

**Sermon**  
August 2020

Sunday 30

Lesson                      Exodus 3: 1 – 15

One of the treasures of our tradition in the Church of Scotland is our emblem and the words which appear along with it. First used in 1691, a representation of the burning bush appeared on printed copies of *The Principal Acts of the General Assembly*. The Latin words, *Nec Tamen Consumebatur*, mean ‘Yet, it was not consumed’. Alongside the Church of Scotland and many Presbyterian churches throughout the world, the emblem of the Presbyterian Church in the United States is a cross, dove and the flames of the burning bush.

*Nec Tamen Consumeatur.* These Latin words are lifted from the Book of Exodus: it is the story of Moses' mystical encounter with God at the burning bush. Leading the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses wandered deep into the wilderness; he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Alone, he saw an angel of the LORD appear to him as a fire blazing out from the centre of a bush. In Hebrew, it says that Moses 'gazed' into the bush; he saw that the bush was not consumed. Moses stopped and turned aside in order to approach this great, remarkable sight. As he did so, God saw that he had turned aside to look and so called out to him, 'Moses, Moses!' Moses replied, 'Here I am'.

For a moment, place yourself deep in the wilderness, high up on the isolated mountain of Horeb, feel the heat of the Middle Eastern sun upon your brow, let the sun's brightness dazzle your eye and, with your eyes closed, listen to the breeze and earth's silence. In Scripture, symbolism is everywhere. The wilderness may be a physical desert place, but it may also be the emptiness of the human soul; it is in the soul, the consciousness, that we encounter the Eternal. In the Jewish tradition, some say that it was the Archangel Michael who appeared to Moses; others that it was the angel Gabriel. In the Christian tradition, it was Gabriel who appeared to Mary. The name 'Gabriel' means 'God is my strength'. Angels were a symbol of the *Shekinah*, God's ethereal Presence. What took place on that

mountain top? In a mystical sense, for Moses and for us, is Horeb located in the human heart?

In the rabbinic tradition, the bush is said to be a thorn bush. The rabbis said that ‘not even a thorn bush is void of God’s presence’. In the midst of the bush, Moses saw the fire of God, the heavenly fire. It may be that the fire was not the red flames visible to the natural eye but rather a metaphor: a symbol of God’s intense, powerful, insubstantial, dangerous and illuminating Presence. In Isaiah, the prophet said:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts:  
the whole earth is full of God’s glory’.

In his poem, *God’s Grandeur*, the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of  
God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook  
foil....

The priest, Teilhard de Chardin, spoke of ‘the fiery  
energy of love and compassion burning at the centre of  
the cosmos’, at the centre of the universe. Scripture is  
to be read imaginatively; life is to be lived  
imaginatively.

In Scripture, God appeared many times. God appeared  
to Abraham and Sarah as three angelic visitors. In the  
darkness, as a stranger God wrestled with Jacob.

Hidden inside a cave, God’s Presence was felt by Elijah  
as the sound of ‘sheerest silence’. Later in Exodus,  
God appeared to Moses as through an impenetrable

cloud. For the Hebrew people, the Ark, a large wooden box, became a symbol of God's Presence, the Divine Mystery in their midst. Many times God said, 'I am with you'. Isaac, Jacob, Joshua, Gideon, Jeremiah and Moses 'heard' God say, 'I am with you'. At Christian baptism, we sing the Aaronic blessing:

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make His face to shine upon you  
and be gracious unto you.  
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,  
and give you peace.

What is that blessing but an assurance that God is with us: God's very face shines upon us! In Psalm 139, the psalmist asked of God:

Where can I go from Your spirit?  
Where can I flee from Your Presence?  
If I climb up to heaven, You are there;

if I make the grave my bed, You are there also.

Perhaps on that mountain top or in a moment of quiet, inner reflection, Moses saw, as if for the first time, that God, the God of love and compassion, was truly with him. Perhaps he saw the fire of God's Spirit burning through creation, through even a thorn bush, and felt himself to be alive in God. With the eye of the heart, of faith, we too can turn aside like Moses, see the Divine and hear the voice of God. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that the miracle of the burning bush is not the fire, nor that the bush was not consumed; the miracle was that Moses stopped. Only when we stop and gaze do we begin to see.

What Moses 'heard' was God's anger at the oppression meted out by the Egyptians and God's anguish and distress at the suffering of the Hebrew slaves. Egypt is a symbol of all that is life-denying; all that diminishes human dignity and strangles human flourishing.

Today, if Moses were again to climb Mount Horeb, what might he hear God say? As last time, Moses may claim that he is not up to the task, that his knowledge is limited, and that he is inadequate: the task is gargantuan, and it cannot be done. What might Moses hear God say? Might Egypt this time be the seemingly unstoppable human behaviour, the self-interest of Pharaoh, destroying the planet, decimating species, and wastelessly consuming finite resources. Is it possible to challenge and defeat *this* Pharaoh? God said to

Moses, 'I am with you'. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that God had nudged Moses for seven days before finally he stopped to gaze. Only when we stop to gaze will we truly see, and truly hear God's anguish and distress. Only when we stop to gaze will a flame of fire become a heart of fire: a heart strong enough to change ourselves and, slowly, change our world.

Amen.