

The Bush Said What?

Exodus 3:1-15

March 7, 2010

I.

We have some great readings today. The Gospel speaks of the parable of the fig tree, and God's mercy and forbearance in waiting for us to do his will. The New Testament selection tells us that God will provide a way out of temptation. And, of course, the Old Testament reading is the well-known story of Moses and the burning bush.

It's hard to skip over Moses, isn't it? It seems like he has been immortalized in our minds by Charlton Heston's epic performance in the 1956 classic movie, *The Ten Commandments*. And it's interesting to note that the movie won an Oscar for best special effects, which obviously included its portrayal of a flaming bush that could not be consumed.

So I'm going to talk about this reading from Exodus, a book that also describes some of the most historic and spectacular events in the Bible. In addition to God's voice from the bush, Exodus recounts the plagues upon Egypt, the institution of the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, and the majesty of Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments.

And I should say that the Old Testament, in general, describes our faith in the context of history, whereas the New Testament invites us into a deeper sense of spirituality. The Old Testament is a story of God's interaction with the Hebrew people whether they were ready or not. The New Testament is a story of God's offer of salvation through the Holy Spirit only when we are ready.

This means that sometimes the teachings of the Old Testament are circumstantial, rather than direct, evidence of Biblical guidance for us today. In today's reading God was speaking to Moses, not us. This is to be distinguished from many of Jesus' teachings, which not only were heard by the crowds and disciples but also were intended to be received by people in every age. We therefore must construct some parallels in order to bring the burning bush into the twenty-first century.

II.

But before we do that, it might be helpful to set the stage and review some background from two perspectives.

First, the reading tells us that God wanted Moses to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. So we might ask, what were the Israelites doing in Egypt in the first place? How did they become slaves? The Egyptians did not go out to conquer or capture them. Why were they there?

And second, who was Moses, really? When the reading began he was quietly minding his own business tending sheep in a place called Midian, which was in the desert well beyond Egypt. Why did he get involved with a local problem the Hebrews were having in another country?

The answer to the first question is that the Israelites voluntarily went to Egypt. It began with Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. But God was with Joseph, and he eventually prospered and rose to a position of great governmental power second only to Pharaoh.

Then, because of a famine, Joseph and his brothers and their father reconciled, and they all moved to Egypt with their families and households to be under Joseph's protection. Over the next two centuries they multiplied prolifically, and became so numerous they were perceived as a threat to Egyptian security. So the Pharaoh subjugated them and forced them into lives of hard labor.

This is where Moses enters the picture. He was born in Egypt to Hebrew parents at a time when first born Hebrew males were to be slain on Pharaoh's orders. You probably remember the story of a baby Moses being placed in a basket in the Nile River by his mother to escape death, and then being found by Pharaoh's daughter who raised him as an Egyptian in the royal household.

But when Moses was about forty, he killed an Egyptian official who was overseeing the forced labor of the Hebrews, and Moses had to leave Egypt behind as a fugitive. For the next forty years he lived in the wilderness, became a shepherd, married a local girl, and had a family. It was a quiet existence and he probably assumed he would spend the rest of his life in this way.

III.

But God had other plans. This is where today's reading picks up. Moses now was eighty years old and had led his sheep beyond the wilderness to Mt. Horeb, described in the reading as the "mountain of God."

And the reading at this point is prophetic. Many scholars believe that Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai are the same place, and the two names just have different origins. And although Moses was unaware at the time, we know how the story unfolded. This was the mountain to which he would lead the Hebrew people, and upon which he would receive the Ten Commandments from God.

But back to the reading. Moses saw a curious bush that was burning but did not burn up, and went over to look at it. And God's voice boomed forth. It told Moses that he had been chosen to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and lead them into the Promised Land, which is present-day Israel, including parts of Jordan and Syria.

Moses, however, was reluctant. He basically said, "Who, me?" In modern day jargon he probably might have said, "Say what?" And God told Moses not to worry, for God would be with him, and to tell the Israelites that God had sent him. But Moses still was hesitant. He had not seen any Israelites in forty years, and they would have no idea of who he was.

And so Moses, perhaps grasping for a way out, asked the memorable question, "Well, what if they ask your name, what do I say?" And God gave the eternal and unforgettable answer, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM sent you." And this, by the way, is the only place in Scripture where God's name is revealed.

And the rest literally is history. Moses demanded the Israelites' freedom from Pharaoh, who endured plagues and disasters before he relented. And Moses eventually did God's work, all of which is recorded in the rest of Exodus, and the Books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

IV.

Today's reading, however, is a brief slice of that great panorama of Hebrew Scripture. And from it I would like to raise two matters as food for thought. Both relate to Moses' initial reluctance to accept God's call and God's words to Moses. I will take them in reverse order.

Moses asked God's name, and God said my name is I AM. This response has spawned a lot of theological and linguistic research and speculation. And experts have analyzed the Hebrew language to explain how titles like Yahweh, Jehovah, and Adonai are drawn from God's answer.

And one aspect of that work might enable us to discern why God's name is as it is. Scholars point out that in ancient times a name was more than just a cool sounding word, and it went beyond mere ancestral history. A name also frequently described the essence or character of the person bearing that name. Moses, for example, has a variant form, Mosiah, which we understand today as Messiah, or savior.

Well, what kind of a name would describe God's character? Obviously, it would have to be a name that did not imply limitations. God could not be named Tom, for example, because that name would exclude him from being regarded as Stan, or John, or Tyrone.

And while God certainly is the Creator, that could not be his actual name because it would exclude other aspects of God, such as Deliverer, Sanctifier, Redeemer, and Savior. We know that God is omnipotent and omnipresent, and his name should reflect that all-embracing character.

So, if God always has been, always is, and always will be everywhere all the time in every possible way, what kind of a name would describe that? If God is self-existing, eternal, boundless, and absolutely sovereign, what would his name tag say here at St. Thomas? I AM seems like a pretty good answer when we consider it in that way, doesn't it?

And looking at it from the other side of the coin, we also see there is nowhere God is not. There is no part of our lives in which he is not present. God exists outside of Creation, inside of Creation, and throughout Creation. God is outside of time and space and within our time and space. We know that God simply is. That's why he told Moses his name is I AM.

The other idea coming from today's reading is that God can call us at any time, even late in life. And God frequently calls us to do things we don't think we can do on our own. I have sensed that myself. I did not hear a bush tell me to go preach to Episcopalians in Diamondhead. But I did feel God's presence as I prepared for ministry, and I did some things on faith. Some doors opened and others closed, and I know I could not be doing what I am doing just on my own.

All of us probably have felt God's presence in our lives. We most likely have not experienced anything as dramatic as a burning bush, and we know that God usually does not send engraved invitations. We probably will not get an e-mail message from heaven.com.

But God does call us to do his work in the world, and that call can come at any time. Moses was eighty years old. His story shows that it's never too late to push the sun back up in the sky one more time, especially if that's what God wants us to do. And the only instruction manual we need is the Bible.

Secular society, however, seems to value systems and formulas. We see books and seminars on "The Seven Habits of Effective People," and "The Five Principles of Successful Leadership." But God doesn't work that way. Our ability to serve God does not come from training but from faith. And it does not come from our own capabilities but through God's grace.

V.

And so, let's ask ourselves, how do we know when we are relying on ourselves, and when are we listening for God? And certainly we are to be commended for doing the things we are capable of doing. But when we also do them because of God's presence, then they can become holy.

That distinction is illustrated in today's reading. Moses saw the burning bush and turned aside to go to it. He could have kept on walking. God did not call him to the bush, and did not speak until Moses approached.

And Moses removed his shoes as he did so because he was on holy ground. Now, that ground was not intrinsically holy. Sheep probably had walked over it earlier, and probably would walk over it again. But it was holy at the time because God suddenly was present.

God's burning bushes always will be there in some way or another. And God also will be in them. I pray that we, like Moses, will turn aside to go to the bush, and that we will listen for the voice of the great I AM. When we do that we will know, as Moses knew, that when God calls us, he will enable us. And if he enables us, he will uphold us to do his holy work. *Amen.*