

THE BURNING BUSH: GOD WHO SPEAKS

Exodus 3: 1-15; Matthew 16: 21-26

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We're told in the book of Exodus that God called to Moses out of the burning bush: "Moses! Moses!" This Hebrew scripture, prescribed by the lectionary for today, tells the story of Moses getting direct orders from God, out of a bush that is burning, but not consumed. Alas, I have never heard a booming voice from the heavens, or out of a burning bush for that matter. I've never heard God calling "Harold! Harold!" It might be nice –to get direct orders from above, so we'd know exactly what we're supposed to do. No more difficult decisions to make, no more mistakes – just following orders.

But, maybe that wouldn't be so nice. We would be intimidated, wouldn't we, by any such loud divine voice addressing us? If this happened too often, what would happen to our autonomy, our dignity as free human beings? I've never had a burning bush experience. Yes, I believe I've heard God speak, but certainly nothing that spectacular. But we'll come back to this question of how God speaks to us.

First, let's look more closely at this wonderful old text, and the world behind the text. Who wrote it and when? The text was certainly not written by Moses himself. Our Hebrew scholars and historians of the ancient world tell us it might have been written in its original form as early as the ninth century before Christ – so, almost 3,000 years ago.

A close linguistic analysis of the Hebrew text indicates that the book of Exodus is a compilation of the work of more than one author; it was written and re-written, based originally on oral traditions. But the event of which it speaks was probably another three centuries or so before the first writing.

The call of Moses from the burning bush was, of course, the prelude to the exodus of the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. Debates rage among historians about the dating of that momentous event. No one knows absolutely for sure, but most experts – by that I mean archaeologists, historians of ancient Egypt, and close scholars of the Hebrew texts – now agree among themselves that it was probably in the 13th century, perhaps some time in the 1200's – Before Christ.

There are historical and archaeological indications that a slave rebellion probably happened in Egypt in that century. There's no reason to doubt that, far back in time, a major event of liberation actually occurred, and that it was led by a great prophetic figure called Moses. The memory of this dramatic event was profoundly formative for the whole history of the Hebrew people.

The exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt was revolutionary for the history of religion, since that event was foundational for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of whom look back to Moses as a great founding prophet of their traditions. Further, these three religions have powerfully shaped great civilizations and cultures, namely Judeo-Christian civilization, and Islamic civilization.

World history as a whole, and our world today, would be profoundly different if the call of Moses had never occurred. So this story that we're considering today is an event of earth shaking significance.

Now, this remarkable story of the call of Moses, and of the subsequent Exodus event, was passed down by oral tradition for centuries before any written documents existed. It was told over and over by word of mouth from one generation to another. Eloquent versions of this story of Moses' call, and then the escape of slaves from Egypt, would be told around family tables and camp fires. Not hard to imagine that, over the centuries, it was dramatically embellished. Eventually it was written down by scribes, passed along over the centuries by Jewish rabbis, celebrated for millennia, and still today, in the Jewish passover festival.

But the story was also widely spread by Christian missionaries, told by preachers and Sunday School teachers, all over the world. Didn't most of us, in our generation, hear in Sunday School about the burning bush and the Exodus parting of the waters, and the escape of the slaves? Some of have seen it dramatized by that fabulous old movie, "The Ten Commandments" by Cecil B. DeMille.

But we can be sure that Moses didn't look much like Charlton Heston. Think of Moses as, by our standards, a rather small, brown man with jet black hair and dark eyes. Think of him as a prophet of God, but also as a cunning, courageous political leader.

We remember hearing about the cruel Pharaoh, the divine, absolute monarch of Egypt, supposedly a divine son of the gods. The Pharaoh became threatened by a large minority group living within his kingdom, namely, the Israelites, an immigrant people, who probably looked different, and had their own religious beliefs, traditions and culture. The Pharaoh became suspicious of these alien people and decided to enslave them, and also to limit their growth by having all the Hebrew baby boys thrown into the Nile. Think of it! Such horrendous cruelty! (Rather like separating the immigrant children from their parents at the Mexican border!) Fear and suspicion of people who are different is common in history and it's still around today. It ends up in horrendous cruelty.

You'll remember from last week, that Rev. Barbara told us the background story of how the heroic, mid-wives, Shiprah and Puah, refuse to murder the infant boys. Of how a mother, unwilling to have her baby boy killed, puts him into a basket and hides him

among the bull rushes, where he's discovered by a Hebrew princess, and raised by her as a prince of Egypt. These were courageous acts of civil disobedience. These women loved God more than they feared the Pharaoh.

That baby was Moses, who grew up as a prince, but, aware of his Hebrew origins, murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, and then in fear, fled into the mountains. It was there that he was addressed by God from the burning bush.

So what can we say about this burning bush experience of Moses? We cannot reconstruct what exactly happened with Moses that day. Wouldn't we love to have an objective newspaper report of the event? Was there really a tree on fire, but not consumed? Was it a supernatural miracle? Maybe.

Was it perhaps a magnificent dawn or sunset shining through a tree that inspired Moses? Was it a natural event of great beauty that spoke to Moses of God's goodness? Who knows? We know that in many religions, fire, even a lighted candle, is considered a symbol of divine presence. And did Moses hear a real voice speaking from the bush?

Was it an AHA moment? A EUREKA moment, like Euclid in his bathtub? – when Moses reached a blinding new insight about the nature of God. A new realization, so powerful, that he knew he had been addressed by a holy one from beyond himself. A divine revelation.

The text says that “the angel of the Lord” appeared to Moses from the bush. In the scriptures, an angel is always a messenger from God, a mode through which God speaks. God speaks indirectly. Because, remember, no one can see God, and live. We are told that “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” He is commanded to remove the sandals from his feet because he is standing on holy ground.

The text underlies the sense of God as an awesome mystery. God may indeed love us as tenderly as a mother loves her children. But God is no one's pal, no one's buddy. Besides this sense of profound mystery, there is something truly revolutionary here. This God of the Hebrews cares about slaves!

We are told that God said to Moses: “I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters, and I know their suffering.” This was a revolutionary moment in the history of the world. Here is a God who wants freedom and justice for people. Very different from the many gods of ancient Egypt, and utterly different from the deified monarch of Egypt. This God knows the people's suffering intimately, and suffers with them.

Suffering-with. That's the meaning of compassion. Suffering-with.

The story reflects the early beginnings of what may be called 'ethical monotheism'.

Mono-theism: The belief in one God, the One eternal Source, the One Unoriginated Origin, of one universe, (one uni-verse) and one humanity. This was a breakthrough over against the belief in many transcendent powers or gods, some of them attached to particular peoples or tribes.

Most ancient peoples, including the Egyptians, believed in many gods. But the oneness of God became absolutely basic for Hebrew faith, and then also for Christian and Muslim faith also.

But this is also 'ETHICAL monotheism'. Not only is this God one, and utterly incomparable, but this holy One is also good. This God is not a morally indifferent Supreme Being, but a holy One, with a moral purpose.

We're so familiar with this idea that God is good, that we take it for granted. But to believe this was a great breakthrough for humanity.

It hasn't always been obvious to human beings, and it's still not obvious, that the great Unoriginated Origin is good, and intends human beings to be good.

To believe that this eternal One has a moral purpose, and is leading and guiding humans forward to live in communities of justice, love and peace, this was a great Eureka moment for Moses.

In other words, it was a 'revelation' – an insight that came to him, he believed, from beyond himself. Not his own idea, but a message received.

And this message that Moses receives has practical content. It's not just an abstract philosophical concept.

No, suddenly Moses knows that this holy One has a purpose for his life: that he is to lead his people, the enslaved Hebrew people, out of slavery to freedom. God says to Moses: "I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

So the revelation of this one holy God includes a mission, something that has to be done: If God is this compassionate One who cares about slaves, then the slaves must be liberated from their misery.

And notice, this holy One does not do it directly, with a supernatural sweep of the hand. God needs Moses, and also needs the cooperation of the people to do their part, to accomplish this task of liberation. It requires human planning, human willingness, and courage.

But then Moses dares to ask God: What is your name? In other words, Who are you, who speaks to me and commands me? The answer: "I am who I am." "I AM" has sent me to you.

Well, I asked our friend Judy, who knows her Hebrew much better than I do: What is this Hebrew word that constitutes God's name? Well, she said, if it can be pronounced at all, it's Yahweh. She said God's name is a form of the verb "to be." It can be translated: "I am who I am." But it's not limited to the present tense. It could be translated: "I have been who I have been." Or "I will be who I will be." It is a dynamic name. God's name is a verb, not a noun. It speaks of a living, dynamic Someone who always was, is, and always will be.

(Incidentally, Yahweh has been Anglicized by translators as Yehovah, or Jehovah. As in our old hymn, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah." Jehovah is an English rendition of Yahweh " – The One Who Is, who has been, and who will be.")

The name underscores the mystery of God: The One forever incomprehensible to us. But what Moses does understand is that this God is good and compassionate, and cares about people. Well, what about the world in front of the text? Our world.

Today, at least in our country, we don't have actual slaves. But we do have poor people, and oppressed people. In our contemporary terms, we'd have to say that the God of Exodus wants social justice, wants an end to poverty and oppression of every kind. Oppressed people all over the world, including American blacks and many others, have found that the burning bush and Exodus story speaks powerfully to them. It's liberating and inspiring for them.

But most of us are not especially oppressed. Does God speak to us? Does God speak to you? You may not have had a burning bush experience, like that of Moses. I guess none of us is a great prophet of God. But it is basic to our faith that God does speak; God communicates; God tries to get through to us.

It's basic to our faith that God speaks to us here and now through "the Word." When we gather for worship, we hope to hear the Word of God – through Scripture, and within scripture, especially, through Jesus Christ himself.

There is a sense in which Jesus is our great Burning Bush.

In John's gospel, Jesus is called "the Word made flesh." The whole story of Jesus is God's Word to us, God speaking, communicating, in and through this human being, Jesus.

I mean the whole of Jesus, not just his words, or his teaching, but the whole "package," as it were: his life and deeds, his teaching, his death and his resurrection. The whole Christ event speaks to us of God's will for our lives, and also speaks words of hope, comfort and blessing.

God may also speak to us here and now through the experience of worship: through the music and the hymns and the prayers. God may speak to us through art. Certainly, in my experience, through music, but also stained glass, or painting, poetry, sculpture or carving.

Recall that the burning bush is beautifully carved on the pulpit of East Plains Church? The burning bush on the pulpit suggests that God speaks to us... from the pulpit! For a preacher, that's a scary thought. Preachers, supposedly, speak the Word of God. When we listen to a preacher, we listen for God's Word.

But God's Word is not confined to preachers. Thank goodness! God is not limited to us preachers. God may speak through any one of us – words that illuminate, words of comfort, words of challenge from one person to another.

Or God may speak to us personally and individually, through moments of prayer and meditation. We pray for guidance and strength, but then we have to listen. If we listen, intentionally, we may have our own Eureka moments. God may speak through our conscience. God may speak to us in quiet moments, in a “still, small voice.”

Perhaps you have a burning bush experience in your life: a decisive moment, a turning point, a major decision that determined the rest of your life. Was the Spirit of God at work for you in such a moment? Something like that happened with Moses. He was given a calling, a challenge. He made a great decision. And great things followed.

Who knows what great things may follow, if we too listen for God speaking to us, and if we receive comfort and strength, and if we take up the challenge to follow.

Or may some of us have many small burning bush experiences?

We may not be Moses. But we are, who we are. You are who you are. God knows our names, and we all have important things to do for God, and for the world and the people around us.

So.... Thanks be to God for God's own Word that comes to us, especially, through Jesus Christ, our Burning Bush. Amen.