

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2020

(Exodus 3:1-15)

When was the first time you heard the voice of God?

Where was your burning bush?

If a poll is ever conducted in which participants are asked to name the passage from the Old Testament that holds the most personal significance, I would be hard pressed not to include this morning's reading from Exodus. Together with the reading from 1 Kings about God appearing to Elijah in the sheer silence – one that you've heard me refer to often in my sermons – this encounter between Moses and God captivates me. Any incident of personal encounter from the Bible, in fact, holds particular interest for me.

God speaking to Moses out of the flame is a powerful moment, one of a very personal connection in a one-on-encounter. No one else is there; it is simply the creator and the shepherd ... the Lord and the exiled prince. Despite being in very rough and remote country, Moses is not isolated from the world – but he does encounter God in a moment of isolation. There is nothing of any great significance taking place here ... nothing that would seem to give any indication of what is about to happen. Moses is simply out tending to the flock under his care, “an ordinary, everyday journey ... with no ‘religious’ intentions. The setting is the wilderness, and Moses’ vocation is mundane.”<sup>1</sup>

An ordinary, everyday journey, one that in an instant is transformed into something incredible and extraordinary. For me, these verses are a reminder that God doesn't need large crowds, fabulous settings or great fanfare before speaking to us. In my own life, it has often been in the seemingly ordinary moments when I felt God reaching out to me most powerfully. What felt like taps on my shoulder in the early years of my discernment, attempts to draw my attention to what was being put in motion in my journey. A voice speaking to me in the darkness of a monastic liturgy in Kentucky at a crossroads moment in that journey, a voice quietly telling me, “We aren't finished.”

As with Moses, my encounters with God – the moments when a voice called to me – were ones when I couldn't help but turn aside to look at those great sights. On that day in the wilderness, the summons came from a flame that did not consume. For me, the voice came from the shadows of a darkened sanctuary, or during a sunset at the close of the day, or as I sat in my living room after a time of great activity. Even more remarkably, these “burning bush” moments were not one-time events; they each were tiny part of a much larger thread winding its way through my life. Likewise, Moses' journey was not set on a foundation of a single encounter with God, but rather a series of conversations ... a series of prompts ... a series of moments of truth telling, admonition, and encouragement.

I may sound like a broken record in saying this, but it bears repeating: these past months have been challenging. As a result of the pandemic we've come face to face with a new type of bondage. Our way of life has had to be adjusted as we adapted as best we can to new

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus*, from the *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* series, p. 54.

personal practices and shifted into a more active, intentional effort of focusing on the greater good. We've experienced confusion, anger, frustration, fear and grief. In much the same way as our ancestors did in Egypt those many generations ago, we have been calling out for liberation. For some, it has been a cry for liberation from what is perceived as the oppressiveness of mandates and operating procedures. For others, it has been a cry for liberation from isolation and loneliness. For still others, it has been a cry for liberation from illness and loss.

It may surprise you to hear me say this, but I think that even with these adjustments, as painful and frustrating as they may be, I see a gift. With the slowing down of much of life, I invite us all to consider that we have been given the potential and gift of moments that occur when, like Moses, we are in the wilderness doing nothing more than the mundane things. I invite us to consider the gift found in those moments when, like Moses, we are confronted with nothing more than the ordinary.

In my view, it may very well be that in those ordinary, mundane moments that we hear God calling out to us. In those moments we very well may be reminded that wherever we encounter God, we are standing on holy ground. In those moments we very well may hear God reassure us that our cry has been heard. In those moments God may very well remind us that in the midst of it all, the I AM who sent Moses is the I AM who walks through this time of exile with us.

So here I return to the questions with which I began, and I invite you to use these moments of quiet in the midst of chaos to look for your flames and listen for your calls.

When was the first time you heard the voice of God?

Where do you have your burning bush moments?

Listen for them, for you too may find yourselves on a journey that is transformed in an instant from mundane to extraordinary.