

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 3, 2017

“The Bush is Still Burning.”

Exodus 3:1-15

There is an old story of a very long evening. The search committee for a new pastor had been going over resume after resume in hopes of finding the perfect minister. None so far. Tired of the whole process, they were about ready to call it quits when they came upon this letter of introduction from a candidate.

To the Pulpit Nominating Committee: It is my understanding that you are in the process of searching for a new pastor, and I would like to apply for the position. I wish that I could say that I am a terrific preacher, but I can't—actually, I stutter when I speak. I wish I could say that I have an impressive educational background, but I can't—no college or seminary, just the school of “Hard Knocks.” I wish I could say I bring a wealth of experience to the job, but I can't—I have never been as pastor before (unless you count the flock of sheep I have been shepherding). I wish I could say I have wonderful pastoral skills, but I can't—sometimes I lose my temper and I have been known to get violent when upset. Once I've killed somebody, but, gracious folks that you are, I am certain you will not hold that against me. I know churches these days want young ministers to attract young members, and I wish I could say that I am young, but I can't—actually, I am almost 80...but I still feel young. With all that which might go against me, why am I applying for your position? Simple. One afternoon recently, the voice of God spoke to me and said I had been chosen to lead. I admit, I was a bit reluctant at first, but... So here I am. I look forward to hearing from you and to leading you into an exciting new future. Yours sincerely,

The Pulpit Committee members looked at one another. The chairperson asked, “Well, what do you think?” The rest of the committee was aghast. A stuttering, uneducated, un-experienced, arrogant, old, obviously neurotic, ex-murderer as their pastor? Somebody must be crazy! The chairperson eyed them all around before she added, “It is signed, ‘Moses.’”

You knew that, didn't you? The Moses saga is one of the most familiar in all of scripture. From our earliest Sunday School days we remember the story of his birth into a nation of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, how the mean old Pharaoh had issued a population-control decree saying that Hebrew baby boys should be put to death, the floating basket in the bulrushes to hide our infant hero. Finally, the Pharaoh's daughter to the rescue with Moses being brought into the palace as an adopted member of the royal family.

We also remember that Moses was not allowed to forget his heritage. A clever bit of deception by big sister Miriam had allowed him to be wet-nursed by his own mother with Pharaoh's money paying for the privilege.

Meanwhile, the Hebrew nation was struggling in its bondage. There was an incident of Moses' murdering a vicious slave master, and burying his body in the sand. A day or so later our hero sees two Hebrews fighting and tries to mediate their dispute. They know about the dead Egyptian, so he knows it is time to make himself scarce. He eventually lands in Midian where he settles down as a son-in-law to a priest named Jethro and begins his career as shepherd.

Now we come to this unusual story that is our focus of this morning's scripture. The Burning Bush, a symbol to show how God can and does turn the ordinary into the extraordinary. The bush was probably an ordinary bramble bush, the most usual kind of vegetation in those parts. The fire would not have been that remarkable because spontaneous combustion is not unheard of in a dry, hot desert country. But a fire that burns and does not consume? Hmm. Moses comes over to investigate. Suddenly, he hears his name: “Moses, Moses!” the voice is coming from the bush. Moses leans in, his head cocked to one side in wonder, “Here I am.” The voice again, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” “Uh-huh.” Moses, looking bewildered as you might be, fumbled around with the tongs that held his sandals in place, removed them, then looked at the bush again. The voice, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Right. The bush speaks...the voice of God!!! Right. Moses responds by covering his face, because he knew to look at God was to die.

God says, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” This is all well and good. One wonders why it has taken God so long to notice, considering it has only been 400 years that the people have been enslaved, but that is another story. The present problem is God's choice of a leader—this eighty-year-old shepherd who has a murder charge against him in Egypt.

As might be expected, Moses mumbles, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Good question. I think we can all agree that God's choices are not easily explained, are they?

We need to note something here—God never defends the decision, never explains why the choice. In answer to Moses' "who am I" objection, the response is simply, "I will be with you." Moses was right—who was he? Nobody. No matter. "I will be with you." And that is what ultimately counts. I love the sign that God promises: "...and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who send you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." In other words, the only sign you will see is in the rear-view mirror...hindsight. One day, when you are back here on this mountain and worshiping with your Hebrew brothers and sisters, you will think back to this moment and realize that God was with you all along, just as promised.

"That's all well and good, God," Moses continued, "But what happens when I get to Egypt and tell the people. 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you.' They are gonna look at me like I am nuts! And who would blame them? What am I gonna tell them if they ask which God has sent me, what shall I say?"

Here is where the rubber meets the road. God's response has gotten more theological ink over the years than anyone would care to calculate. Which God? God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM...thus you shall say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." What could that mean?

So we translate this passage, "I am who I am," or even "I will be who I will be." This is the God who is, the God who really exists. Even more, this is the God who is present, especially at those moments of deepest need. This is the God with no limits, the God who will be whatever is necessary, no matter what the situation. In another time and place, Isaiah expressed the name as Immanuel, "God with us." That was even more real to you and me in the coming of Jesus.

Of course, by the time of Christ, this name had taken on a mystique of its own. In fact the religious establishment was ready to stone Jesus as a blasphemer for using the special name in reference to himself. (John 8:56-59)

For what it's worth, the establishment was at least partly right—no, Jesus was not a blasphemer; yes, he did use the name in a personal way over and over again. And over and over and over, we will find it offers a wonderful word of comfort.

There is encouragement for us in the same Lord who had met Moses on the mountain, I am. For the bush is still burning. We come close and hear, "I am Alpha and Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." In modern English, "I am A to Z and everything in between." Scary stuff. But then the Lord speaks and with a gentle touch of his hand he says, "Do not be afraid; I AM the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see I AM alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of death and hell. When we struggle, we hear, "Hang in there; no matter what we face, even death itself, I AM is still in charge,"

Think of some of the things Jesus said, and then relate them to your own life.

For you who are hungry for spiritual nourishment that has been neglected in the too-fast pace of modern life, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the bread of life." (John 6:35)

To you who have strayed from the straight and narrow path and now want to find your way back, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the light of the world." (John 8:12)

O you who feel that you cannot get back to the path because you have strayed so far, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the good shepherd." (John 10:11)

To you who have been drained of any joy in life by depression, despair, and grief, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the vine." (John 15:5)

To you teenagers who want solid guidance in your life choices—school, career, mate—the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the way." (John 14:6)

To you who are wrestling with the ethical puzzles of a confused and confusing world not sure what is right or wrong anymore, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the truth."

To you who are coming near the end of this earthly journey and wonder what lies ahead, the bush is still burning. Jesus says, "I AM the resurrection and the life." (John 11:35)

Carefully scan the mountainsides of your life. Be alert. Listen quietly. Perhaps a verse of scripture, a word of prayer, a moment of fellowship, a line from a lesson, a sentence from a sermon, the touch of a hand, the warmth of a smile. That voice speaking to you. The bush is still burning.