

Of burning bushes and holy ground

03, Sept. 2017 sermon by Wendell Wiebe-Powell

inspiration: Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21, Matt.16: 21-28 and LIFE

The shepherd Moses had taken his father's flock probably a good two days from the camp; farther than was the usual practice for sheep herders. He ended up in Horeb; likely a rather barren place with ravines and rock outcroppings. It's there that Moses comes across the strangest thing; a bush engulfed in flames without being consumed! Sometimes it's those unfamiliar places and situations, out beyond our well-known places and patterns that we are more able to see with new eyes.

So what does Moses do when he comes across this strange thing? Does he flee in terror? Does he push on; saying to him self; that's amazing but I have to push on to the next green valley or else this flock will be in trouble and I'll catch heck from my father-in-law? Does he push on like the dutiful priest and Levite in the story of the good Samaritan? No, **he turns aside and looks**. When he turned aside to see, it was **then** that God called to him; the I AM the one who can not be defined, contained by image, the One who is not domesticated, colonized, the untamed mystery that engages Moses and Jesus in WILD places.

On one hand, God has been made known to us in one who walked the dusty paths of Galilee and Judea, Emmanuel, God with us, revealed, embodied love and shalom; kin-dom of God breaking forth on earth. On the other hand this One is also mystery, beyond our knowing, simply... I AM... THAT... I AM.... grace not of our doing, love that flows freely...without condition, the good that overcomes evil, the Spirit that burns for those who turn and see in the endangered wild places in our hearts **and** in nature and, the awe inspired by the chorus of autumn crickets under the vault of stars, the shine of a child's eyes, the thundering waves...before whom sometimes the only thing we can do is simply be...be-hold....wonder. Is room in our hearts to hold both the embodied One **AND** the mystery beyond our knowing?

Now regarding this bush that was burning without being consumed... Could this be an image for the flame that burns in our hearts, empowering us to love one another even to the extent of returning good for evil; breaking age old cycles of fear, hatred and violence; a flame that burns in our hearts for justice peace and love; a flame of passion that burns but does not consume us. I believe it was the flame in my sister's eyes; burning in her heart even though her body wasted away; even though she lost her ability to speak, to eat and... finally... to even breathe on her own? Her love and her prayer for her family and for the Earth was not extinguished... is not extinguished... dances passionately, whimsically like the beautiful swallow tail butterfly that fluttered near some of us / her family after she passed away. It's a mystery but that's how I imagine it.

What have been our experiences when we don't let the pressures of life; our obligations, plans, worries keep us from stopping what we are doing and turning aside and seeing? The Samaritan undoubtedly experienced a deeper presence of God as he put aside his plans to minister to the wounded traveler than the priest and Levite who hurried on to their appointments. In the words of M.K. Gandhi, "If you don't find God in the next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further." Do we see the burning bushes in our midst? Do we realize when we are on holy ground? If we do, God will call us; maybe to do small things or maybe to do big things and whether big or small, it often involves stretching beyond our comfort zone. Maybe that's what we're sometimes afraid of. It's safer to remain in the familiarity and safety of camp rather than venturing into the wilderness where one might encounter strange things like burning bushes! But if we turn aside and look and answer, "here I am," like Moses, if we have reverence for the holy ground on which we stand, if we die to our fears, our individual and collective self doubt, God **WILL** be with us. God will give us courage to live out the kind of alternative vision that Jesus embodied and Paul wrote about to the church in Rome... God will strengthen us to hold fast to

what is good, to love one another with mutual affection, to outdo one another in showing honor. We might respond like Moses and say, “who am I” to do such things...little me. But putting one foot in front of the other in responding however tentatively, in practicing holy-ground and God-with-us awareness, we will, as Paul urges the faithful, grow in zeal and in the passion of our spirit. We will grow in our ability to rejoice in hope, to be patient in suffering, to persevere in prayer – *as my sister Rebecca did to her last breath* – to contribute to the needs of the saints, grow in our ability to extend hospitality to strangers, to bless those who persecute us, to be empowered to keep from cursing them, to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, to live in harmony with each other, avoiding being haughty and wiser than we are but rather associating with the lowly, we will grow in our courage to step outside the age old cycle of repaying evil for evil but rather live peaceably, restraining ourselves from vengeance... **even** to the extent of serving the needs of our enemies and keeping from being overcome by evil – *and Lord knows, that’s a huge temptation in this day and age! [KKK in Charlottesville, policy maker denial of human causes of climate change, ...and also personal traumas and struggles that can overwhelm us...cause us to succumb to fatalism and cynicism]*. We can find in the rich imagery and challenges of these passages a prescription not only to keep us from being overcome **by** evil but to but **overcome** evil and to overcome it with **good!** Now that distillation of the sermon of the Mt. and several other key texts by Paul is a tall order. It’s a snap shot of the kin-dom of God that Jesus exemplified and taught. It’s a wonderful set of words but daunting; easily to be avoided when the rubber hits the road in our daily lives when our old tendencies creep into our hearts and actions. Living in this alternative way, requires dieing to our old self and selfishness. Perhaps that’s a lot of what it means to, “take up our cross,” not necessarily going out in the blaze of a martyr but the little dieings to our self centered tendencies in our daily messy, complicated walk of our lives and in our dieing, we find an enlivening and community like never before.

Sometimes I wonder if the rapped and pillaged Earth and all the creatures who suffer within her are crying out like Jesus on the cross, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But I believe that the grinding of exploitation and oppression today does not escape the heart of God in our time just as it did not escape the heart of God in Moses’ day. Even though I have sometimes lost faith about these things, I will proclaim that God also hears the cries and desperation of the world and of our inner heart and soul in our personal struggles.

And so we are called – like Moses – to participate in the deliverance of those who suffer under the corporate and political Pharos of our day as well as those who struggle in their...in our... personal lives. We are understandably tempted to say with Moses, “who am I...who are WE that we should confront the powers, the domination systems. “Its just little old us.” But God calls us to get off of this, “its just little me” and “little us” sniveling. It’s not just little us. Saying that is a convenient circling the wagons in the encampment of the familiar; safe from the wild undomesticated places with burning bushes. It’s not just little us because of this...because... as we step into the risky places... responding to God’s call, we are not alone. God will be with us even through the valley of the shadow of death. We are not alone because God gives us fellow travelers with a rich array of gifts and abilities [look around you] God knits together solidarity for the work of inward and outward deliverance – if we have eyes to see it – across denominations, religions, ethnicity and many other customary dividing lines. But as Bennie Krauss reminded us, answering this call to participate in the work of deliverance involves paying careful attention to the voices, the stories and the lead of the poor and the oppressed; avoiding the assumption that we have the answers. Among the often barren and craggy wilderness of those suffering poverty and oppression, we may find the flame of God guiding us.

In saying with Moses, “here am I,” we are accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses present and who have passed into the mystery beyond our knowing. Generations of my relatives took months

long ship voyages sometimes with storm waves crashing over the decks, to unknown places to bring the light of Christ. But they were also greatly blessed with broader and deeper understanding from those they encountered. Others of my extended family – and here at FoH – have chosen to not to work overseas but they have shown that facing challenges that stretch us, building community and finding mystery are often right under our noses! As my diverse extended family gathered recently at my uncle David's home on a hill overlooking the Great Plains of Nebraska, we beheld together sunsets words can not begin to describe, wondered at lightning that streaked across the vault of the inky night sky and then... the midday sun grew dark; eclipsed by the moon; Venus and Jupiter shining as though it were night! We beheld. With all our collective international experience, our education, our understandings, we were humbled before the indescribable mystery of heaven and earth.

WE ARE NOT ALONE. And in that solidarity of souls, there is courage to take up our cross, to face evil and say, we will not succumb to your ways but will do good in return, love in return, we will not be overcome by the evil of our time but we will OVERCOME evil with good. We can stand and move in this new realm even in the face of dark portents and seemingly insurmountable odds because we are not alone but **also** because we know that death does not have the last word. The One who was crucified by the death producing system of domination is resurrected. The human one who was slain is alive and among us and even within us if we have hearts open to receive. Love eternal courses through our veins when we turn and see the passionate flame that does not consume but enlivens and encourages uskind of like those power milk biscuits that give shy persons the courage to do what needs to be done.

Now, I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with those places in life that are safe and familiar. After all, what would be the point of launching off on voyages into the unknown if we didn't have hope that God would lead us into safe harbor? It's no accident that images of home are

associated with deep longing of the heart and heaven. However, if we remain in our safe zones and don't **also** venture out in faith and trust into those risky places of healing, deliverance and solidarity across God's great patchwork quilt, if we don't step out into the deep water from time to time, I think our soul atrophies and the a world in travail has that much less life-giving energy.

Now just an end note regarding Peter's rebuke to Jesus after Jesus told the disciples what was going to happen to him. Peter meant well. He was only trying to protect this one who he loved and revered from a cruel death. Jesus' reaction, commanding the accuser or tempter to get behind him, sounds unduly harsh. But this Christ is also the Human One...the one who with great drops of sweat pleaded with God to remove the "cup" of the looming prospect of his execution, the one who cried out on the cross, "...why have you forsaken me." This human one was likely already felt the temptation to take a different path and the fact that he reacted so strongly to Peter's desire to keep him from being killed indicates that those words from Peter sounded good on one level and were tempting. The one who just a few passages before Jesus had called The Rock, how had become "a stumbling block". Jesus had to react forcefully to keep on the path of life... the path that is so threatening to the domination system that it squelches or even kills those don't back down. But in remaining faithful to the way of life, love and justice, Jesus broke the chains of death producing patterns; opening the way for us to join in the enlivening kin-dom of God on earth. In saying, "here I am"... "here... we... are," to this daring alternative vision, we find courage in solidarity with each other and in the company of the One who has been embodied and revealed among us but also the incomprehensible mystery of I AM.