

**"The Burning Bush"**  
**Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**August 31, 2008**  
**Text: Exodus 3:1-15**  
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If Moses had been really smart, he would have figured things out when he saw that bush. The bush said it all; it should have been enough. That bush told the whole story, but Moses couldn't see it. Not then anyway.

It begins with a bush. Not a shapely oak, not a majestic redwood, not a spreading chestnut tree, not a mountainside of towering pinyon pines or junipers, not a rustic stand of birches or a forest of maples, but an ordinary nameless bush, scrubby enough and common enough to be easily overlooked. No one would call a bush the grandest of living things.

Do you know what a bush is to a shepherd, like Moses was at the time? A bush is a nuisance, a too-easy hiding place for dawdling sheep. If you were a shepherd, you'd be tempted to clear the whole grazing area and cut down every insolent clump of brush. The sheep would never notice, and it would certainly make your job easier to have only those open, grassy areas.

How many times had Moses left the flock in search of some woolly straggler? Too many, he was sure, and this day was no exception. Another daydreaming sheep strays too far from the path, and off goes Moses, tramping into the undergrowth, cursing the bushy brambles and thickets that lure his sheep from the grassy plains. "Not again!" he

says. "I've got to get a radar system or some shock collars or at least a good dog. I can't keep spending all my time in the bushes, for God's sake. I swear I'm going to bring my axe tomorrow and start cutting these things back to . . . O, my God, what in the world is that?"

It begins with a bush. A single, blazing bush, burning with a fire that cannot be extinguished, the fire that can come only from great holiness. The liberation of a people begins with a bush, the humblest and puniest of trees [Anna Carter Florence, "Sacred Ground," *Pulpit Digest*, LXXIV (July/August, 1993), 5.]. But the ground becomes holy around this bush. And from this bush, the voice of God comes forth and announces his intentions, his purposes. If Moses had been really smart, he would have figured things out when he saw that bush. But he didn't, and *we* usually don't when God is trying to get our attention in the same way.

From this measly bush, God says to Moses, in essence, "Moses, I've been paying attention to what is going on in Egypt, and I don't like what I see and hear. My people are hurting down there. It's not a pretty picture, and I intend to do something about it. I am going to deliver my people out of their slavery in that land. I am going to set them free, and I am going to give them a land of their own. I am going to do all this so that they can live as my people and show the world what I am like by the way they treat each other. Their society will reflect my own nature and character. Their society will be righteous and just and good. This is my plan, Moses, and you are going to be the one through whom I am going to make this plan work."

And how does Moses respond to God? About like we do. He

starts to whine. "But God, who am I?" Moses' whining continues for all of Exodus chapter three and half of chapter four. No spoiled Jewish princess has anything on Moses. No crabby teenager can light a candle to him. No impossible to please mother-in-law is in the same league with him. Moses is one great whiner.

In his whining, Moses goes through a whole laundry list of excuses as to why he can't possibly do what God wants him to do. "But God, I got into trouble back there in Egypt, and they threw me out. Now I am nothing but a shepherd. But God, I don't think the people will believe me. But God, I'm not good at public speaking. But God, I don't think I can go up against Pharaoh, with his army of chariots. But God, I just don't think I'm cut out for this job. It's more than I can handle. I've doing good just to keep up with these sheep. But God, can't you find somebody else to do your dirty work?"

God is about as impressed with Moses' excuses as God is with ours. Check it out in chapter four. God winds up losing his patience and his temper with Moses. It seems that whining gets on God's nerves too. And so God says to Moses something like the following: "Look, Moses, I wasn't born yesterday. I am the God of your ancestors. Remember them? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Do these names ring a bell with you? Those guys weren't perfect, or have you forgotten that?"

Abraham was a liar and a cheater who kept trying to take matters into his own hands instead of trusting in me. Isaac was a momma's boy who later let his wife trick him into blessing her favorite son rather than his. And Jacob—talk about a back-stabbing opportunist. I finally had to wrestle with him and knock his hip out of joint to get him to be honest

with himself."

And God goes on. "It's the burning bush, Moses. Can't you see it? It's a visual aid, a rather good one, if I say so myself. Is it clear yet? Let's try this: take off your shoes. Maybe then it will sink in. It's holy ground, Moses. The bush and the ground around it, they're special, Moses, but do you know why? Not because of what they are. They are special because of *who I am*.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Yes, they are the patriarchs, the fathers of the faith, but why? Not because of who they were. It is because of *who I am*. Who are *you*, that you should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? That's the wrong question to be asking. You're missing the point, Moses. You're not catching on. You're unclear on the concept. It's not who you are that matters here. *It's who I am.*"

"I AM, Moses. That's my name. I AM. I AM WHO I AM. I AM the one who makes things happen. I AM the one who gives and takes away. I AM the one who runs the show. I AM the one who makes the rules. I AM the one who decides what will be, how it will be, and when it will be. And most importantly, I AM the one who will be with you. You are not doing this thing all by yourself. That's not what I am asking you to do. I will be doing this thing with you and through you.

And so I will be for you all you ever need for me to be for you. I will provide for you all you ever need to have in order to do what I have called you to do. I never call someone without equipping that person adequately. I never ask anyone to do a job without giving that one all the help she or he needs. That's what it means when I say that I AM."

Moses is invited by God to become the burning bush, the seemingly insignificant instrument of God's revelation, of God's work, of God's deliverance of an enslaved people. Moses, the outcast prince of Egypt. Moses, the murderer. Moses, the shepherd. Moses, the stutterer.

This Moses becomes the one through whom the plagues would strike the land. This Moses becomes the one through whom the waters would be parted. This Moses becomes the one through whom Pharaoh's great army would be defeated. This Moses becomes the one through whom the Ten Commandments would be given, the one through whom the people would be fed by manna in the desert, the one through whom the slaves of Egypt would become the chosen people of God to live in covenant with the Lord in a land of milk and honey. This Moses becomes the great deliverer of God.

If Moses had been really smart, he would have figured things out just by looking at that bush. But we wouldn't have been any smarter, would we? After all, we find ourselves in the same place as Moses, and we act the same way, don't we? God calls us, and what do we do? We whine. "But God . . . I don't have the time, I don't have the creativity, I don't have the talent, I don't have the patience, I don't have the energy, I don't have the background, I don't have the money, I have too many problems." Like Moses, we sell ourselves short, but even worse, we sell God short. *We sell God short.* We fail to see that God can make burning bushes out of us and the ground around our feet holy and sacred.

Our God, the God of the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and Christ's Holy Spirit, is the God of the burning bush. This God has a name, and it is I AM. And the I AM chooses to

accomplish his purposes with and through quite ordinary, imperfect, messed up, unhealthy, sinful people like me and like you. Make no mistake about it, we are bushes, each and every one of us. We are bushes, mere tree wannabes. But like our spiritual forefather, Moses, we can burn with a fire *that cannot be put out* when we give ourselves over to the work of the Lord. We, too, can be instruments of God's never-ending effort to deliver, to redeem, to liberate, to save people from their bondage to evil forces.

You see, *God needs you. God needs you.* Like Moses was, you are uniquely gifted and uniquely situated to do some work for the Lord. There is something, please believe me when I say this, there is something that only you can do for God. No one else can do it, only you can because of who God has created you to be and do. So will you find out what it is?

Will you let God be the I AM in your life? Will you let yourself be the burning bush God is asking you to be?