

## O.T. Tales – 4

### “Burning Bushes...and Other Calls from God”

Exodus 3

John 8:12/Matthew 5:14-16

Psalm 46:10

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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First United Presbyterian Church

Bellefontaine, Ohio

Now, I need to begin with a confession this morning. There is, I will admit, a certain amount of hypocrisy in what I want to share with you today. I know that! While encouraging OTHER people to slow down and discover the presence of God in their lives, I myself continue to run life at a hectic pace – dashing around...running all kinds of errands...reading all kinds of books...attending all kinds of meetings...responding to all kinds of needs, both real and imagined – yet all the while IGNORING the voice within me that tells me to *slow down* a little...to *stop* for just a minute...to *wait upon the Lord* every now and then...to *be still* and know that GOD is God.

So when I ran smack dab into our scripture passage from Exodus this past week – the story of Moses and the burning bush – I immediately realized it was a Word from the Lord tailor made for ME...and maybe for YOU as well...maybe for ALL of us who are afflicted with all the “busyness” that plagues our busy lives.

Here’s how the story goes. Moses, you will remember, is the son of Hebrew slaves who has been raised within the wealth and luxury of Pharaoh’s palace only to become a fugitive from justice when he kills an Egyptian taskmaster who is beating a Jewish slave. So Moses flees Egypt and travels some two hundred miles across the Sinai peninsula to the Land of Midian, where he marries a Midianite woman and plans, presumably, to hide himself away for the rest of his life. It’s a comfortable exile and Moses has pretty much everything he wants...the primary thing being his anonymity among the people he has adopted as his own. His father-in-law Jethro, after all, is a well-to-do priest with plenty of land and livestock, so Moses goes to work for Jethro tending his flocks. And gradually, all of his bad memories of his days back in Egypt begin to fade away.

But then one day, while he is minding his own business, tending Jethro’s flock in the high country around Mt. Sinai, Moses sees a bush, out in the middle of nowhere, burning for all its worth. Well Moses notices the bush and says, “Hey?! What’s going on here? How did this bush catch on fire?” And he begins to consider the possibilities. But as long as Moses stands there watching the burning bush...pondering how it started burning, he never sees a single twig turn to ash. Like the Energizer Bunny, it just keeps going and going and going – burning and burning and burning. All of which leads Moses to wonder “Why is this bush burning, but not burning up? I’m going to go closer and find out!” he says. “I’m going to stop what I’m doing for a little while and see what’s going on here!”

And right then...PRECISELY THEN...God knows Moses is a keeper. When the Lord sees that Moses has turned aside from the “busyness” of what he’s doing to LOOK at this wonder before him...this *miracle* right under his nose...this burning bush that doesn’t burn up...THAT’S when God’s speaks to Moses from the middle of the burning bush – calling Moses by name and telling him to take his shoes off, for the ground on which he is standing is HOLY ground.

Which Moses does, of course, immediately falling to his knees and covering his face -- for he suddenly realizes he is in the presence of something holy. But this is not just ANY old god here...some “nature god” Moses has encountered. And it is NOT one of the “lesser gods” that the people of the area worshipped. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...the God of Moses’ very ancestors and forbearers...the God who has SEEN the plight of His people who are suffering in the bondage of slavery in Egypt and is now calling Moses...MOSES HIMSELF...to personally go and arrange for their release.

And yet, all of this sounds like a very BAD IDEA to Moses, you see. In the first place, he’s a wanted man., he tells God. If he goes back to Egypt...well, who knows what would happen to him. And in the second place, Moses has some major misgivings about his leadership ability. “Who am I that I should bring

*the Israelites out of Egypt?” he asks the burning bush. “I...I...I...can’t t-t-talk t-t-t-oo g-g-g-g-ood! A...a...and b...b...besides, God, I don’t even know your name! Who am supposed to say it is that SENT me to tell old Pharaoh to “let my people go!”*

To which God replies, *“I am who I am, Moses! Tell them ‘I AM’ sent you! And ‘I AM’ with you always!*

Now, there’s a lot that happens from here on out, but suffice it to say that as the story goes along, Moses decides to BELIEVE the burning bush and the God who talks from the middle of it. He accepts his calls, and though he gets to TALK with God frequently after that, Moses never gets to see more than the backside of God again. And yet, even an encounter with God’s BACKSIDE proves positively illuminating for Moses. Because after a number of encounters with the holy presence of the Lord, Moses OWN face begins to shine...to shine with such a bright and shining luminescence that he frightens those around him...such that he has to take to wearing a veil to cover the light of the God which is shining through him. Eventually, of course, Moses delivers the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, thereby becoming one of, if not THE outstanding hero of the Old Testament story...all because he took the time to turn away from the busyness of his life and behold the presence of God in a burning bush.

Ah, but those were the GOOD OLD DAYS, weren’t they? Burning bushes...angels of the Lord...pillars of fire...clouds of smoke...parted seas...heavenly doves...voices from on high – all those UNMISTAKABLE signs of the Lord’s presence with us always. What most of us wouldn’t give for a burning bush every now and then...for one clear sign from the Lord...for one clear word from on high...for one pillar of fire leading us through the wilderness of our lives...for one voice from heaven assuring us that God is with us always. What we wouldn’t GIVE to have God speak to us in such a clear and certain way!

But then again, I stay so BUSY so much of the time that I wonder if I would even SEE a pillar of fire...if I would even be AWARE of a parted sea...if I could even HEAR a voice from on high. I’m so often focused on myself and what I’VE got to do that I wonder if I would even NOTICE a burning bush even if it was right in front of me. And even if I DID notice the burning bush, I’m afraid that, knowing what happened to Moses, I might just turn aside and not LOOK at it for fear of what that burning bush might be asking me to do. So maybe I’d get even BUSIER with my life...have even MORE things that I’m running around doing...so I won’t even have to PAY ATTENTION to that burning bush over there!

*Burning bush? WHAT burning bush! I don’t see any burning bush! A burning bush? Don’t be ridiculous I haven’t got TIME for such nonsense!*

*A burning bush? Really? Well, there’s got to be some LOGICAL explanation!*

*A burning bush? Well for heaven’s sake, will someone PLEASE go over there and put it out! I mean REALLY! Someone might get BURNED by such a thing!*

Writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a friend of hers that’s not nearly as busy as Taylor is. She says her friend takes a lot of walks. And while she says her friend has never claimed to have seen a burning bush, she does admit to talking quite frequently to the TREES. Once, her friend says, she was walking along fretting about this or that...about what she ought to be DOING...or FIXING...or CHANGING about her...and other people’s lives...when this big oak tree says to her *“Hey, why do you WORRY so much?” Watch me be a tree!”* So Taylor’s friend stood there a few minutes and watched the tree be a perfectly grand and wonderful tree...just as it was. And then the big oak tree said to her, *“Okay, now YOU go be who God created YOU to be! And quit WORRYING about it so much!”* So she did.

Another time, Taylor says her friend was mulling over everything in her life that was going wrong – her marriage...her family...her job...her friends – when she came across a maple tree with great upswept branches. *“Try it!”* the maple tree called out to her. So that’s exactly what Taylor said her friend did...lifting her arms and looking into the deep blue sky. *“All of us sudden,”* Taylor’s friend said, *“it was like the light of God shinning into my life! I understood that what the tree was doing was a gesture of thankfulness and praise to the God who had created it and blessed it’s life in innumerable ways!”*

*“Oh thank you! THANK YOU!”* she said to the tree.

*“You’re welcome!”* the tree replied. *“But don’t thank me! Thank God!”*

But it’s not just the TREES that talk to her friend, Taylor goes on to say. Once it was a stunning sunset that said, *“Don’t worry so much about the world. I can handle it!”*

Once it was the ocean who told her, *“I’m a lot bigger than you are!”* Once it was a friend who said, *“No matter what happens, I’ll be with you, always!”*

Once it was a new-born baby who assured her that no matter how hard or mean or cruel life could sometimes be, God was in the business of creating and recreating all things new all the time.

Once it was some river rapids that said, *"I know you're going through a really rough spot in your life right now, but there's a quiet stretch of calm just a little further along. Trust me!"*

Trust me! Trust the oak tree...trust the maple...trust the sunset...trust the friend...trust the baby...trust the river...trust the Word...trust the Lord.

Trust God to be with you, ALWAYS. Trust God to inhabit ALL of life and to USE all of life to announce God's presence. And trust YOURSELF to turn aside and notice.

*"Earth is crammed with heaven,"* wrote poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *"each common bush AFLAME with God. Yet only those who take time to SEE take off their shoes. The rest sit around and pick blackberries."* Or tend sheep. Or run errands. Or do busy work. Or fill their lives with so much noise...so many voices...so many things...so much to DO...that they can never hear...or see...or notice God when, in reality, God is all around them – ALWAYS!

Once upon a time a man whispered, *"God speak to me,"* and a meadowlark sang. But the man did not hear.

So the man yelled, *"God SPEAK to me!"* And thunder rolled across the sky. But the man did not listen.

The man look around and said, *"God, let me SEE you."* And a star shone brightly. But the man did not notice.

*"God, show me a miracle,"* he demanded. And a new life was born. But the man took no notice.

In despair, the man cried out, *"God, touch me, and let me know you are here!"* So God reached down and touched the man, but the man brushed away the butterfly and walked on, angry that God never answered his prayers.

So I guess what I want to say to YOU this morning is what I want to say most of all to MYSELF. And that is to *SLOW DOWN*, every now and then. To *STOP*, every once in awhile. To *BE QUIET and STILL* from time to time. *NOTICE* the burning bushes around you...or the wind rustling the leaves on the trees...or the sunset that tells you God is in his heaven. *LISTEN* to the still, small voice whispering in your ear. *PAY ATTENTION* to the presence of God all around you. *TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES* from time to time and acknowledge that the ground you are standing on is HOLY ground. *STOP* what you're doing every once in awhile in order to *TURN ASIDE* and notice the sacred all around you – in the heat of the sun...the power of a thunderstorm...the face of a friend...the cry of a child. Look into every event and happening...every joy and sorrow...every success and failure...every difficulty and triumph – the big and the small...the hoped for and the feared...the good and the bad...the grand and the common – looking into it ALL for God's presence...AND for God's call in your life. Believe that *WHATEVER* is going on, God is *IN* it and can *USE* both the event and you...to achieve God's purposes in the world and in your life.

And then...THEN...if you're willing...I invite you to go even one step further. Once you've gotten the knack for seeing burning bushes, allow God to set YOU on fire...so that you might be for someone else the presence and call of God in THEIR lives. Like Moses whose face shone so brightly he had to cover it with a veil, allow the wondrous, bright and shining light of God to shine THROUGH YOU.

Several years ago, Virginia Shafer came out of church one Sunday morning and said to me, *"Your face was absolutely SHINING today, Rob!"* And I said, *"Why THANK YOU, Virginia!"* -- thinking, of course, that she was complementing me on what a wonderful job I had done with the worship service and the MAGNIFICENT sermon I had just preached.

But before I could say, *"How kind of you to notice!"* Virginia went on to say, *"Yes! While you were serving communion to the Elders, the sun was shining on the communion plates and reflecting on your face and you were just GLOWING!"*

Which is precisely the way it SHOULD be, isn't it! NONE of us glow, in and of ourselves. NONE of us shine because of our own glory. NONE of us burn because of our own internal flame. It is always GOD glowing THROUGH us...God shining ON us...God burning IN us that causes us to glow.

But if God can use the likes of even US to be God's "burning bushes"...who might just help someone else to slow down...stop...turn aside and become aware of God's presence in their lives...then to GOD be the glory.

And if God can take the likes of you and me and USE us to be His "lights" through whom the light of God shines into the darkness of someone else's dark and weary world...then to GOD be the glory.

What was it that God said to us through his son, Jesus? "*I am the light of the world,*"...or something like that. But Jesus didn't stop there, now did he? He went on to say, "*YOU are the light of the world. So let your light shine before ALL people that they may see YOU...may see YOUR bush burning...may see YOUR shining light...and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*" (John 8:12/Matthew 5:14-16)

So slow down...turn aside...check out the burning bushes in your life. Just BE STILL and know that GOD is God!

And to God be the glory, both now and forever more! Amen!

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