

The Burning Bush: Exodus 3:1-14

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Rev. Heather Carlson, St. John's Presbyterian Medicine Hat

Good to be back with you and picking up our summer series on the first five books of the Bible.

The pentateuch, which literally means the 5 scrolls. Sometimes they are referred to as the Books of Moses - having for some time been thought to have been authored by Moses. These five are the same books that Jewish people call "The Torah" the law.

In June we began with Genesis, which literally means the beginning. If you want a review or missed some, you can catch up on those videos on our website or youtube channel. God birthed creation with presence and promise. The text exposes humanity's repeated failure met by God's covenant faithfulness. God appears determined to bless, redeem, and restore as we are invited into a hope grounded in God's goodness.

So today we're picking up the story here:

The story of the burning bush. Which means a great deal to our corner of the Christian family. It's the symbol of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, was included on the crest of the UCC. Depicted in art through the centuries. Someone said that a burning bush catches your attention. And a burning bush that doesn't consume the wood, really gets your attention.

So let's set the scene. Exodus opens centuries after the time of Joseph that closed out the book of Genesis. The Hebrew people, descendants of Abraham Isaac and Jacob who were saved from famine and found refuge in Egypt have experienced the blessing of Eden - they have been fruitful and multiplied. So much so that the new Pharaoh sees these immigrants as a threat - the newcomers are oppressed into slavery, and when that doesn't break them, the Pharaoh orders all male children drowned at birth.

Just before our reading, the text tells us, "The Israelites cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act."

Maybe this isn't what we expected. If you know the story you might not think much of it. But try to let go of the familiarity and think about how odd this might seem. A people group is enslaved under one of the most powerful rulers of the ancient world, and this God of all creation acts by going to speak to a man out with his father in law's sheep in the wilderness. God does not drop down from the sky and make it happen.

This says something very important about this God we are meeting in the pages of scripture. This God is determined to work in, with and through humans and humanity. There are a lot of stories of ancient gods throwing lightening bolts, slaying cosmic dragons, and carrying mountains around to exert their will. The God of the Bible rarely acts that way. Interested in

something more than efficiency. Interested in the shaping and cultivation of the character of a people.

In 10 days I'm to Vancouver for a course at St. Andrew's Hall as part of my continuing education study leave. The class of about 20 met earlier this week by Zoom and began our discussion of how disciples of Jesus are formed today. The textbook for the course highlights a concept that the North American church has glossed over, or set aside through much of the late 20th and early 21st century. Some theology emphasizing salvation as the ticket to heaven places little attention on the character development of discipleship. Other theology emphasizing the social gospel developed a focus on change in the world glossing over the personal transformation.

God is interested in our character development because we are being readied for responsibilities when the fullness of the Kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven. Some of you may have encountered this if you are familiar with CS Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. Term "training for reigning." The refining and strengthening of our likeness to Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and the church as a training centre for our lives to be shaped so we become a blessing to the world. The mission of God is undertaken by those who themselves are being shaped, refined, and strengthened - bearers of the fruit of the Gospel.

So on that day Moses encounters God in the burning bush, God is at work to free the Hebrew slaves AND in the development of Moses' own character.

And Moses hits a hurdle right away. He is quite sure God's idea to send him is a bad one, and so he objects. Who am I? When God tells him it doesn't matter who you are, matters who I am. Then in verse 13 he launches objection #2. I'm probably not your guy - I don't even know your name!

Moses is resisting the call to be holy. Doesn't mean morally uptight. It means unique, sacred, set apart. At the beginning of the scene Moses is asked to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground. Biblical Scholar, Tim Mackie, tells the story of being a kid, coming into the house and taking off his shoes. Often carry them to his room, but on the way, he'd pass through the kitchen where something was often going on. Eager to join in, he'd set his shoes on the kitchen counter.

His mom would understandably get upset. The kitchen counter is unique, sacred space, set aside for a purpose, for making food. As Moses objects to his fit for the task ahead, he is objecting to God setting him aside - giving him a unique role. Moses wanted to finish up his day with the sheep, head home to his wife Zepporah. Maybe have some stew and play music, get up and head out with the sheep in the morning.

God is interrupting Moses' plans with this call. We can relate, can't we? Likely not a bush on fire, but it might be the alarm clock that woke us up beckoning us out of bed to set aside our morning for worship and fellowship when we could have scheduled golf, groceries or brunch. Heading the call to be set aside, holy.

Or maybe its a grudge or irritation we've got that God is urging us to set aside - to get on with the work of forgiveness. Or income that we thought was going to be a trip that God has plans for elsewhere. Or someone in our lives that God's leading us to love...

We too can hide behind a nobody status - Who am I? Surely you've got the wrong number Lord. Pick someone with better credentials, or higher profile. Someone with greater knowledge or capacity. Yet God's responses to Moses illuminate God's invitation to us as well. It doesn't matter who you are, it matters who I am. Are you willing?

Are we willing. Willing to be holy - set aside to be shaped inside to be about God's work of blessing in the world?

Our scene closes with God revealing his name to Moses. Yahweh - a verb. I am who I am. I am who I will be. Doesn't seem too remarkable until you think of humans.

Remember meeting someone. You think they are wonderful! Kind, amazing, generous. And then you are roommates, or work together, and you discover they are kind, amazing and generous... sometimes. We can depend on humans sometimes to be who they are. We can depend on God always to be who God is. God always lives his character.

And Yahweh's name means he is present now and ongoing. Not I will be (in 7 minutes), but what I am now I will be in the future. The one who made covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the one still in covenant with his image bearers now in captivity. God will preserve them through their suffering, just as the reformed church understood that God would preserve his church through persecution and suffering without being destroyed. The bush remains intact - God sustains.

It is no accident that the burning bush became the symbol of the Presbyterian Church. For generations, Christians have looked at that bush and remembered that the Church does not exist by its own strength or cleverness. Like the bush, we are often surrounded by hardship, pressure, uncertainty, and change. Yet the God who revealed himself to Moses is still the God who is present, who is faithful to his covenant, and who sustains his people without allowing them to be consumed. Beneath the symbol of the burning bush are the words *Nec Tamen Consumeatur*—"Yet it was not consumed." That is not merely a statement about the past; it is a confession of faith for the present. The God who called Moses still calls ordinary people to be set apart for holy purposes. The God who was with Moses is with us. And the God who says, "I am who I am," remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. So may we have the courage to stop when God gets our attention, to trust the One whose character never changes, and to say yes when he calls. For the God who sends us is also the God who sustains us—and by his grace, we too will burn brightly without being consumed. Amen.