

And It Was Not Consumed

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Lent, March 20, 2022

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8

Sermon text: 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.

Exodus 3:2

1. During the years I attended seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York City I would often have occasion to glance across the street at the Jewish Theological Seminary on the north corner of 121st and Broadway. A stone building with an impressive entrance. Above the door a carving in the brownstone of a stylized bush in flames with the words in Hebrew: “and it was not consumed.”

Of course this evokes for Jews and not only them the holocaust and the determined survival of the Jewish people—once again a remnant refusing to be extinguished from this world. It evokes for me now the will of the Ukrainian people for self-determination.

This in no way denies the terrible loss of life, innocent life, and the anguished questions and prayers that are addressed to God during and afterward. A struggle to understand human evil and God’s apparent silence.

Yet it was not consumed. The words from the beginning of chapter three of Exodus, the story of the Israelites escape from bondage in Egypt under the pharaohs. The call to Moses to go down and confront Pharaoh and demand he let God’s people go.

As if God were to speak to one of us sitting here and say, go to Putin and demand he stop the war—so equally implausible and daunting did this call of God appear to Moses.

2. When I picture the burning bush and imagine God’s suddenly speaking to Moses as he drew near: Moses Moses!—I wonder at Moses so calmly replying, Here I am. As if this might be a common encounter. But it was not; God told Moses to come no closer, to take off his sandals, for he was standing on holy ground.

As if you were to walk into church one morning and hear not me talking to you about God, but God very God speaking to you—and the baptismal font glowing as if on fire as you draw close, and God says, take off your shoes! don't you realize this is holy ground?

Question: Why are sandals and shoes somehow inappropriate for holy ground? Perhaps because they bring into the sacred space of the encounter with God dirt and distraction from the mundane world. More likely, we are not going to be allowed an extra layer of numbing protection against the reality of God's presence—it is immediate, visceral, not to be muted or muffled.

We are to bring our full selves into the encounter. Bare feet and bare souls.

3. Because I grew up on science fiction stories featuring a variety of encounters with extra terrestrial beings, and portals into other dimensions, I see the story of Moses and the burning bush as a portal to another dimension, and this encounter as an encounter with an extraterrestrial. But the portal opens to heaven and the extraterrestrial is none other than the creator of the universe.

And strange to admit, for some reason we think of the science fiction stories as more likely and plausible than the Bible's stories of encounters with God, whereas many accounts by many people across all epochs and cultures describe similar encounters with the sacred. It is not mere fiction. It can happen to you. Perhaps it has.

And the encounters bear more than family resemblance. The accounts in the Bible point to a very deep pattern: God is both the creator of the universe—the God of nature—and the God of the people—demanding justice, offering mercy, a God of love. God tells Moses I have heard the cries of my people, I know about their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them from slavery in Egypt and to bring them to a new place and a new, free life. Which is none other than a sign, a foretaste of resurrected life. The God of creation is the God of resurrection, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. One we see in the mystery of incarnation. The other we know only after the mystery of the crucifixion.

The burning of the bush is real; the flames too hot to touch (another reason God tells Moses to keep his distance). The pain and suffering of this life end

in death, and of course our mortal life comes to an end with a sigh or cry—a final flicker of the flame and then as if a wisp of smoke curling away—so it can seem the soul departs the body. But the spirit of life, the holy Spirit, burns for eternity, always giving new life. We are reborn as new creation in a spiritual body, a burning bush that will not be consumed.

4. God tells Moses his name as Being, I Am Who I am, as well as his name as one in relation: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of our ancestors, yes, and so rightly to be understood and described to the other Israelites to whom Moses will relate this encounter. A God who is not a stranger, the God who made a covenant with Abraham, who appeared to Jacob, whom Jacob wrestled! Who made promises God intends to keep.

But also this new name, this new and deeper understanding of who God is—the God who is Being. Being beyond the material being of the universe, who indeed sustains the flame of energy and matter as it moves from one form to another beginning with the beginning of creation, continuing through the birth and death of stars, formation of planets and life, the endless dance of natural cycles of light and dark, life and death—who not only put this show on the road, but keeps it going, and not just sputtering along. They say the universe is not only expanding, it is picking up speed. As if God is still blowing the holy Spirit into the balloon of time and space. And even so, this is only the beginning. There is a mystery beyond even this—that God stepped through the portal, with God's own incarnation as the Son, Jesus Christ, adding a further dimension of the sacred to this world, and that the resurrection of Christ reveals a plan for a new creation, none other than this one remade, resurrected into the body of glory which the Son has shown. A body shown in the burning of death on the cross as well as the shining of light on the mountain.

5. Much more can be said of this miraculous encounter of Moses and God, of the sign of the burning bush that was not consumed. But let me close with a thought about the hope it signifies. Hope based on faith and trust in God is indeed the fire that will not be consumed. It is an external symbol of God's continuing promise—even in the midst of death and suffering, bondage and despair. Hold on. Remember. And look within. The inner analog to the burning bush that is not consumed is the well of life that spring up in the heart of the believer, as Jesus told the woman at the well. If we drink of this water we will never thirst; the fire will never go out.

If we do not, we will always be thirsty, never quite satisfying that hunger for love and joy and peace that God promises, but which can indeed elude us in life. We sense it is out there, but so many times we just get a glimpse, a taste, only for it to be snatched away, or fade away. We suffer loss, or try and try, yet in the end burn out. Are we not all feeling that way at times these days? So long and hard a two-year pandemic, full of extra care and isolation. And we begin to emerge from pandemic only to find the enemy of peace, the spirit of war and conquest, flare up and burn up in a terrible fire in Ukraine and Russia—a fire which threatens to spread. This fire we must work and pray to extinguish—and to help those wounded and hurt. But all of this, this long Lent, will pass. There will come a new Easter. Trust in God. Keep the faith. and though the Spirit be just a flickering pilot light in your heart, if you pray and believe—turn on the gas— the holy Spirit will burst into flame. and you will not be consumed. You will be renewed, and lifted as on eagle's wings.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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