

## A BURNING BUSH

Lent 3, 2022

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight,  
and see why this bush is not burned up.” Exodus  
3:3

Moses was a fugitive. Though he had grown up in the luxury of the Egyptian palace, he had killed a man. He wasn't even an Egyptian. He was a man without a real home, a man without family or country. Once he was a prince. Now he was a shepherd – if even that. Like Abraham before him, was a wanderer – looking for a place. At Mount Horeb – also called Mount Sinai – he found it. He was told to take off his shoes (for he was on holy ground), and he did what everyone did when they entered the house: he took off his shoes, for he was home.

He also found a family and a people. And God called him, despite his stutter and his reluctance to

lead. He tried to stall – just like we do. “Wait! Give me a sign! Tell me who you are. What was that name again? Who should I say is calling?” It doesn’t help to stall when God is doing the talking. “Quiet, Moses. I Am Who I Am.” Maybe it is worth saying that Moses did not go up the mountain seeking God. Maybe that explains his confusion or reluctance. But God went to the mountain looking for him. And the God who causes life, who is who God is, helped get a people through the wilderness from exile and slavery to freedom in a new land.

But during that journey of 40 years a generation of people struggled with hunger, and thirst, and – maybe most of all – with faith. Few, if any, made it to the Promised Land, to freedom. Faith shifted to doubt and anger, and many gave up on Moses and his God in the process. They fell away – some to die in the desert, some to worship a golden idol, others

to return to Egypt where the troubles were easier to manage.

It wasn't the only time God's people have wondered if God has the power to save, or whether God will save. Jesus was approached by his disciples who wondered how God could allow good people to suffer and die at the hands of evil men, or simply fall victim to an awful construction accident. If God were all powerful, why was it that these things happened? What had they done to deserve such a terrible fate?

In Luke's Gospel the writer links two very different kinds of calamity. The first, Pilate's murdering of Jews visiting Jerusalem is obviously human sin. The other, a construction accident, is, for lack of a better term, just bad luck. Neither is seen as "punishment" for any perceived grievance against God – as some thought. They are part of the human

condition, part of the struggle we live with. The question is how we live with life in the “wilderness”. When we are struck by troubles – wars, disease, doubt - do we give up – on ourselves and God? Or do we “repent” – come to grips with life when it might overwhelm us.

In Luke’s Gospel he gives us a hint of what Jesus has in mind. In the parable of the fig tree it helps if we think of God, not as the one who threatens the life of the tree, but as the gardener who wants to do a little more digging. God looks at the tree – at us – and says, “No, let’s give it another year or so. Let’s see if we can’t get through this together.”

The other truth about God is what Moses discovered: the fire on Mt Horeb is God and cannot be extinguished. God will not abandon Moses. God will not leave the people alone in the wilderness.

God will not leave us when we don't seem to be producing the fruit we might. God will, instead, dig around, water, nurture us in hopes that we will find our way back to faith. The word for that is "repent" – to turn and return to faithfulness in God.

In these days of conflict in Eastern Europe, as COVID continues to circulate throughout the world, as parents and children try to regain a rhythm at home and school, I thought of these wise words written nearly 450 years ago:

“ THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too

lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.” Thomas Paine: The American Crisis.

December, 1776

Perhaps this is what God instilled in humanity from the beginning. Out of the wilderness where we have struggled with challenges we find what is worth holding on to – and what is enduring and permanent. We find that the fire of God cannot be extinguished, and faith itself can stand against hunger and thirst and threat and worry. There is always the temptation to give it up, to think that there are easier ways to find meaning and purpose, yet when tragedy or misfortunes arise, or when enemies cannot be driven off, faith still provides sustenance and strength to meet the days ahead. And so we pray with the people of Ukraine that many will find great strength in these days; that we, safely housed in the United States will find faith the leads to action – to

sowing seeds of peace, to provide support and solace to those in trouble, and that the whole world will learn from the present strife that we are all one people, all God's people. Whatever we decide, God will continue to burn and to dig and to sustain until the true Kingdom can rule on earth as it does in heaven. Amen.