

September 3, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
*But I Haven't Seen a Burning Bush!*

Exodus 3:1-15

## THE INTRODUCTION

The word "Exodus" derives from the Latin word meaning "exit" or "departure." TriCon experienced its own exodus from its worship space during renovation last summer. The exodus narrative for which the biblical book is named adds to this theme of departure the meaning of being liberated from bondage.

The origin of the Hebrew people as connected to Joseph and the twelve tribes of the book of Genesis in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is a *theological* connection that later editors made as the books reached their final form during the 6<sup>th</sup> century of Israel's history – the time of another crisis, when the people of God were in exile from the promised land. Walter Brueggemann, a prominent scholar of Hebrew scripture, points out that the God of Abraham, Sarah, Miriam, and Moses "continues to offer subversive possibilities for our future."

Last Sunday, Bob preached from Exodus 1, which describes the birth and risky rescue of Moses from the context of Egyptian slavery. Moses was raised in the house of Pharaoh by his daughter, but cared for by his Hebrew mother, unbeknownst to him. As a young man, he witnessed the beating of a Hebrew slave and killed the perpetrator, becoming a fugitive. In chapter three we find the adult Moses working as a shepherd in the land of Midian, in the shadow of Mount Horeb – the mountain of God.

## THE READING

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup>There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' <sup>4</sup>When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' <sup>5</sup>Then he said, 'Come

no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' <sup>6</sup>He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup>and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' <sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' <sup>12</sup>He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

<sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' <sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.\* He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." ' <sup>15</sup>God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord,\* the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you." This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

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## SERMON:

Let me guess: You've never experienced a talking, burning bush? When I imagine the burning bush – I can't help it – DeMille's depiction in *The Ten Commandments* comes to mind, and then gets overlaid with *The Wizard of Oz* giving Dorothy and her friends a first audience. No wonder I haven't seen such a thing! Does this mean, then, that I haven't experienced a call from God?

The burning bush in Exodus 3 fascinates us and probably takes up more of our imagination than it ought. As Walter Brueggemann points out, the bush is just mentioned in verses two and three, serving to capture Moses' attention. It is "only the launching pad for what must come next,"<sup>1</sup> *not* the centerpiece of the story. The true focus of the story is the following thirty-five verses of conversation between Moses and God. The call of Moses is the most important thing; the burning bush is simply a shorthand way for us to point to it. Indeed, we moderns tend to stumble over and linger upon the supernatural in most bible stories, but Moses didn't become the liberator of the

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 711-2.

Hebrew slaves simply because he saw a bush burning on a mountain in the desert that could have started with the extreme heat or sparks from a volcano or a lightning strike!

**You and I put a lot of weight on the phenomenon of the burning bush, but Moses' vocation came to a head that day *after other things had happened*.** In other words, like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter*, there is a prequel to the call of Moses.

**Before he saw the burning bush, Moses had learned more about himself and what set him on fire - what mattered to him.** Back in Egypt, for example, he had murdered a man who mistreated a slave; back then his blood had boiled and anger consumed Moses. But running away and trying to be at peace led him to Midian, where he forged a new life and, with the guidance of his father-in-law, Jethro, developed *new* ways of being.

During this period, Moses probably learned that he had the gift of leadership and a certain charisma. In Pharaoh's court he had acquired cross-cultural skills, as we would call them in our time, and in Midian, he became a strong, tenacious, a patient shepherd. He cared about the suffering of his fellow human beings too. Even living at a distance from Egypt, without Facebook or U.S. Nightly News, he still longed for the liberation of the Hebrews.

I read about Carolyn Horton this week, a young woman who works in a botany lab. Being a research scientist fits with her "[fascination] with living things," and she enjoys observing them under a microscope. This is one of her gifts. Carolyn has also recently learned that she has an artistic side. She photographs these living things, capturing the "patterns that keep recurring in lots of different areas of nature: like the way a tree branches, mathematically, [having] similar patterns to the way a river or lightning branches." She describes her pictures as her "collection of sacred places."<sup>2</sup> Her call from God is somehow going to use her gifts for research and photography.

**You and I are more likely to see a burning bush and hear a divine voice of call as we too learn more about ourselves, individually and together as a church.**

**The second part of the prequel to a call is in the fact that before Moses saw the burning bush, God had *already* heard the cries of his people in bondage and had developed a plan to free them!** The Lord was aware of their slavery and the cruelty of their situation. God could simply have burned with wrath, letting this frustration consume him and the perpetrators, but instead initiated a constructive project of liberation! We can count on God's love, working for good. This is what we mean by the phrase "the mission of God."

Since the word "mission" derives from the verb "to send," the word indicates that God is always looking for those that will *allow themselves* to be sent – to answer the call and carry out his projects of love and emancipation. Having no physicality, God must recruit *human* leaders and agents. To put it bluntly, God needs our hands and feet. As the poem attributed to St. Teresa of Avila puts it: "Christ has no body but yours; no hands, no feet on earth but yours," speaking of the Body of Christ, the church.

I heard this last week that the folks in Rockport, MA decided to rally around and help their name's sake, Rockport, TX after Hurricane Harvey's destruction. Apparently, they had seen and heard a burning bush.

Yesterday, I watched the architect Michael Murphy's TED talk. He's our Filopov Forum speaker this year. When Murphy listened to Dr. Paul Farmer describe hospital buildings in Rwanda that were

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<sup>2</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 189-90.

making people sicker, it was as if he had seen and heard a burning bush, and realized that this was a mission that could use him and his design skills.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe you *have* actually seen a talking, burning bush, or *will*.

**Besides learning about ourselves, it takes listening to God.**

While shepherding in Midian, Moses always had an eye on Mt. Horeb – the mountain of God – and on this particular day, enthralled by its mystery and power, he went off grid and climbed its rocky side. God was seeking a leader and Moses was seeking God. When he glimpsed the flaming bush, he decided to “turn aside and see this thing.” He could have kept on his way, but he stopped and came closer, like a scientist and theologian combined. Paraphrasing the Jewish mystic Lawrence Kushner: “How long do you suppose it took, staring at it, to figure out that the bush was not burning up?”<sup>4</sup> Long enough to hear the voice of God?

In the 70s theologian Nelle Morton observed how women in consciousness raising groups supported one another. When one didn’t have the words to tell her story, to express her pain, or even to cry, they gave her their full attention in stillness, waited, and listened. Eventually it all came out, freeing the woman from her bondage. Morton says that the women “heard her into speech.” The woman said to them: “You heard me; you heard me all the way.”<sup>5</sup>

**You and I and TriCon church are more likely to see a burning bush and hear God’s call to mission when *we* listen to God *all the way*.**

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<sup>3</sup>The link can be found at [massdesigngroup.org](http://massdesigngroup.org).

<sup>4</sup>Lawrence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 17.

<sup>5</sup>Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Beacon Press, Reprint Edition, 1985).