

EXODUS 3:1-15

¹⁻² Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the west end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. The angel of GOD appeared to him in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up.

³ Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?"

⁴ GOD saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He said, "Yes? I'm right here!"

⁵ God said, "Don't come any closer. Remove your sandals from your feet. You're standing on holy ground."

⁶ Then he said, "I am the God of your father: The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."

Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God.

⁷⁻⁸ GOD said, "I've taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey, the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite.

⁹⁻¹⁰ "The Israelite cry for help has come to me, and I've seen for myself how cruelly they're being treated by the Egyptians. It's time for you to go back: I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt."

¹¹ Moses answered God, "But why me? What makes you think that I could ever go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

¹² "I'll be with you," God said. "And this will be the proof that I am the one who sent you: When you have brought my people out of Egypt, you will worship God right here at this very mountain."

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What do I tell them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you.'"

¹⁵ God continued with Moses: "This is what you're to say to the Israelites: 'GOD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you.' This has always been my name, and this is how I always will be known.

FIRE

Fire. The word itself excites us, scares us, thrills us! Whenever we hear it, it gets our attention. And it was fire that got Moses' attention. It was an unusual fire; it wasn't destroying the bush that hosted it, and so it was not exhausted for lack of fuel. It seemed to reflect the nature of God itself; it was powerful and dangerous, but not bent on destruction.

And so it intrigued Moses. It drew him closer, but not without trepidation; if he didn't know it already, the burning bush so informed him: "Take off your sandals. You are standing on holy ground." The burning bush was, as theologian Rudolph Otto would characterize as both "*mysterium fascinans*" (a fascinating mystery), and "*mysterium tremendum*" (a mystery that leaves you trembling).

More symbolically this fire reflected a fire that started in Moses that day. He'd been raised well by his mother – spared the sword of the Egyptian overlords as he was sent down the Nile River in a basket. He grew up in a palace, hardly anything to complain about. But it was a palace built on the backs of slaves, people who he could have distanced himself from but for whom he nonetheless felt a connection. And when, one day, he saw one of those slaves being beaten by an Egyptian slave master, he lashed out and killed him.

And then he left it all behind. He tried to make things right by his own means, and only made a mess of things. So he left his home, his people, his family, met a girl, settled down, and had a family. He had a steady job working for his father-in-law. Everything was pretty stable there in Moses' comfort zone. But then came the fire.

I always like to note that scripture says that Moses had led father's sheep "to the end of the wilderness" (NRSV: *beyond* the wilderness). Now that's REALLY wilderness. Scripture doesn't say *why* Moses decided to go so far, but it says that he was led to the Mountain of God. I think we can relate with Moses. Life can go well; we can have steady job, happy family, live in a safe neighborhood, and be generally content. We can even attend church regularly and think of ourselves as spiritual individuals. But given enough time to reflect upon the life we're living we find something lacking. We feel a need for something more – and I'm not talking about more money or cars or living space; I'm talking about truth. I'm talking about *meaning*. Moses did not live in a bubble, and he could not forget where he came from and what he had seen. He had seen injustice and cruelty. He had seen genocide. But when danger reared its ugly head he had turned and fled.

We don't live in bubbles either. Not in this information age. We get news thrown at us from around the globe. We are aware of injustice and cruelty and evil not just across the ocean but in our very midst – the scourge of drug abuse, of adultery and infidelity, of greed and snobbery, racism and prejudice. And despite having steady jobs and steady income, stable family and friends, safe home and neighborhood, the world comes crashing in. And something within us draws us to the mountain of God, to the mountain we know as God.

And we may wander there accidentally, not aware of where our steps are leading us. Perhaps one day we find ourselves in a church...just because we're curious. The next thing you know we're singing. Before long a flame arises within us. A holy fire, a burning bush. And we start to hear God's voice.

Now before some of you start thinking that it's too late for such a fire to take hold of your heart, let me remind you that Moses was 80 years old when he ventured to the Mountain of God and came upon that burning bush. God does not discriminate based on age. The fire, that mysterious yet terrifying fire that drew Moses in, spoke the truth that God is so prone to speak:

"I have seen the suffering of my people, and I will rescue them."

And a reluctant Moses probably realized that he was somehow going to be part of God's plan. That's another one of those truths that God is so prone to speak; that *we* are the one's God uses to bring about change in this world.

Which is really a wonderful thing. He doesn't permit us to sit back and just watch things happen; he wants us to be the agents of change in the world. He wants us, as Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said, *to be the change we want to see in the world*. Moses clearly did not like slavery or human

oppression; that's what led him to murder a man. BUT GOD DOES NOT LET OUR PAST TRANSGRESSIONS DEBILITATE US! It would take forty years for Moses to come to the Mountain of God, but come he did, and listen he did, and obey he did. And fulfilled he was!

My prayer for you today is that you would come to the fire, the holy fire that burns away the memories that so confine us and debilitate us, the fire that speaks truth to us and reveals the nature of the true God – the God of compassion, the God of justice, the God of righteousness. The God who leads us in those paths of compassion and justice and righteousness that we might leave our mark in our community, in our neighborhood, that we don't simply close the door and leave the trouble outside, that we don't just watch the news and shake our head in disgust, but that WE ARE ON FIRE.

One last thing; Moses was not perfected by that fire. He went on to make a lot of mistakes in his life – he lost his patience on a few occasions, he made some poor administrative decisions. But Moses never lost the fire. He knew where he was going, even though he got lost on a few occasions. You too may have gotten lost. You may have been on that journey to the Promised Land and somehow you took a side road and now you're not sure where you are. Don't fret. Wherever you are, God is with you. And just as that pillar of fire led Moses through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, so God will lead you.