



“The Burning Bush”

Exodus 3:1-15

June 28, 2020

This morning’s story from Exodus is included in every children’s Bible I surveyed for our summer series. This is interesting given our usual aversion to the combination of kids and unsupervised brushfire. And yet, it is an obvious choice. Moses at the burning bush is the ultimate story of a theatrical divine calling. The obedient son-in-law minding the sheep blindsided by a stunning sight—a bush that is burning but not burned up. Out of the burning bush, Moses hears the voice of God, commanding him to serve as liberator for the Israelites held captive in Egypt. The encounter is a perfect fit for the visual world of children *and* notable for its high sense of drama and unmistakable clarity. There is, I think, an implicit assumption that this is how God speaks—in moments of overwhelming and undeniable presence. We love to tell these stories. “I was simply minding my own business when God almighty appeared to me in flames of fire and spoke with a clear and thunderous voice, calling *me* to a new way of life.”

Perhaps you’ve had one of those experiences. Perhaps like Moses, you were given divine instructions in a miraculous way. Perhaps like Mary you were visited at home by an angel of the Lord. Perhaps like the Apostle Paul you were stopped in your tracks by a blinding light and commanded to change course. God does speak to some of us in this way.

Of course, there is also the possibility that this story of the call of Moses is disheartening for you. There is the possibility that your burning bush has not yet appeared, that you are yearning for that experience of transcendent holiness, that you are still waiting for clear divine instructions. If this is where you find yourself, then I believe there is encouragement for you in this story. Because, despite the way this story is most often taught in children’s Sunday school or remembered in popular imagination, what is most remarkable about the call of Moses is not its transcendence but its earthiness. What is most striking is not the purity, promise, or even the potential of the one who is called, but the fact that God calls an ordinary broken human being to be a witness

to God’s act of liberation. What stands out in this story is not the unmistakable booming voice of God, but the extraordinary truth of a God who *listens*.

That is the genesis of this story that makes possible the Exodus of God’s people from oppression and tyranny. We miss it if we pick up the narrative in chapter three. This story of God’s persistent call begins when the Israelites cry out under the weight of their oppression. And God hears. It is the attentiveness of God to the cry of the suffering that sets this plot in motion. Imagine the power of this truth—God listens to the cries of the hurting and disenfranchised. God hears the groans of the suffering. The text continues...God remembered (the covenant), God looked upon (the people), God took notice of them. God hears, and God is moved to action. This week, a friend shared these words of Episcopal Priest Broderick Greer, “There are no voiceless people; only people who won’t listen.” The people of God enslaved in Egypt raise their voices, and God hears them. Because of that, freedom is possible. We worship a God who listens.

And then there is Moses. His story may have begun with a miraculous rescue into the palace of Pharaoh, but it is not long before this imposter is a fugitive from the law in the remote village of Midian. When we encounter Moses this morning, he is living below the radar and beyond the demands of justice and is content to remain that way. It may be a muted life for one raised by the king’s own daughter, but at least he is secure. Moses is not on some grand soul-searching expedition to find himself. He comes to Horeb, the mountain of God, entirely by accident. As far as Moses is concerned, the ground on which he stood was no more holy than the floor of your home or the pavement of the Kroger parking lot. Except for this. God is there. And so, to this ordinary person in this ordinary place doing his ordinary work, God speaks. The initiative is God’s. God has heard the cries of the people. “I have observed my people’s misery...and I have come down to deliver them.” Moses is to be sent with God’s warning message to the King of Egypt.

The call of God, birthed in a deep awareness of human suffering, is stronger than the understandable objections that Moses tries in vain to submit for consideration. In response to each of these excuses, God offers the same corrective promise: “Moses, you do not have to do the heavy lifting. You need only serve as my instrument, a channel for my liberating love.” Moses is commanded to be a witness to God’s activity in the world. Called to use the life that he has been given to serve the God who gave it. An ordinary broken human vessel called to carry divine truth. In this way, the story of Moses is our story as well.

Though they’ve become better known as award-winning movies, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy began as novels from the pen of J.R.R. Tolkien, whose Christian faith is woven throughout the story. At the beginning of the first book, Tolkien describes a dialogue between Frodo, a young hobbit, and Gandalf, the wise wizard. It is as clear a depiction of call as I’ve read. Frodo, who has just received the powerful and dangerous ring, complains to the ancient wizard, “I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.” Gandalf responds, “So do I, and so do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”ⁱ In the midst of his ordinary life, Moses receives a call from God. It is the same call that is given to each one of us in the midst of our mundane and ordinary lives—to listen to the cries of those who suffer, to live God’s truth that sets him free, to tell the story of God’s redeeming grace, to love as God loves.

As children, many of us were taught that God lives in heaven. We learned that God is powerful and holy, but also distant and remote from our human experience. Heaven, after all, seems like a galaxy far far away from our daily lives. Unfortunately, this picture of the distant God has served as a foundation for much of what passes for popular theology. God is “up there” and we are “down here.” Of course, there are many troubling implications of this perception of God. Most importantly, it is not the picture given to us in scripture. Stories like this morning’s passage from Exodus speak of a God who inhabits the human experience. Faith, then, is all about opening us to those ordinary places (like a random bush set afire among grazing sheep) where God is speaking.

Where have you experienced the presence of God? Where have you heard the voice of the divine? Where is God calling you? What task or mission has God set before

you? This moment, this afternoon, this week, in prayerful reflection and honest soul-searching, will you ask yourself those questions? What is God asking of you, of us, right now?

One of the great struggles of this moment in history is that we are not able to see each other face to face. I miss the intimacy of those encounters and the tenderness of those interactions. But I do see you. I do hear you. In recent weeks, I have had the privilege of hearing many of your stories. Some are suffused with pain and sadness, frustration, and weariness. Some of us are reflecting on moments we have missed the call of God, ignored the voices of others, been silent when we should have spoken. Some of us are asking how we might write a new chapter in an old story, or perhaps begin a whole new book. Many of us are wondering how to make the most of the time we’ve been given. This time when so much of has been broken open and laid bare. A global pandemic. An economic crisis. A reckoning with racism. The time we’ve been given is not for the faint of heart or the stubborn of will. God’s call in this moment will challenge us. But I also trust that God’s promise will equip us. I trust that it is never too late to do the right thing, to turn around and face a new direction. I trust that this venerable, historic, powerful institution can rise to the moment we’re in and contribute what we have to the work of the Gospel that is uniquely necessary now. It was not too late for Moses. It is not too late for us. On Tuesday evening, the elders who serve as this congregation’s leadership team met. Elder Nancy Frick began our meeting with a stirring prayer, which included these words, “Open our ears to hear the cries of your people, our hearts to be moved to stand with courage in the face of evil, and for our eyes to see all people with your compassion and love.” And then, we lived into her prayed words. We began anew the long and faithful work of reconciliation, forming a task force on race and welcome to guide our process. We heard of the ways our community mission and leadership have deepened and expanded in this time. We lamented loss and welcomed new possibilities. We prayed, and some of us wept. We were on holy ground. On Thursday morning, the holy ground was the patio at Café Patachou where I met with siblings in Christ who serve churches that may look different from ours but whose hearts for the Gospel are very much the same. We prayed about how we, an interracial group of pastors and friends, and the churches we serve might be part of God’s work of repairing the

breach in our city. The Spirit is on the move. I am filled with hope.

I find a foundation for my hope in this Bible story I first learned through fabric cutouts on a felt board in Sunday school. The bush is burning. Moses turns to see it. The voice speaks. Take off your shoes. This is holy ground. Holy ground. We find ourselves on it whenever we pause long enough to notice where we are. Sacred time. The time we're living, so long as we listen for the voice of God who listens to the cries of the oppressed.

Let me suggest that the key moment in this morning's story comes not when the bush begins to burn, as dramatic as it may be, but when Moses chooses to see it. When he says to himself, "I must turn aside." It is this decision to see, to be open to the presence of God that changes life for Moses and ultimately for his people. It is as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her epic poem "Aurora Leigh,"

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 blackberriesⁱⁱ

Where is God calling you to turn aside and see the holy in the common? In which ways is God speaking to you, calling you to pay attention? In friendship and conversation, in laughter and tears, in anger and in love, in questions and doubts? If we turn aside and see, if we pay attention, we can still hear the call of God.

May God give us the courage and the wisdom to make the most of the time we've been given. Amen.

i J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*, 1954.

ii Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," available at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html>