

Turning Aside for Fire
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Exodus 3:1-15

Fire, like water, is both life-sustaining and life-threatening,
both necessary for life and with the potential to end life.

Both are dangerous when they are out of control—
which doesn't take long when we're talking about fire.

I have read that assuming stable fuel, heat, and oxygen levels,
a typical house fire will double in size every minute.

We have friends who lost their house to a fire,
and it seems like their life is divided into two periods of time:
before the fire and after the fire.

On the other hand, we all have memories of gathering around a fire
and roasting marshmallows or telling stories.

We have the good and the bad.

But I doubt that many of us have experienced a burning bush in the desert—
a bush that burns but is not consumed.

Moses was, of course, an Israelite, part of an enslaved people
in the land of Egypt.

You know the story.

Exodus 2:23 says "The Israelites groaned in their slavery, and cried out.
Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God."

The Pharaoh made the rule that all infant boys were to be killed.

Moses' mother tried to hide him

but he was discovered and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter.

These dual identities provided a difficult dichotomy for Moses . . .

to be part of both the oppressors and the oppressed,
to stand, emotionally, at both ends of the whip.

One day the cognitive dissonance grew too great,
and when Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave,
he killed the Egyptian in a fit of rage and buried him in the sand.

When he learned that others knew what he had done,
he fled for his life.

Moses found his way to Midian, where, in time, he married the priest's daughter
and tended his father-in-law's sheep.

This is where we pick up the story in our text for today.

Moses was out tending the sheep, minding his own business,
when he saw an angel in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush.

We don't know anything about the angel--the angel isn't mentioned again--
but we're told that the bush was burning but not being consumed.

Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight,
and see why the bush is not burned up."

Personally, I would have turned aside to see why an angel was in the fire,
but Moses seemed more interested in the burning bush.

So Moses turned aside from his work, from the focus of his day,
and then God spoke.

I find it interesting that God did not speak until after Moses turned aside.
It makes me wonder how many times I might have received
a divine message
if I had just slowed down and "turned aside."

But notice, too, that "when God set a bush ablaze,
he didn't choose a bush right in front of Moses.
God didn't choose the bush that Moses was about to stumble upon.
It was within sight, but at enough distance that Moses would have had to
go out of his way explore it.

And he did.

And it was this curiosity that brought Moses to a wondrously burning bush,
which turned out to be so much more."¹

As one preacher puts it:

"Curiosity may kill the cat and displease the parole officer
but it also ushers in new epochs in history.

From one cover of your Bible to the other,
and throughout the history of the Church,

¹ Morley, Rick. "God's curiosity, and ours." {HYPERLINK "http://www.rickmorley.com"}

God upsets the settled and recommended paths
of prophets, patriarchs, disciples and saints.
Before they were ever useful to God . . . by being resolute and unshakable,
they proved their worth because they were quite the opposite –
capable of being distracted from their day jobs
and unstuck from all their several necessary trajectories.

God could depend on them to shift their gaze from their desks
and direct it out the window.”²

Their direction was changed because they, like Moses,
looked aside to see the fire.

We are a congregation of seekers.

We are learners.

We are curious about the world around us
and the world within us.

So I want to ask you this morning:

Was your path ever changed because you got curious about something?

Did you ever change directions because of a message
from an unexpected place or person?

Now I’m going to ask you to do something that we can’t do most weeks
because this doesn’t work well when we’re livestreaming.

I want you to divide into groups of three or four people—
people with whom you did not ride here today.

And I want you to share your answers to one or both of those questions.

1) Was your path ever changed because you got curious about something?

2) Did you ever change directions because of a message
from an unexpected place or person?

I’ll give you about six minutes to discuss.

Now call out some of the things you said or heard, in just one word or phrase.

What were you curious about that changed your path?

² Warren, Robert J. “Losing Sight of Jethro’s Sheep.” {HYPERLINK "<http://bobsprospect.blogspot.com>"} }

In what unexpected place or person did you discover a message?

Thank you. Thank you for participating and for sharing.

I pray that all of our turning aside, all of our curiosity,
all of our changing directions because of an unexpected message
are not behind us, but ever before us as well.

Poet Jan Richardson has a blessing for us that goes with this story.

It is called Blessing at the Burning Bush.

You will have to decide
if you want this—
want the blessing
that comes to you
on an ordinary day
when you are minding
your own path,
bent on the task before you
that you have done
a hundred times,
a thousand.

You will have to choose
for yourself
whether you will attend
to the signs,
whether you will open your eyes
to the searing light, the heat,
whether you will open
your ears, your heart
to the voice
that knows your name,
that tells you this place
where you stand—
this ground so familiar

and therefore unregarded—
is, in fact,
holy.

You will have to discern
whether you have
defenses enough
to rebuff the call,
excuses sufficient
to withstand the pull
of what blazes before you;
whether you will
hide your face,
will turn away
back toward—
what, exactly?

No path from here
could ever be
ordinary again,
could ever become
unstrange to you
whose seeing
has been scorched
beyond all salving.

You will know your path
not by how it shines
before you
but by how it burns
within you,
leaving you whole
as you go from here
blazing with
your inarticulate,

your inescapable
yes.

I want to repeat that last stanza.

You will know your path
not by how it shines
before you
but by how it burns
within you,
leaving you whole
as you go from here
blazing with
your inarticulate,
your inescapable
yes.

You see, when God's angel appeared to Moses in the burning bush,
when God's message came from the fire,
God was blazing.

God was "burning with righteous anger and with justice."

We're told in the passage that God says:

I have **seen** the misery of my people,
I have **heard** their cries,
I **know** their suffering,
and I have **come down** to deliver them.

"At the heart of the Bible story of the burning bush is the beating heart of God—
a heart that burns with compassion and justice for the oppressed
of every time and place."³

Rev. Keith Anderson used this story almost five years ago
in a response to the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson Missouri.

³ Anderson, Keith. "God Hears the Cries of Ferguson: A Burning Bush and a World on Fire." {HYPERLINK
"http://www.huffpost.com"}
}

He wrote:

“Today, God hears the cries of those in Ferguson and all who are oppressed.

As in the story of the burning bush, God sees, hears, and knows their pain.

God also acts in the face of injustice and demands the end of oppression.

God instructs Moses to go tell Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go!’

[We say the same.]

Let my people go from racism, oppression, profiling,
and militarized law enforcement.

Let my people go from the exploding gap between the rich and the poor,
from unfair and unequal working conditions.

Let my people go from unfair and unequal incarceration.

Let my people go.”⁴

The fire still burns.

The voices still call.

May we be burned but not consumed. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.