

I'll Be There -- Lent 3C

Here in California, when there's a spark in the dry landscape, we pay attention. Especially when it springs out of the midst of a bush, the many wild acacia, or other thorn bush species with which the desert abounds, are normally dry and brittle, so much that at certain seasons, a spark can kindle a wildfire that burns far and wide. A fire, therefore, in such a desert bush was a startling and frightening sight. The Biblical account places the event at the base of Mt. Horeb (believed to be Mt. Sinai, but in modern times also known as Mt. Moses) on the Sinai Peninsula. Today, St. Catherine's Monastery is there, surrounding what is claimed to be *the* burning bush. Constructed by order of the Emperor Justinian between 527 and 565, it is a spectacular natural setting for a magnificent collection, including Arab mosaics, Greek and Russian icons, Western oil paintings, religious objects from ancient Christianity, and the second- largest collection of illuminated manuscripts in the world. (The Vatican has the largest.) The collection consists of some 4 or 5 thousand handmade volumes in Greek, Coptic, Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew, Slavic, Syriac, Georgian and other languages.

But back to the bush. Moses' bush was a rare and extremely long-lived species of bramble, *Rubus sanctus* (holy red one), native to the area. The original bush has admittedly died, but there is a claimed descendant still living and on display amongst the Greek Orthodox monks .

It has been said that the lessons from Hebrew scripture set forth events from Israel's salvation history as types or prefigurements of the Easter event. The accepted wisdom of the Church has at times been that everything in the Hebrew Bible was put there by God to foreshadow the cosmic event we call Jesus the Christ. After all, if God is omniscient, she must have known exactly when and where and how Jesus would eventually appear, so the rest of history before

must have been back-story. Understandably, this theory has been disputed – especially by non-Christians. Instead of all history prefiguring Jesus the Christ, perhaps it makes better sense to say that Christ Jesus became incarnate so that we might grasp more firmly our own selves in history.

Thus, for example the Crucifixion took place at the time of Passover, which had been instituted along with the Exodus. Jesus' death and resurrection brought about the ultimate exodus, when all are freed forever from spiritual bondage to sin and death. Through Jesus, we can better grasp the powerful meaning of the Exodus.

Likewise, the Burning Bush: It is said that God's foolishness is more powerful than our intelligence. The foolishness in choosing Jesus, born in a stable to a poor carpenter and his wife, resembles the foolishness in choosing Moses to lead the people out of Egypt.

One is reminded of a list of the 776 dumbest things ever said, which contains the following: "A Superintendent of Schools in the town of Barrington, Rhode Island issued this statement: "After finding no qualified candidates for the position of principal, the district is extremely pleased to announce the appointment of David Steele to the post."

Moses qualifications included neither personal magnetism, a spotless record, noble lineage, nor brimming self-confidence. As Frederick Beuchner once put it, Moses probably looked like "Tevye the milkman after going 10 rounds with Muhammed Ali."

What Moses does possess that is the one thing necessary to be of service to God: receptivity. He sees a tree on fire and investigates – turns aside (from his intended path) saying, "Here I am."

In William James' seminal text: *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he describes conversion: "The process, gradual or sudden, whereby a person previously unhappy, inferior and wrong becomes

consciously happy, with a sense of belonging and justified in his beliefs.

The Exodus text does not give any indication that Moses at the bush was converted according to James' definition. What Moses does exhibit is an openness to what is going on around him and a willingness to proceed with what he is called by God to do, even though he does not fully understand. That is the mustard seed faith that is all God needs from each of us to accomplish good.

Psychologists talk about 'separation anxiety,' which is not only in children or immature adults who fear abandonment, but also the uncomfortable state artists and scientists and entrepreneurs experience when they realize they are alone, that they are treading on new ground; holy ground. They perceive that they have ventured into unexplored, unmapped territory; there is a stomach-churning realization that maybe they are lost or absurd and irrelevant, or just plain wrong.

Because he is so alone, and naturally having any number of anxieties about what he is experiencing, Moses needs a name from God so he can trust the experience. He wants evidence to validate the encounter. Like when you are promised a visit from the plumber when you really need a plumber: You get the name of whoever promises you on the phone that the plumber is on the way over.

Per Martin Buber's translation, the name God gives Moses is: "I will be there as the one who will be there." The great philosopher Buber died in 1965, so he wasn't around the next year when the Four Tops elucidated his idea: "When you feel the world grown cold, And you're drifting out all on your own, reach out, reach out for me. I'll be there, with a love that will shelter you. I'll be there, with a love that will see you through." I wonder if those are the sweetest words there are, 'I'll be there.'

They are certainly the words Moses needs to hear. Not just that God is, but that God is and will be here, within us, as a promise and the power that goes with such a promise. Like a business fully capitalized, a project fully funded, a loan fully secured, a baptismal covenant, a thereto-pledged troth.

God is not simply “Being” itself, God is Being with a purpose; Being present, effective and liberating. God will be there in steadfast, unfailing love. If nothing else, the call of Moses reminds us that what God can do for us in our weakness surpasses anything we can do in our own strength. Christ on Calvary’s tree makes this story explicit, immediate and apart from what we call time.

Mary Daly asks, “Why indeed must God be a noun? Why not a verb – the most active and dynamic of all? Hasn’t the naming of “God” as a noun been an act of murdering that dynamic Verb? And isn’t the Verb infinitely more personal than a mere static noun? The symbols we have for God may be intended to convey personality, but they fail to convey that God is Being.”

And one might add, Becoming. “God does not offer to us finite beings a thing all complete and ready to be embraced. For us, God is eternal discovery and continual growth. The more we think we understand God, the more God is revealed as otherwise...” Literally, other-wise.

We must liberate Christ from a Western intellectual form that is logical, abstract, privatized, and individualized. We must engage the complex Christ . . . which means accepting the diversity and differences of the other as integral to ourselves and thus integral to the meaning of God. Engagement with the other is not dissolving ourselves into the other but being true to ourselves — our identity — by finding ourselves in God and God in the other.

It is these encounters with life that we must focus on. In great part, Christian discipleship is responding to our encounters – good and bad -- by modeling our life after Jesus. Like all things in life, the details make all the difference. What do such encounters look like, feel like, sound like? There are as many descriptions of an encounter with Jesus as there are people who have encountered Jesus. What is the best way to model my life after him?

Being aware of presence of God is vital. The best way is to stop, get quiet and listen. Silence, meditation, centering prayer, whatever you call it, the end result is the same – God is pulling at you hard, God wants you to get to work; God’s directions come in the still small voice.

Hear Jesus’ words from the *Gospel of Thomas*: “The one who is near me is near the fire and the one who is far from me is far from the kingdom.” Proximity does matter. May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi, Jesus. The dust that falls off your teacher may wind up on your feet, your clothes, in your hair; you might breathe it in. We have to keep up; to be aware of our encounters with the Holy, wherein we acknowledge God’s presence in our life. Then we have to find a way to respond. Too often, we think of a life devoted to Jesus where he is isolated in time and space, who lived and died, and about whom we know everything there is to know. This is unsupportable. Jesus is risen. The Holy Spirit is always with us as our guide. Being a disciple means movement. It means keeping up.

“...The more we think we’ve got ahold of God, the more God withdraws, drawing us closer into the depths of of ” what is holy and divine and godly. “The nearer we approach, through all the efforts of nature and grace, the more God increases, in one and the same movement, the attraction that exceeds our powers, and the

receptivity of our powers to that divine attraction.” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

The Bible speaks a good deal about mystery. This is often the only way to understand it. Some approach the subject with the mind of magic. They want to revel in miracles just as the contemporaries of Jesus did. They did not understand that his miracles were not conjuring tricks, but but signs, signs of the mystery of the Kingdom.

“I am that I am,” or “I will be there as the one who will be there,” is no magic formula, it is a tautology, a statement that is true by necessity or by virtue of its logical form. Nor can we hear what it says if we are too busy conforming the mighty words of the Hebrew Bible to our mechanistic minds. We have to find our burning bushes right where we are, and listen to the voice that proceeds from the heart of such mysteries.

We are a community that exists to hear this voice. We exist because God called Abram and said, “Get thee out.” We exist because God said to Moses, “Eyah, Asher, Eyah.” We exist because, in the fullness of time, God came to us as Jesus, saying, “Feed my sheep,” as the fullest imaginable disclosure of the mystery; to be here for us, that we might be there for one another.