

“The Burning Bush”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 3, 2017

Exodus 3 – The Burning Bush

The burning bush is a part of the United Church of Canada’s crest. The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925, representing the joining of Methodist, the Presbyterian and the Congregationalist denominations to form a National Church in Canada.

From the United Church of Canada’s website: “The burning bush is the symbol of Presbyterianism. It refers to the bush that burned and was not consumed (Exodus 3:2) and symbolizes the indestructibility of the church. From Presbyterianism we have received a heritage of high regard for the dignity in worship, the education of all people, the authority of scripture, and the church as the Body of Christ.” I thought you’d like to know that St. James’ Presbyterians!

In the second chapter of the Book of Exodus, Moses has fled from Egypt after killing the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew. When Moses stops running from Pharaoh who has sent him army to kill him, he finds himself sitting by a well in the land of Midian. Here he meets the seven daughters of the priest of Midian who have come to the well to water their sheep.

One thing leads to another and Moses marries one of the priest’s daughters, Zipporah. And this is where our story picks up. Moses is tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest in Midian, and in his herding the sheep, he has moved the flocks far away from Midian, to the other side of the wilderness, and is now standing with the sheep in his sight, in front of a large mountain, Mount Horeb. My feeling is that he is very much to himself in this place, remote yet protected or he wouldn’t have brought the sheep to pasture there.

And as he walks through the valley floor beneath the mountain, there appears to his side a bush that is burning, yet not consumed. The bush is alight with flame and yet the green leaves still reveal their greenness, the dark brown of the branches still reach out.

And in this account, as Moses turns towards the bush to see what is going on, and angel of the Lord appears – always a sign that something is about to happen. And the voice from the bush calls him, “Moses, Moses’. He is told to remove his sandals from his feet for he stands on holy ground.

God says to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (vs. 6). God reveals that God is the same God that guided Moses’ ancestors. And yet, it seems as if this is the first time that Moses is connecting with God in his own life. It’s one thing to recognize and live under the promises handed down to you from your parents, but another to find yourself on holy ground for the first time.

And now that God has Moses on his turf, i.e. the Holy Ground, and has his attention, he wastes no time in ‘calling’ Moses to his new work. Although it hardly seems a call, but a summons. God simply says, “So come, I will send you.” In other words, ‘You’re it’.

God tells Moses that he will do great things through him, that God will send Moses to bring the people out of Egypt, out of slavery and bring them into a land that is good and broad, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Of course Moses is thinking at the same time he’s hearing this, how could I possibly go back into Egypt with all of Pharaoh’s army looking for me to kill me? How does this work? Who am I to lead the Hebrews out of slavery and into a land of milk and honey?

When asked by Moses what name shall I give for the one who sent me, God answers with the name, “I am who I am”. A literal Hebrew translation of this name is ‘I Am Who I will Be’. Another legitimate reading of the Hebrew verb structure renders it as “I will be What Tomorrow Demands”.

How would our worship change if we always referred to God as “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” or “I will be what Tomorrow Demands”? “God” seems so static by comparison, so easily pigeonholed, so narrow, so under control! We use the word ‘God’ as a proper noun, but here God is self-identified in a verb form: dynamic, active, changing.

I will be what tomorrow demands. No matter how this chaotic world calls us to minister to the other, God will be what tomorrow demands. No matter what our steps in our next journey will be, God will be what tomorrow demands. Like the burning bush that is never consumed, God will be what tomorrow demands.

God is ever present, known by many names and, at the same time, beyond definition. The relationship that God states to Moses will be borne out in in the immediate future – a fiery pillar by night and a cloud of presence by day – and throughout the centuries and millennia to follow.

The well known conversation that ensues between God and Moses sets the tone not only for a personal relationship between one human being and their deity, but between an entire nation and their creator/liberator/sustainer.

Rita Nakashima Brock, co-author of *Proverbs of Ashes*, told about visiting an ancient church in the Mideast. High over the altar was a mosaic of Moses kneeling in front of the burning bush. Behind Moses’ back, where he couldn’t see them, the mosaic was filled with bushes, every one of them on fire. Is the world really filled with burning bushes?

How do we identify the burning bushes in our individual lives? What is God saying to you? Is God calling you to follow? To go? Listen closely – what do you hear? How do we encourage one another as faith communities in Stouffville to be more attentive to the possibility that bushes are burning in many unexpected places, and are more widely dispersed than we might imagine?

I'll close with a story about one woman who saw a burning bush in her community.

Al Rogness writes of his wife, Nora, "with pride". She noticed soldiers travelling through Mason City, Iowa, on the east-west train during WWII, having a little wait for the north-south down at the station. They'd head for the nearby bar for a 'breather.'

Nora met with the rail executive, Mr. Ingrahm, and the conversation may have gone like this:

Nora: I want those boys to have a warm cup of coffee, some good home cooking, and Iowa hospitality.

Mr. Ingrahm: Where's your committee?

Nora: God doesn't call committees. He calls me. But a lot of people will help.

Rogness writes, "For more than a year, thousands of GIs enjoyed the warmth of coffee and friends in that Iowa town. (from *The Word for Every Day*, Augsburg, p. 111)

When you or your church sees a burning bush and you realize you are on holy ground, remove your shoes, stand up with your feet flat on the ground and say aloud, 'Here I am.'

Thanks be to God. Amen.