



Last week, Pharaoh’s daughter pulled Moses from the Nile and raised him as her son. Today’s lesson skips over a huge piece of Moses’ life. The “missing piece” is Moses coming to terms with his identity as a Hebrew rather than being an Egyptian prince. Our lessons even hide the fact that Moses had killed a cruel Egyptian slave-master and had tried to cover up the deed. He had ended up fleeing Egypt, though, to avoid being killed in retaliation by his adoptive grandfather, the Pharaoh.

Moses had settled in Midian, a foreign land, and had married Zipporah, a foreign woman (well, SHE wasn’t foreign in Midian). They had a son, Gershom, whose name meant “I have been an alien.” Names always mean something in the Bible, particularly in Hebrew scripture, so we suspect what Moses had been thinking about those 40 years he was in Midian. Yes, that’s right: Moses was 80 years old now. He was 40 or so when he fled Egypt and he had had 40 years to think about being alienated, being an immigrant, being a refugee.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, THAT Pharaoh had died and the plight of the Hebrew people had gotten even worse than it had been before. Exodus chapter 2 ends, “And God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (Well, God hadn’t STOPPED noticing the plight of his people in Egypt, but that’s another story for another sermon on another day.)

This is where our first lesson begins today, with us noticing Moses keeping watch over his father-in-law’s sheep. Our lesson casually mentions that Moses’ shepherding took him near

Mount Horeb, which it calls “the mountain of God.” Did Moses go there seeking God, or just happen by Mount Horeb? We can’t tell. So, I’m free to speculate.

Today I’ll guess that Moses hadn’t taken notice of God there or anywhere else; he was just minding his sheep (well, his father-in-law’s sheep), thinking about the unfairness of being an alien to everyone; being an immigrant and a refugee everywhere; being a Hebrew but given to the water; being rejected by Hebrew and Egyptian alike, without even sheep of his own.

Scripture doesn’t say so here, but Moses was a stutterer. An 80-year-old stutterer. And THIS is who God chose to render justice in Egypt.

I confess, as many times as I have heard this story, throughout my whole life, I’ve been so heartened by God coming to Moses I’ve overlooked HOW God came calling. Yes, there was a burning bush, but I was much more interested in what God said to Moses and what Moses did in response. I’ve rather overlooked the bush itself. I forgot that NOTHING is in the Bible by accident, that nothing is there by coincidence, or even just casually. So why was the BUSH there?

Something, today, beckons me from the bush and invites me to “turn aside” and look, invites me to see the bush itself, improbably, illogically, burning with fire but not burnt up. Something invites me today to look inside the bush and wonder, “Why a bush?”

I’ve always assumed I knew the answer: THIS is how God protected Moses. A burning bush is how Moses could have had a conversation with God and lived.

Turns out, though, I was flat wrong. God can have a conversation with us however God wants to. Can’t he? I know; you’re going to tell me about free will, how Moses got to choose whether he was going to converse with God.

And Moses DID choose to investigate the burning bush. See, the God who created Moses, who gave Moses a burning curiosity to begin with, on this day gave him a burning mystery to be curious about. And sure enough, Moses’ curiosity caused him to explore what was up with the bush.

What Moses discovered was that there was something IN the bush. More accurately, Moses discovered that there was some-ONE in the bush. Amid the fire. Not burned up.

Does this remind you of anyone later in the Bible? [Congregation accurately named “Daniel.”] YES! And what about three young men, friends of Daniel’s (Shadrack, Meshack, and

Abednego) who were thrown into a burning furnace but who were not burnt because an angel of the Lord was there in the furnace with them?

Moses didn't know anything about Daniel and these three young men, who lived a millennium or so after him. But this is our clue that Moses' burning bush could be a foretelling, a hint of great things to come. Miraculous things to come. GREAT things to come. Yes, a foretelling.

Moses saw an angel of the Lord in the burning bush. But the angel, God's messenger, didn't do any of the talking. This is most curious. Aren't angels supposed to deliver messages? (Hmmm. Maybe it wasn't time for THIS messenger from God to speak.) Instead, the Lord God himself, our lesson says, spoke to Moses, called Moses by name. And Moses responded the way that other great people in the Bible would much later respond. Moses said, “Here I am,” just like who? [Here the congregation accurately named the priest and prophet Samuel, the great prophet Isaiah, and even Mary the mother of Jesus, who later responded, “Here I am; let it be according to your will, Lord.” To which I replied, “Yes, yes, yes! More foretelling!”]

All of this from the burning bush on THIS day.

Did you know that Moses' burning bush was a thorn bush? The word translated here as “bush” carried the meaning “prickly.” I laughed out loud when I read this. Doesn't God always appear amid the thorns? Don't we usually blame God for the existence of thorns? And rightly so. We know God could eliminate life's prickly bits, but God doesn't. We know that God CREATED thorns in the first place. After we sinned in Eden, Genesis chapter 3 says. So, there is a direct correlation between thorns and our sin. In THIS light (no pun intended) aren't you reassured to know that God was in the midst of these thorns. Aren't you comforted to realize that, where God is, we are not burned up?

Given this information, a burning thorn bush with God in it makes a lot more sense than a burning bush randomly stuck out in the dessert. I contend that what we have here at the foot of God's holy mountain is a foretelling of the cross of Jesus—out of time and out of place—reassuring us that God has heard our cries, promising us that God will not forget us and will not overlook injustice, letting us know in a blaze of glory that our curiosity will compel us to explore that God is here with us, and telling us millennia in advance (beyond a shadow of a doubt) that the Lord's prime messenger will no longer be silent and will redeem us from our defiance in

Eden. This burning bush even has the Lord’s Spirit shining with the glory of the Lord, pointing the way to God’s holy mountain.

So where do we encounter a burning bush today? For me, the burning bush is right here at this altar. That’s where I bring my sense of alienation and ask God to use me for whatever purpose he created me. But sometimes I encounter a burning bush out there, when I least expect to see one. For example,

- Maybe (and you can let me know whether you agree with this) I saw a burning bush last week reflected in a priest who used to be a hate-filled KKK member, who now proclaims God’s love for all people.
- What about our food pantry, a place that gives away physical sustenance in the name of the Lord, when by all measure of logic that pantry shouldn’t even be possible? Is that a burning bush?
- What about a homeless man I read about who, being given \$500, bought food and clothes for other people? Is THAT a burning bush?
- After the eight o’clock service this morning I heard about Mattress Mack in Texas. He owns a bunch of mattress stores and he opened them up and invited whoever needed a place to sleep in to sleep on his mattresses. A burning bush in the middle of a flooded city.

Do we encounter burning bushes today? And if so, where?