

Symbols are everywhere.

We're inundated with them. This morning, the alarm went off on my Samsung Phone, I looked at the time on my Timex clock, turned on my IKEA lamp, shaved with a Braun razor, showered with Gillette Shampoo and body wash, put on a Guy Laroche suit and a Calvin Klein tie, ate a bowl of Quaker oats, and got in my Nissan – where I drove past two Subways, a Pizza Hut, a Husky, Shell and a Petro-Canada, a Tim Hortons and a Starbucks before walking into a building in the shape of a giant Celtic Cross.

Sure, in our secular society, we call them brands instead of symbols – but the function is the same. Symbols – or brands – don't carry any power or weight on their own, but instead their power rests on being able to point beyond themselves to a deeper reality.

A flag is not just a flag; it is a symbol of a nation's values and integrity – a symbol of identity.

And advertisers use them all the time. We're told that buying a Volvo means you love your family more than if you didn't. Buy a Rolex to show how successful your business is. Symbols that communicate something beyond themselves.

And the church is no different. For two thousand years, Christians have understood the importance of symbols. Ancient Christians communicated with symbols. To greet each other one would draw a curved line on the sand – and if the other was a believer too, he or she would draw a mirroring line, connecting the shape of a fish – or ICHTHUS in the Greek (Jesus Christ, God's son, Saviour). Likewise with the cross. The earliest reformers chose to remove the Roman Catholic crucifixes from their churches because the symbol of the empty cross served a purpose beyond the theological. The cross was empty because it was a symbol to remind me that this isn't Jesus' cross. This Cross belongs to me. The empty cross calls me to both count the cost of discipleship and at once to marvel at the fact that it is only by the Grace of God that I'm not hanging up there right now.

Even the table before us this morning is filled with symbolic meaning – a reminder that in worship, the true presence of God in Christ is experienced.

But for Presbyterians, one symbol stands out.

The burning bush.

But stop and think about that symbol for a moment, and ask yourself: if you were starting a church, would that be your symbol? It's not a New Testament symbol, it doesn't evoke Jesus or the Holy Spirit or even the open Bible. If we were talking about Afro-Spirituality in the American South or Liberation Theology in Latin America, then maybe that story would make sense, but for a group of largely Western European, Middle to upper class Protestants, Moses is not our guy. When you ask Presbyterians to identify a character in Scripture that they identify with, three names rise to the top of the list: Jonah, Peter, and David. Not Moses.

And yet, type Presbyterian into Google, and the page is filled with burning bushes. It seems like there's a disconnect.

But that's because the burning bush isn't a symbol of identity like a Rolex. It's a symbol of purpose, like ____.

The burning bush reminds us that the church is called to mission. Tim Dearborn writes, God's church falters from exhaustion because Christians erroneously think that God has given them a mission to perform in the world. Rather, the God of mission has given his church to the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world. The church's involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of the triune God. The burning bush calls out to us, reminding us that we are a people defined by mission over and above everything else. Our liturgy, our traditions, our preferences and our plans, all optional – all subordinate to mission, because it is the mission of the church that defines us as a church.

This passage shows us how to kindle the fire of mission in our life together as a Faith Family. It reminds us that fire needs three things to exist: Fuel, a spark, and Oxygen.

The Fuel is remembering that Mission is central to the identity of God.

Fundamentally, this is a passage about identity. In context, the phrase I am shows us six times in the first fourteen verses. There is no distinction between the God who is, and the God of Mission. Our primary understanding of God in the Western World is a kind of distant figure who is there to help us through hard times, but that's not the God presented throughout scripture. The God that leaps off the pages of the Bible is the God who says to Moses, Go tell Pharaoh that I AM says, let my people go.

This is God in the present tense. God is not I was with mission as something we did in the past, nor is God, I will be as though Mission is something we'll do in the future. Right now, this moment is the moment for Mission. I had a mentor who used to tell me that if you feel far away from God, who do you think moved? Some of you this morning are tired, and you feel like you're at the end of your rope, and you're here looking for God. The burning bush invites us to remember that God's been here the whole time, but he's been doing what God does, doing what's central to his identity: he's been on mission, and the quickest way to find the God that you are searching for is to find out where he is, what he's up to and ask yourself: how can I join in.

The Spark is remembering that Mission is a relational activity

As much as this is a passage about identity though, it is also littered with connections.

God connects to History: I am the god of your ancestors

So much of our identity comes from our history. What you eat, the kind of movies you like, what you find funny – all of it we learn from our parents and our grand parents and the people who have helped

make us who we are. Here God reminds Moses of that fact. This is not something new that God is doing, it's something that God has been doing all along and God is inviting Moses to see himself as part of the unfolding story of God.

Moses connects to God: Take off your shoes, the place you stand is holy ground

History gives way to intimacy. Mission can't happen if we keep something between God and ourselves. For Moses it was shoes, but for some of us it's the scars of our past, or the exhaustion of the present, or the fear of the future – but in any case, the result is the same: Artificial separation from God. Barriers that we put up and say God, you can have all of me but not this part. You can do your thing, but not with this. You can have it all, just not that. Unless we recognize that the mission in which we stand is holy ground and let down every barrier, then we miss out on the mission of God.

Pharaoh connects to Moses: Go, tell Pharaoh that I AM has sent you

Mission doesn't work if it only for ourselves. If our mission was just to bless each other, that's easy. We wouldn't need anything supernatural to make that happen. The challenge is in connecting with people outside of these walls.

When I was in Saskatchewan, and I was a volunteer fire fighter, most of the structure fires we got called to, we didn't really try and fight the fire. Instead we'd empty hundreds of gallons of water on the building next to the one on fire, because the reality of fire is that it only takes a spark to light another fire. Mission is a relational activity because that spark is designed to keep bouncing from me to you to the next person and back again. Mission is a relational activity because it is supposed to be contagious. It's not the responsibility of the Mission Team or of the Minister's or of the Elders. It's the responsibility of all of us

The Oxygen is remembering that Mission is what happens outside the encounter.

How great must it have felt to be Moses in that moment though? To feel the warmth of the presence of God on his naked feet. How easy would it have been for Moses to build a tent in the warmth of that bush and move in? How easy was it for Peter to tell Jesus at the transfiguration that they would build tents for Moses, Elijah and him. These actions all express the same desire: a desire to own the experience. To hold it for ourselves and never let go. Because to share it is to risk losing it. But a fire that's never let breathe, only ever smoulders. The Oxygen of taking the fire out of this place is what lets it come to life.

The motto of the Presbyterian Church in Canada; *Nec Tamen Consumebatur* means "Yet it was not consumed." Draw near to him, and he will draw near to you. That's the promise of scripture, that's the promise of mission, and that's the promise of the table to which we are now coming.