

EXODUS 3
THE CALL OF MOSES
August 30 2020

This scene – Moses and the burning bush

It's iconic – if you google “famous painting about Moses” you'll get more than you imagine.

It's a powerful piece of writing – it's foundational to an understanding of who we are as people of the book: Jews, Christians – who we are, and also who God is.

And it most certainly can't be “dealt with” in one sermon. Or one thousand.

Like all scripture, it's a jewel, multi faceted, and the Light shines through it depending on how you hold it, how you read it. Just a slight turn of this jewel and you say OH – I didn't see that before.

So I am offering you this jewel this morning – and praying that the Light will shine through in just the right way for you right now.

There's a sermon in here (which I'm not going to preach) about the humour in it. God's voice, (how do you hear it in your head? Does the voice sound like....James Earl Jones? Deep bass, with echoes? Or more like Judi Dench? What if in the reading of it we had asked a little girl to read the words of God? How you imagine that voice says a lot aboutwell, it says a lot.

And the voice of Moses: Who would you cast for that? Charlton Heston is the classic Moses....in your head does he sound like that? Arnold Schwarzenegger? Or more like Woody Allen? If you read on, he's more a Woody Allen kind of guy here – four times he tries to get out of it. Pitiful excuses. Pitiful. And finally he gives up all pretense and just says “Find someone else”.

There's a part of this episode that is really kind of funny. No huge mountain, not this time. No trumpets, no angels swooping around bringing live coals from the throne of God.....not an earthquake in sight.....

a shrub.

The voice of the Lord of Hosts, the Mystery that moves the sun and the stars, the Almighty, the everlasting.....the voice of God from shrubbery.

And at some level you imagine Moses, kind of stooping down a bit, to look at it, face tobranch.... looking down at it, he says

“Who shall I say sent me?”

The shrub draws itself up to its full.... three feetand replies. I AM WHO I AM. Which is no answer at all because – in Hebrew there are no verb tenses. So it could mean I am who I will be, I am who I was, I was who I will be, and so on. Ambiguous. Deliberately so. No one just asks the name of God and receives it – as though you could.

You know? This is a God who appears in strange – unusual ways. Sometimes God just makes you laugh out loud. It's a kind of heads up for how you expect to see God your own life, for how you expect to see God in the rest of the Bible.....don't get some idea of God in your head that will prevent you from seeing where God really is – and who God really is - and never discount the humour God uses to show you. .

So that's the sermon I'm not preaching. I've got about a dozen more but

Two simple things this morning.

1) The ways that you have your own burning bush experiences. The moments – not always showily spectacular – those moments when you turn aside from what you're doing – something grabs your attention, and you actually stop and turn aside, and experience something that affects you so deeply that you have no words, you probably don't tell anyone for fear of - what – judgement? I think so...

More people than you know have had experiences like that. We seldom speak of them. Maybe it feels as though to speak of it wouldlessen it, somehow? I don't know. But I have found that in the privacy of my office, or some other safe space, many people have told me about their own version of a burning bush.

One of my professors from Bangor Theological Seminary talked about sitting at the breakfast table with a bowl of oatmeal. Suddenly, he said, he was aware of all the connections all the work all the energy and all the miraculous things that had to happen for him to be eating that oatmeal. The sun and rain that helped the oats grow, whoever harvested it, processed it, packaged it, the clerks in the grocery store, the electricity that it took to cook it on the stove, the people who made and installed that stove,and on and on and he said that he felt – not a burning bush but a bowl of oatmeal connected him to God and nature and other human beings in a way that shone just as brightly as that shrub.

I never forgot that.

Richard Wagamese, in his book *One Story One Song*, describes being at a story telling retreat with Indigenous elders. They instructed the group to go outside early in the morning and sit there. That's all. Face east as the first light came up over the trees.

“At first I saw nothing. Then I began to discern swirls and shapes in the sky, and then a wild palate of colours i had never imagined....I was awestruck when i first spotted that impossible blue. I recognized it immediately, not as a memory but as an ache at my very centre. It awoke something inside me and when i felt it I wanted to cry....the emptiness and fullness and possibility of everything. The story teller in me had shut down, gone into hiding, but when I saw that special blue, my storytelling spirit was sparked to life again”

And he goes on.

And so....do you have a story like that?

And I always wonder.....it says that Moses noticed it and turned aside to see. What if THAT is the miracle of this story – that he noticed? And I wonder – what burning bushes have I walked right by, not noticing?

2) That leads directly to the second (and final) thing.

Moses noticed. He saw. He witnessed that burning bush.
It's about noticing, and what happens when we do.

The princess saw that basket in the water when Moses was a baby. She needn't have gone down to see what it was, she could have said
those Hebrews, throwing stuff in the river all the time, polluting our country

but she saw it and she responded. She saw that he was a Hebrew baby. And she responded.

Earlier in his life, Moses saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian. He himself was Egyptian royalty....could have looked away, could have said "I think he was concealing a weapon"
but he looked. He saw. He saw the suffering and...
misguided though it may be...
he responded. He killed the guy who killed the guy.

So....this call from the shrub isn't exactly out of the blue. He's been noticing. He ended up marrying Zipporah – they met because – he noticed her. She and her sisters were being bullied by some male shepherds at a well. He noticed that. And acted.

So whatever else he is, Moses is a guy who notices things. Notices when things aren't right. When people are being mistreated. He sees that.

And, as it turns out, God is a noticer too.
This burning bush – this gift to Moses of transcendence, of the mysterious, shining presence of the Holy – this isn't just so he can feel warm and fuzzy
not even so that he can know deep in himself that he's part of something huge, a world made in the image of a wise creator – as fulfilling as that may be.

This burning bush speaks, and says, in God's name
"I have seen the oppression of my people"
God sees. God notices.
The cries of those who suffer do not go unheard, unheeded
God sees. God notices
Centuries before, Hagar, the first person in the Bible to have an experience like this
names God
calls God El-Roi – the one who sees me

God notices.

AND God acts.

Not exactly as we'd like.
I picture a conversation at that bush that goes something like this:

I am who I am – I am the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar...the God of Isaac and Rebecca – the God of R and L and B and Z
and I've seen the suffering of my people

Good – they're suffering horribly!

I've seen how they suffer at the hands of their taskmasters

Good ! I've seen it too. Somebody ought to do something!

And I've come to do something about that.

Well, if you don't mind me saying so – it's about time.

I've come to deliver them from their bondage and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey

That's great! How about if I just put my sandals back on and get out of here so you can get on with it. I'm glad somebody is finally going to do something.

I'm going to send you.

Wait – What????????????????

GOD SEES. GOD NOTICES. GOD ACTS.

God calls people and says – go to the Pharaoh
go to him and say
let my people go.

And that's how it works.

Burning bushes call to us all the time. And the call is to a deep sense of connection with the Mystery, your oneness with all that is, your part in everything and a beloved sister or brother of the family of all things.

And that connectedness will open your eyes,
see the suffering

perhaps not in a burning bush

but on the nightly news, in the protests of people who have no other recourse in their quest for justice
in people on the street,
in the weather patterns that seem to be crying out for our faithful attention...

if you take the time to turn aside and notice those things
hear those voices

then you will be hearing the voice of God.

And when your burning bush moment.....that mystical experience of unity however it comes to you,
when that

leads to a burning desire for justice and health and wholeness for all those
with whom you newly, blessedly, identify

and the fire in your belly calls you to work with the Holy One toward their wellbeing
when your mystical moments

form within you a more study compassion, grow within you an expansive kindness
sharpen your hearing for the undertones of hope

When the fire is no longer in the bush but in you
the ground beneath you will truly be holy – and you'll take off your shoes.

and you burn – with genuine love
then