

Exodus 3:1-15

“On Fire”

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The Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading:

Introductory Piece: This fall, we are listening to the Bible stories from the book of Exodus about how God freed the Hebrew people from enslavement. Today the story tells us about how God called Moses to lead the people into freedom.

The Story:

The baby Moses grew up as a prince in Pharaoh’s house in Egypt, but as a man, he felt a connection to his Hebrew roots and to justice. So when he saw one of his Hebrew brothers beaten up, he was furious. He got into trouble and ran away to another country. Moses became a shepherd in Midian instead.

One day he led his flock near Mount Horeb. Moses was drawn to this mountain; it was high and impressive, and he felt close to God there. This day, a shrub on fire caught his attention. He took time to look at it long and hard and saw that it was burning, but wasn’t burning up! He also heard a voice, the voice of God, calling his name: “Moses, Moses! You’re standing on holy ground, so take off your sandals and listen.”

God said, “I’ve heard my people crying out in pain during their oppression in Egypt, and I feel for them. I’m going to lead them out of Egypt and slavery and bring them to a good, big land, full of wonderful things like milk and honey. Get on board, because I need you, Moses. I’m going to send YOU to Pharaoh to bring them out.”

Moses protested: “What?! Me?! I’m nobody.”

“You are somebody because I am with you, and you can be sure that you will bring them to this mountain as free people.”

“But what is your name when they ask me?”

“‘I am’. Say ‘I am has sent me, the God of your ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, and Jacob and Rachel.’”

Over the years, more than one church member has complained to me when they hear this story: “That’s never happened to me!” I’ve never seen a burning bush, or heard a divine voice, or participated in a big God project. “I guess that I’ve never been called by God!”

In light of this scripture from Exodus, two comments surface for me. The first is, **“Maybe you haven’t really paid attention.”**

You see, the main thing in this text isn't that a dry shrub was on fire in the Midian desert. What *is* important is that Moses "turned aside to see this thing." It got his attention, and he took time to look at the bush – I mean, really look at it. As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner points out: "How long must someone look at a burning bush to know whether or not it is being consumed? Certainly longer than most people look at anything."¹

And it was only when God saw that Moses was truly paying attention that God spoke, in a kind of voice that Moses could hear. It was in this receptive state that God called out to Moses. As Miriam told the children earlier, we can pay attention in holy reverence and anticipation, because God *is* calling to us out of *all* the beautiful and strange things around us.

For instance, if in our relationships, we are truly listening – to our spouse, our children, and our friends – they will tell us what is needed, how we should change, and what good we can do. In the same way, all of the wildfires raging in the West right now, which ARE burning up everything in their paths, ought to claim our attention! Granted, Climate Deniers and Questioners will interpret the phenomenon differently, but the rest of us will hear God's urgent call to *human* change in the midst of *climate* change!

Yes. People say: "I've never been called by God from a burning bush!" My second comment is, "**Maybe you haven't let God's passionate project catch you on fire!**"

Think about it: Moses had finally gotten to a more settled life in Midian than what he had had in Egypt. No longer a fugitive, he had a home, a family, a beautiful, outdoor job in a family business that he was good at – some would call this "The American Dream." He was probably even planning his retirement and pursuing his own stock portfolio. Why even consider returning to the land of bondage, risk capture, confront the powerful, and demand freedom for a bunch of Hebrews that he didn't know?!

I wish it wasn't this way, but people rarely hear the call of God Almighty when they are safe and comfortable in the status quo. It takes being unsettled. Ruth Bader Ginsberg told law students: "If you want to be a true professional, you will do something *outside yourself* ... something that makes life a little better for people less fortunate." And for a whole society to transform in the direction of God's will, it has to catch fire, that is, to feel anger *and* possibility – to stand on the edge of the Promised Land in the here and now and want it so desperately, not only for the few but for all!

So Moses would have to *identify* with the downtrodden, *feel* their misery, and suffer *with* them until the embers were stirred and there was fire in his bones. This is what God, the Great "I Am" had already done: "I have heard the cries of the people. I know their suffering." In order for *Moses* to move, both figuratively and physically, back to Egypt, he had to in some way become *one with the fire* of the Holy Spirit in that burning bush!

Likewise, the goal of our interim time is not only to keep paying the bills, maintain the building one more year until a new minister can be found, and add to the numbers *in here*; it is instead to look for ways, even during a pandemic, to get *out there*

¹Lawrence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 17.

with the good news. **The goal of our interim is to pay attention, hear God's call, heed it, and become a church *on fire!***