Moses believed that the voice he heard was real and came from God, took off the sandals that protected his feet, one of the most vulnerable parts of our bodies, and he listened. But Moses didn't like what he heard.

“Go to Egypt? I'd really rather not.” That's the gist of how Moses responded. “You don't want me. What do you want me to say? God sent me to free you? Who's going to buy that? They'll reject me.” And God said, “Tell them that I Am Who I Am sent you.” And Moses answered, “I Am Who I Am. So you're Popeye?” OK, Moses didn't actually say that, but he might have been thinking it. You can't definitely rule that out.

The conversation continued well beyond the story we heard earlier. God gave Moses a staff as a sign of power, along with a few clues about the nasty things that would happen to convince Pharaoh to let God's people go, and when Moses tried to wriggle out of the job by

claiming that he wasn't a very good public speaker, God said, "Fine. Aaron can do that part." Poor Moses, God just wasn't going to let him go.

We might think that God went after Moses because there was something special about him, that Moses bore some rare intrinsic quality, a robustness of character perhaps that made him the only interesting candidate available. But no. God chose Moses because God wanted Moses, and that's all there was to it. Moses was special only because God chose him for a mission to deliver a message. "Pharaoh, let my people go." And with all due respect to Moses, and I'm a big fan, God did all the heavy lifting with the frogs and the locusts and whatnot.

Now it's highly unlikely that God will ask any of us to help Him set free an entire nation of slaves, though as we've seen with that strange bush, anything can happen when God gets involved. However, God does set things on fire, figuratively, in an attempt to catch the attention of people like us, who are so busy, distracted, overloaded with data.

Maybe our burning bush is a disturbing dream that nags at us or a sense that something's missing in life or that we've forgotten something important we need to remember. Maybe it's a stray thought that flits through our minds and won't go away or something a person says or does that sparks our curiosity and imagination. It could be almost anything, because whether we see it as a blessing or a curse, God's very resourceful and leaves all options on the table.

When that fire appears, we might be too preoccupied with our to-do list to notice, or perhaps we see it out of the corner of our eye and think, "Somebody else's problem, not mine." But if we do stop and stare, our first reaction may well be to put it out, to hose it down or smother it before it spreads and threatens to consume the things that are most valuable to us. We know how dangerous fire can be. Useful at times, yes, but definitely a force for us to control, not let run free.

And if we do stop to see and let the fire be, we might hear a voice, and I think deep down we know that. We know that if we push the pause button on our loud, go-go, faster-faster lives – even for 5 or 10 minutes of silence a day – then the voice will come through, calling us to remove our sandals or whatever it is that we use to protect our most vulnerable parts from God. We crave that voice, but we also fear it, because we know that God likes to mess with our minds, and we'd really rather he didn't.

But no matter how hard we push Him away, God just won't let go. We can ignore or reject Him. We can abandon God even as we pretend to love and obey Him. We can try to tame God, which tends to be our default setting, turn Him into a teddy bear for when we're scared, or a Santa Claus God, a sort of vending machine of grace. But God's not having any of that. He keeps coming, setting stuff on fire in hopes of inspiring us to greater things, to godly things that really matter and make a difference.

So we need to be ready to give up. Not only is that the right thing to do, it's easier, because we get tired, and God does not. And we need God more than we know. We bump into so many surprises in life, so many unexpected situations, not all of them helpful or pleasant or meaningful. We can't escape all that. Maybe we're sick of change, of things we don't understand and can't control. But when change comes from God, when God surprises us with the unexpected and mysterious, we need to jump on that, because when that stuff comes up, we're facing the grace that saves us.

We're facing grace when we notice and stop and stare at the flame. We're facing grace when we reverently remove what's protecting our most vulnerable spot from God. We're facing grace when we listen and accept the call and go forth, full of faith in God's power and goodness. And none of it, none of it has to do with pre-qualifications, with special innate abilities we

presumably possess. God can and will work with whatever material's at hand. In fact, he seems to like it that way.

Apart from Jesus, the most prominent people in the Bible are a rogue's gallery. Remember, Moses was a murderer. Peter's courage crumbled at the crucial moment. Before Paul was Paul, he was Saul, a fierce persecutor of Christians. And King David. Well, let's just say that when it came to the Ten Commandments, he had a losing record.

What opportunities we've left lying in the wilderness, because we felt afraid or unworthy. Part of our Lenten discipline is to reflect upon and regret the times when we walked by the fire or put it out, the times when we didn't listen or listened and did nothing. But that's only part of our Lenten discipline. We lament the no, and repent with a yes that seeks God. He's looking for us, so if we look, too, it won't be long before we bump into one another. We need to watch and see and wonder. We need to listen, give in, let go. Accept the call, and embrace the adventure. Yet be aware. We're being sent to Egypt. Lovely place, nice pyramids, but full of slaves who need to be freed, and Pharaoh will not let them go easily.

Now you don't need me to repeat the shameful litany of injustices in our world. Children who go hungry in a land of plenty. Refugees fleeing from rape, torture, and murder, while the wealthiest nations in the world say, "Go home," when they have no home to go to; a "Go home" that's often based on the color of a person's skin or the content of their creed or simply the cost of keeping them alive.

Some might think, "Whoa there, that's getting a little political in the pulpit," and I appreciate the concern, but a man named Moses was sent down to Egypt with a demand for Pharaoh, that he let go of thousands upon thousands of valuable slaves. If that's not political, I don't know what is. Jesus was crucified by the Roman Empire for sedition. Paul got his head

chopped off for the same reason. Their executions were political. Empires don't tend to kill people unless their ideas threaten the status quo. The biblical prophets are intensely political, speaking harsh truth to kingly power and wealthy elites. We can't isolate a section of reality from God, and declare him irrelevant to a given situation, because God owns it all.

But what on earth can we possibly do? These are big, complicated problems, but they're not too big or complicated for God. So when we ask, "what could we possibly do?" the answer is to do what God tells us to do, and that may involve a serious change in how we view the world and interact with it. We need to look and listen prayerfully, because the specifics can vary from person to person.

Some feel called to divest from their portfolios companies that they see as causing harm. Several years ago, I liquidated a position at a loss because I learned the company made landmines, and I didn't want to benefit from that. Your call from God may be different. Some feel called to work in food banks or soup kitchens, or turn to political advocacy with letters, calls, emails, social media posts, or other forms of non-violent protest. Again, the list is nearly endless, which means that there is something that each of us can do to bring God's justice into this world.

There are fires burning: fires of war, pestilence, and famine; fires of greed, bigotry, and apathy. These aren't God's fire, because they consume and ruin and maim and kill. God's fire gives life and healing and purpose, to us and to all who choose to stop and see and not smother it. God's fire reveals a voice that guides and leads and sends people to Egypt or to wherever the poor and oppressed cry out in misery. And so the faithful go, with God's promise that "I will be with you." The faithful say, "Here I am," as Moses did. The faithful go, declaring the presence and the power of "I Am Who I Am." Amen.