

Date: August 28, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 22

SERMON: Burning Bushes and Other Revelations

Text(s): Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

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In 1999, the annual Pastors' and Spouse's Conference of the Association of International Churches was held in Cairo. As part of that two-week experience, we traveled over into the Sinai desert to the legendary place where Moses supposedly encountered the burning bush at the foot of Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses, or as we know it, Mt. Sinai. Some reputable biblical archaeologists say that location of the real Mt. Sinai is more likely in present-day Saudi Arabia. But what we can say is that from a very early period, well before the time of Jesus, the site we visited has been venerated, first by Jews, later by Christians, and now by Muslims as well. Those millenia of veneration and devotion have made it a sacred place.

During our visit, we had the opportunity— I was going to say privilege, but that might be pushing it— the opportunity to climb the mountain in the middle of the night in the light of a full moon. The point of starting the trek at 2 am was to get to the summit in time for the sunrise at 5:30. Most of the climb is easy; it's a fairly wide trail that spirals and switches back, and if you really get tired, there're always some Bedouins around with a camel you can get on, although the sight of some American pastors or their spouses on camels is probably not one you'd want to see at any time other than the middle of the night. It's the last 350 yards or so to the summit that really get you. There the trail ends, and you have to ascend about 800 irregularly-placed rock steps at a steep angle. Once we arrived at the top, I had been elected to lead the group in devotions as the sun came up. And of course, there was no voice from heaven to help me, and I looked around in vain for some stone tablets with some divine commandments engraved on them. I should have remembered

that they're on the grounds of the Texas statehouse rather than up there on Mt. Sinai.

At the foot of the mountain, sits one of the most ancient Christian monasteries in the world, St. Catherine's, with its community of Greek Orthodox monks. Visiting St. Catherine's and especially its library which houses some of the oldest and rarest Jewish and Christian manuscripts in the world, as well as some of the oldest icons in the world, really was a privilege. In a narrow lane just behind the apse of the monastery church on a small terrace stands a rather large bush, about the size of a rhododendron, but bushier, with waxy green leaves. Again, according to legend, this is the bush that burned without being consumed, and before which Moses received his revelation of God's name and his call to become God's agent of liberation for his enslaved people.

Needless to say, the only thing that was burning the day I stood in front of that bush was me, because the temperature in the sun was well in excess of 100 degrees. I was a bit disappointed, I must confess; I thought that if I were going to take the trouble to travel across that incredibly barren desert and climb Mt. Sinai in the middle of the night, I should at least get a glimpse of a burning bush out of the experience, but, apart from loss of a night's sleep, sore knees, sunburn, and wonderful memories, no revelation came to me.

As I thought about this and other stories in the Bible where other people have similar kinds of revelations— Gideon threshing wheat, Isaiah in the Temple, Jeremiah the teenaged boy, Amos herding goats, Paul in the midst of a journey to Damascus, the Mary after her engagement to Joseph, or the one in our Gospel lesson where Peter, in answer to Jesus' question, suddenly says, "*You are the Messiah,*"— it struck me that in all of them, there is a similar pattern, a pattern that may actually help us understand our own experiences, particularly those experiences that have been revelatory for us as well.

The first element in that pattern is that the experience of revelation is always initiated by God, not by the human recipient. Nowhere in the scriptures does someone receive a revelation of God's reality and a sense of calling to some vocation in response to something they are consciously doing to try to make it happen. That is why I am always skeptical of any forms of religious piety which seem designed to work oneself into some sort of ecstatic form of consciousness in order to try to have an encounter with God. I know too well how powerful and deceptive the human mind and consciousness can be; genuine revelation comes not at our initiative but at God's. Otherwise, God is only a projection of our own human unconscious needs and desires. God always initiates the encounter.

The second aspect of this pattern is that the encounter almost always comes in the midst of the person's daily life or ordinary round of duties. It's never part of some grand spectacle or extraordinary set of circumstances. Moses was herding goats; Peter's moment, when he suddenly recognized Jesus as the Messiah came when Jesus was asking his disciples what the scuttlebutt on the street was saying about who he was. Some event or place or interaction, ordinary in itself, suddenly becomes a window into eternity, and we become aware that we are on holy ground. We become aware of it, we enter it, we are sometimes jolted into it, but we do not control it.

Annie Dillard, in her wonderful book *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, tells of such an experience she had. She had once read a news report of a young girl who had been blind, but after surgery was able to see for the first time. When the doctors removed her bandages, she saw what she described a "tree with the lights in it." Annie Dillard says, "*It was for this tree that I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day, I was walking along Tinker Creek, thinking of nothing at all and I saw*

the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame [from the setting sun]. I stood on the grass, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted up and struck."

A third element in the pattern is that the revelation or insight that both Moses and Peter received, was that they were in the presence of a God whom they could not understand, explain, or control. The God in whose awesome presence Moses stands, is not just any old garden-variety ancestral God who can be placated or appeased by a few sacrificial goats. Nor is the Messiah whom Peter confesses a garden variety messiah who will fulfill Israel's expectations of how a good messiah should act. This God is not the God whose will religious leaders of whatever stripe can claim to have a lock on, a God to whom we can appeal to back our own agendas or political programs. One could wish Pat Robertson had pondered this mystery a little more; maybe it would have prevented him from rising to such heights of hubris, such appalling confidence that his will and God's will are one and the same, that he could call for the assassination of the president of Venezuela as he did publicly this past week. No wonder religion and God get a bad name. No, this God is not be described or explained or co-opted or manipulated. This God is the Ultimate Mystery before whom mortals can only keep silent.

The fourth element comes when Moses and Peter try, as many of us try, to wiggle out of the level of personal commitment that they senses this encounter will demand from them.

Peter's commitment to Jesus as the Messiah gets shaky when Jesus begins talking about a cross in his and Peter's future. Moses doesn't really want to go back to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh. So he first of all objects that he's not up to the task: "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh.*" I'm a nobody. Who would listen to me? When God says, "Don't worry, I'll make you adequate for the task," Moses then says, "*But who are you? Whom shall I say sent me? If the Israelites ask me, 'Who appointed you to be our leader?' or Pharaoh asks me, 'Who is your God that I should listen to hm?' what shall I say?*"

And this is where he gets into deep waters (if one can be said to get into deep water in the desert). Moses is not expecting the answer he gets. That is another test of true revelation; if the answer were expected there would be nothing revelatory about it. *God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am."* Or perhaps, given the tense of the Hebrew verb "to be," for that's the name God gives— simply the future tense of the verb "to be" — *I Will Be Who I Will Be.* In Paul Tillich's well-known phrase, Moses is here confronted with "the Ultimate Ground" of his own being. Moses's own life will not be strictly his own from this point onward. He has been singled out, chosen, called. His own self-understanding will forever be bound up with this God who has spoken to him.

I think that's the way God encounters us as well. In the midst of our daily lives, we find ourselves, usually unexpectedly brought face to face with those big questions we're usually too busy or too distracted to ask: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my life about? What is really real? What should I be doing with my life? It's those moments that carry within them the possibility of being revelatory moments. We are in the presence of the Ultimate Ground of our existence. God has us by the collar and is shaking us and saying, "Listen up. I've got work for you to do."

That's why the moment of revelation is

bound up inextricably with the question of vocation, and this is the final part of the pattern in all these biblical call stories. To learn who God is in this relational encounter is to learn who we are and what our lives are about and what direction we have to go. A true revelation of God is never simply a private thing designed to make us feel spiritual or satisfy our need for religious experiences. A true revelation of God is a transforming experience that sets us on a new course; it always carries with it a call for obedience, for trust, for action. The knowledge of God gained in the encounter is always accompanied by the call, "*Come, I will send you to Pharaoh,*" or "*If anyone wants to come after me, he must shoulder his cross and follow me.*" Always, always, the revelation of the mystery of God is, at the same time, a call to participate in God's redeeming and liberating work in the world. If we truly encounter God, a response will be demanded from us, a response of faith and obedience.

William Sloane Coffin, in his book *Once to Every Man*, has a passage about this moment of revelation that is particularly good, I think:

Religious truths, like those of music, are probably apprehended on a deeper level than they are ever comprehended. Like music, revelation is not so much the solution of mystery as it is the disclosure of new mystery. So the leap of faith is not a leap of thought after all. The leap of faith is really a leap of action. Faith is not believing without proof; it is trusting without reservation.

It is that unreserved trusting of our lives to that Ultimate Mystery that brings us that personal knowledge of God and of ourselves in relationship to God. That's the moment of decision, of conversion, of revelation.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish statesman who became perhaps the greatest Secretary General of the United Nations, and a person of deep faith and deep knowledge of God,

described his own moment of revelation and acceptance of his vocation this way, *“I don’t remember when, or even who or what put the question. I only know that at some point, I said ‘Yes’ to Someone or something, and from that moment on my life has had meaning and direction.”*

In a day when so many of us are seeking a meaning and direction larger than that offered by soul-destroying consumerism or the brilliant but cold technology that increasingly dominates our lives, or by the cynicism that pervades so much of our political and cultural life, this story of revelation offers a word of promise. Accepting our vocation to participate in God’s renewing and liberating work, as Moses did, does not mean that all our problems will be solved nor does it guarantee that we will be successful. Moses’ acceptance gained him the thoroughly thankless task of leading a recalcitrant people to freedom, often against their wishes, and he himself never made it to the Promised Land. Jesus’ acceptance of his vocation led to crucifixion, and so did Peter’s. Yet by trusting without reservation, they became instruments in God’s redeeming work in the world, and through them, the lives of many were transformed by hope.

That possibility exists for every one of us as well. We may not be a Moses or a Peter or a Mary whose stories will be told two millenia from now. But when we find ourselves in that moment of encounter with God, if we will muster up the courage to say ‘yes,’ we will discover that our lives will begin to take on a meaning and a purpose that will transform not only us, but the world around us as well.