

THE BURNING BUSH

(No. 1 in the series on "The Bible's Greatest Hits")

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

January 9, 1977

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Exodus 3:3-5

"And Moses said, 'I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.' When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here am I.' Then he said, 'Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'"

This is the original mountaintop experience. All others in recorded history are colored by the remembrance of this one. Like all mountaintop experiences this one that comes to Moses out in the wilderness is intensely personal. And yet as matters turned out it will become a very public event, one of the most far-reaching public events on record.

No one, least of all Moses, expects anything so momentous to occur in such a place at such a time while he is herding sheep. Many years ago a Bible professor named Camden Corburn summed up Moses' situation this way:

A poor man, an old man, a lonely man is tending his sheep on Mount Horeb. He is a failure. He had a chance once. Once he lived in the city and was thought well of at court; but because of certain ideals of his he threw up all this - and has missed a career. He was a big man once; but that was long ago. He is nobody now. He has been nobody for forty years.

That is the scene. Yet with the possible exception of the first Good Friday and Easter, no event over the next thirty odd centuries will prove more significant than what is about to happen to Moses this day - no, not the discovery of America, not the battle of Waterloo, not the first landing on the moon. Not only what we call our religion, but our whole cultural inheritance, our remembrance of things past and our hope for things to come will be marked indelibly by what happens to this old man on the mountain. You and I could not possibly be the kind of persons we are were it not that one day a political refugee turned herdsman happened to notice an odd-looking shrub on the side of Mount Horeb.

The burning bush. What was it and what was its purpose? We can try to explain it in some way appealing to the modern mind. We may hypothesize that the sun hung low and deep orange on the horizon and that it struck the bush from such an angle as to make it seem ablaze. We all have seen sights like that. But such explanations are likely to lead us astray from the meaning of this event. We do best not to explain the bush, but to observe what it does. The bush is a sign, a pointer to something far more decisive than the bush itself. The bush brings into expression that moment when Moses becomes aware that he stands in the presence of one who calls his name and who will change the course of his life forever. The bush marks a crossing onto holy ground. In itself the burning bush is only a curiosity. But as a sign it marks the beginning of a journey that leads into Egypt and out again through this wilderness into the land of promise and then down through the prophets to Jesus of Nazareth and out across the Roman Empire and down through the history of the church until it arrives at you and me.

Well, we are grateful. But we may wonder whether in our time too there might be bushes that burn, but are not consumed. Maybe we too might discover such a shrub upon the mountainside, a shrub that might become a sign for us that there is one who calls our names. So then, this morning I should like to take up two practical questions:

Where are you likely to run across such a burning bush?
and

What is likely to happen if you do?

Where to find the burning bush? I suppose you might try going to Mt. Horeb yourself. It is a course of action that others have tried before with some success. Moses went back there again some years later, talked with God again, and received the Ten Commandments (that is, assuming Horeb and Sinai are the same mountain. We cannot be sure.) Elijah fled there when he was threatened by Queen Jezebel. It is not reported that he saw such a bush on Mt. Horeb. But while he hid out in a cave, he heard the wind, and after the wind there came an earthquake, and after the earthquake, a fire, and after the fire a "still, small voice." Apparently it took more to attract Elijah's attention than it did for Moses. Again and again people returned to the holy mountain seeking inspiration. There is still a monastery there, I believe.

You might travel to Mount Horeb yourself. It is a long way to go, however, and I suspect that travel there is limited. The Sinai peninsula is disputed territory. It might be better to choose some closer place of retreat, some place with sacred associations, a chapel, a retreat center or some personal resort where in the past a bush has burned. Special places set aside for prayer and worship may possess a special power to become holy ground.

But I think we are overlooking something about Moses' experience. So far as we know until the moment when the burning bush caught his eye, Moses never thought of Horeb as the mountain of God. He may have passed this place a dozen times before, tending the flocks of his father-in-law. He never noticed anything very extraordinary about the place, except perhaps, that the mountain was somewhat higher than others in the neighborhood. The ground here always appeared to be ordinary ground. The soil here was the same sort of soil as could be found on the next mountain; the rocks were the same sort of rocks; the vegetation was the same. Even that bush was there before, looking much like a thousand other bushes in the area. Nor is Moses doing anything different today from what he has done on other days. He is just looking after the sheep and the goats as usual. And so it is that when the voice calls his name, "Moses, Moses," and orders him, "Take off your shoes, you are standing on holy ground," Moses is standing on the same sort of ground he is accustomed to stand on every day of his life.

Therefore, for us to seek the burning bush on Mount Horeb probably would be a mistake. We do not tend flocks on Mount Horeb. If we are to discover ourselves on holy ground most likely that will happen where we live and work. It is there that the bush will burn for us.

And what form will the bush take for us? Who knows? Perhaps a church steeple looming up ahead of us as we drive home, reminding us that the human soul is made to aspire and that none of us can live by bread alone. Perhaps a funeral procession going by reminding us that time runs out and eternity stands at our fingertips. Perhaps the glimpse of one of our children coming

down the street, or the sight of some sudden splendor in the sky that surprises us into joy. Who knows how the angel of the Lord will appear? But something on the scene of our everyday life will catch hold of us and lift us out of ourselves for a moment, and make us prickly with awe as we perceive the common ground on which we stand is the dwelling place of the Lord.

Where are you likely to come across the burning bush?

Right where you are.

Now the second question was: What is likely to happen if you do see the burning bush?

The answer is that you are likely to be called into the service of God's caring for the world.

Let us consider again what the Lord said to Moses:

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites etc.... And now, behold the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

There is a pattern here that brings to mind those three famous sentences of Julius Caesar in his work on the Gallic wars, three sentences that in Latin required only three words:

"I came. I saw. I conquered."

The pattern here is similar and yet very different.

"I have seen. I know. I have come down."

"I have seen the affliction of my people."

There was a time when Moses saw too. Back in Egypt when he saw his people mistreated his blood boiled and when he saw them disunited, he wanted to bring them together. But his seeing did not seem to help. When he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew, Moses became a wanted man. When he tried to break up a fight between two of his own people, the antagonists turned their anger on him. Moses left the country then. For a long time he has not seen anything of the affliction of his people.

It is doubtful that he cares to see. Moses has made a new life for himself. It is a humble life, but it is comfortable. He is a family man now. His father-in-law, Jethro, is an important man here and he has befriended Moses. Moses is content to dwell with Jethro and to look after his flocks. It is a quiet life, a serene life. Moses no longer sees the affliction of his people. Perhaps he no longer cares. They were not very grateful for his caring in the past.

"I know their sufferings." Knowing suggests a deeper, more informed perception. It suggests that having seen what is wrong the Lord has investigated the matter more thoroughly. Perhaps at one time Moses did that too. In the household of Pharaoh, he was in a position to know about what was going on in the Land of Goshen. He possessed some inside information, perhaps, on official policy respecting the Hebrews. Perhaps he even formed some theories of his own as to how he might relieve their burdens.

But Moses has been out of circulation for a long time and he cannot claim much knowledge any more. And he probably is contented to keep things that way. People see a lot of things. They see that there is violence in the streets. They see that there is hunger and alcoholism and the abuse of children. They see that there is corruption in high places. They see that there is harsh political oppression in many parts of the world. They see that their neighbors are troubled and perplexed and sometimes near to despair. People see a lot of things. But they would rather not know. What you don't know won't hurt you. It is probably like that with Moses. Even when he cannot help seeing, he would just as soon not know.

"I have come down to deliver." Like Caesar the Lord is action-oriented. And like Caesar he always is looking for recruits.

"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people..."

Of course, Moses doesn't want to go. What wonderful realism there is in the Bible! Here is the greatest hero in Jewish history at the decisive turning point of his life, and he tries to chuck the whole thing. "Who am I to go?" he says. "Find somebody else." Here is Moses in the midst of his great mountain top experience, - burning bush, the voice calling him by name, the discovery of holy ground, - and he tries to get away. It is typical of the Bible.

It is typical too that the mountaintop experience should bring with it a certain disillusionment. We delight in the experience. We want that moment of religious ecstasy. We exult in moving up to some higher level of consciousness. We are reassured by this confirmation of our faith, this epiphany of the Lord, which is to say, this making known of his presence. It's a good trip.

But in the Bible nobody is ever permitted just to enjoy such an experience. In the Bible an epiphany always means that one is given something to do. "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh..."

What is likely to happen when you discover the burning bush? You will be enlisted in God's caring for the world. You will be asked to join the Lord in seeing, in knowing, in coming down to deliver. Your summons may not be on so grand a scale as an exodus out of Egypt. It may not make history. It may be merely that you are sent to someone whom you happen to pass that day in the street. But you will be sent if you see the burning bush and go to look and know that your name is called on the ground where you stand.