

22 May 2005

Bible passage: **Exodus 3:1-6** (*The Message*)

Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the west end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. The angel of God appeared to him in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up.

Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?"

God saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

He said, 'Yes? I'm right here.'

God said, "Don't come any closer. Remove your sandals from your feet. You're standing on holy ground."

Then God said, "I am the God of your father. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."

Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God.

When we named this message for today, we didn't have a clue that there was actually a website with that address. Let me say right up front that this is not meant to be an endorsement or recommendation of it or any other such web address. As I looked the site over over, it appears to

be basically a resource for a whole array of religious or spiritual topics...just so you know.

However, the reason we chose this title is that today, the web is one of our primary means of communication, and that's what we're thinking about—how God might get through to us. That web address just seemed like a likely prospect. After all, the web is convenient because it can be accessed any hour of the day or night, and I figure God is, too. Is that a way that God connects with us in this day and age? How does God get through to us these days?

Our Bible story today is a story of just such a connection. It's the story of Moses and God and the burning bush. In brief, Moses was a shepherd going about his business, and he happened to have come through a wilderness and was on a mountain that some in his day considered a home for God. Actually, maybe they weren't far wrong....at least I always think God's there when I'm in the mountains.

At any rate, as the story goes. Mo is hanging out with his sheep on this mountain, and he happens to notice a bush that is burning. Now that wouldn't be all that unusual in the dryness of the climate in which he found himself, but according to the story, it wasn't being burned up. That may or may not actually be the way it was.

Whatever it was, the burning bush caught Mo's attention, and since he found himself there on a mountain that many considered holy, the only thing he could imagine was that this must be a "God-thing." Burning bush, holy mountain, fire—it all added up to God to him. And according to the story, God was already looking toward Moses, and some sort of a holy encounter took place, although Mo, keeping the tradition of the time, did not dare try to look upon the face of God.

It seems to me that, regardless of the literal veracity of the story, there certainly are some things that are important to notice when we think about how God got through to Moses, and might get through to us today. For instance, Mo was going about his daily business...he wasn't doing anything especially spiritual, like praying or going to church or synagogue or mosque. He was taking care of sheep for his father-in-law, probably alone, so he had plenty of time to think about things.

The story says that he had just come from the west end of the wilderness, and by that I'm guessing he's been struggling with a few things, and it looks as though he's about to figure some stuff out. And then he happens to notice this bush.

Obviously, he was alert and looking for something. God? A miracle? An answer? There's no way to know, but he was looking around or he wouldn't have even noticed the bush burning in the first place. And when Moses looked, he had an experience that the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called "radical amazement." Those are moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as being filled with the glory of God—a truly mountain top experience.

The best part of the story to me is that when Moses stopped to look, really look, God was there, as God was all along. Today, we're distracted by a few more things than a few sheep, and most of us don't get the opportunity to wander around a mountain alone very often, but I wonder—"How does God get through to us today?" What might be today's version of a burning bush?

A set of assumptions underlies these questions: One—that God *wants* to connect with us. For me, that is one of the foremost characteristics of the God with whom we have relationship. We were created in the first place because God wanted to be in a close connection with us. God is the initiator of relationship with us, and God is always there, seeking us, wanting to relate to us. I'm convinced that God is seeking us long before we ever notice or respond.

Another assumption is that God not only seeks relationship with us, but God wants to be involved in our lives. I do not have an image of a being "out there" somewhere, totally disconnected from the daily happenings in our lives. God is right now, within us, all around us, above us and below

us. God is not some remote entity who set things in motion and then disappeared. God is very much active and involved in our world and our lives.

The third assumption that is a part of wondering about today's burning bush is not just that God wants to connect with us, but that we want to connect with God. I truly believe that, within each of us, there is a yearning, a desire to connect with that which can give us ultimate meaning, a sense of purpose, the knowledge that we are loved, and God meets all those criteria.

Given all that, it seems to me that one of the keys to God's connecting with us today is our being open and receptive to the ordinary and not-so-ordinary ways in which that might happen. If we're looking for God's handiwork in our midst, we might be much more likely to see it. After all, as I've said 100 times, God is in everything, and everything is a part of God. God is in us, and we are in God. And because that is so, God may in fact "speak" to us in some surprising ways.

Sir John Templeton is a renowned philanthropist and founder of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, which gives a \$1.27 million award every year to a person contributing to the increase in human beings' understanding of God. Templeton himself makes some contributions to that understanding.

I really like the way he talks about God's connection with us with these words: "I think it's much more like we are a tiny part of God in some mysterious way. Maybe there's similarity in the analogy of a wave on the ocean and our relation to God. A wave is not the ocean, but neither is the wave separate from the ocean. A wave is not eternal and long-lasting the way the ocean is, but the wave and the ocean are related to each other. The God I pray to in those shareholders' meetings is vastly greater than we as humans have conceived as of yet."

So, one of the ways in which God gets through to us today is in our realization that God is within us, a part of us, and a part of everyone else. Whenever we encounter another person, we are encountering God. Whenever we're going about our daily routines, God is right with us. Whenever the timing seems just right and everything converges into a synchronistic whole, God is in it. Whenever we're dealing with some of the dark moments of life, God lifts us up and carries us, and whenever we experience a moment of jubilation, that's God going "whoopie!" inside us. God is within us and within all of life; we just have to be ready to notice. When we do, we will for sure see God's hand at work.

Len Sweet tells a story that may be familiar to you. It's about the rite of passage for young Native American braves. On the night of a young man's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, after he has learned all the skills of hunting, scouting, and fishing, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. On this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods, all by himself all night long.

We can only imagine what it was like. Every time a twig snapped, the young man visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he imagined all kinds of evil sounds.

It had to have been a terrifying night, but after what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke and the first rays of light shone through the darkness of the deep forest. As he looked around, the boy saw flowers, trees and the outline of a path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing there just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father, and

he had been there all night long.

I really believe God is like that. Sometimes our fears get in the way, sometimes it's too dark in our lives to see, sometimes we're totally preoccupied, but God is always there, God is reaching out to us, and is ready to connect with us, if and when we're ready.

**CLOSING:**

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we're ready, ready to reach out our hand to grasp God's outstretched hand.

Video clip: Kenya woman

Closing part 2

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.