

Exodus 3:1-15
“Don’t Pick the Blackberries”

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There’s a story about a young novice, a student, in the desert who went to his elder, a holy man of God, and said, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little Rule, and my little fast, my prayers, meditation, and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts. Now, what more should I do?” The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said, “Why not be totally changed into fire.”¹

The English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it another way when she said this: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit round it and pick blackberries.”

So I got to hand it to Moses. I wouldn’t have come within 250 yards of that bush. I would have gone blackberry picking. Then again, I’m not like Moses. I don’t stutter. I can spit out all my words smoothly. I’m not at a loss for who and what to call God. I have a graduate degree from seminary. I have an office with shelves full of books on theology—hundreds of thousands of pages about God—that provide me with dozens of different names for God. And though I can’t say God has ever come up to me at a party or asked me for spare change, if you were looking for God, I feel I could tell you where and with whom God would, and would not, hang out. I have a rack full of clerical robes and a diploma (written in Latin no less) that hangs on my wall and says: “Master of Divinity”—qualified to speak for God.

For sure, I am nothing like Moses. I keep my doubts in check. I cover up my personal flaws. I am way too smart to get anywhere near a burning bush.

Now don’t say it. I already know. All things being equal, I could probably stand to step a little closer to a burning bush, to have my ego singed and my diploma (did I tell you it’s written in Latin?) caught up in flames. Because the fact is: Moses has something I don’t—guts, and a great story to tell at class reunions.

¹ McNamara, William. (1991). *Mystical Passion: The Art of Christian Loving*. Element Books: Rockport, MA, p. 4.

I'm sure we've all noticed how eye-catching fires can be. Light a candle in a dark room and you know just what I mean. You can't take your eyes off the flame. Fire also has a way of making us submit and give up control. A family will run from a burning house and then stand in utter disbelief as the flames consume everything they owned and worked so hard for. Fire doesn't ask permission. It just burns mercilessly. Sure, we can control a fire by what we choose to feed it. We can douse it with water or dirt, but try and put a fire out and you'll still watch it down to its' last flicker.

It's no wonder then that Moses turns aside to see this strange fire—a bush that burns but is not burned up. I have read this story many times and often wondered which one caught Moses's attention more: the flame or the bush? They are caught in an epic battle, each trying to outlast the other. But maybe the point of the story is not to see which one will last longer—the flame or the bush—but to see how long they can go on together. A flame and a bush: magnificent to the eye only for their ability to survive together.

The story of the burning bush has renewed meaning for us this morning, I think. For in the past week, and even as we sit here this morning, so much of our world is being rocked by natural disorder and disaster. We have sat in utter disbelief ourselves at the wind and waves in the Caribbean, in Houston and Florida, at flooding powerful enough to wash away whole neighborhoods. We know about the devastation of wild fires in Montana and Oregon and an earthquake in Mexico City and we struggle with not wanting to look while also not being able to look away. And we marvel at the ability of the human spirit to not be burned up by the fires and drowned out by the floods. But still there are the questions: how and why does something like this happen?

It's worth noting that Moses asks this very question about the burning bush, and yet he receives no answer. The writer of Exodus 3 does not tell us how or why the bush is able to keep on burning. There is no explanation for it, not a little bit, not at all. The bush is there only to make Moses perk up and take note of what's coming next: a voice. This voice does not speak for itself. It could, because the voice belongs to God and if God can speak from a burning bush than I'm pretty sure God can speak for God's own self. But at most, the voice of God simply speaks for others, and especially for those who cannot. And so it is in Exodus 3 that God speak up for a suffering people who are in need of relief.

“I’ve taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I’ve heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, to pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, to get them out of that country and bring them to a good land.”

God has heard their cry and now God has turned to Moses with only one question. It is, I submit, the only question that matters, the only real question that we need to be concerned with getting right: Do we hear their cries too?

It’s impossible to read the Bible and not see that God hears our suffering cry. And it’s impossible to see that God doesn’t just hear our cry, God comes to cry with us where we are.

O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising up against me; many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the lifter of my head. I cry aloud to the Lord and he answers me. Psalm 3.

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock. Psalm 40.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We saw his glory with our own eyes, the very glory of God, full of grace and truth. John 1:14.

“I’ve taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I’ve heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, to pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, to get them out of that country and bring them to a good land.”

Dieterich Bonhoeffer has said, “Only a suffering God can help.”² I’d like to say again that it’s impossible to read the Bible and not see that a suffering God is what we have. But many people don’t see this because they never get past what is right in front of them.

Moses saw the burning bush, and he heard it speak, but did he really hear what it had to say? “Moses, I have heard the people cry under the weight of their slavery. I have seen their oppression. Now take off your sandals. Feel the earth beneath you. Consider the pain of those who have never walked it in freedom. I love them and want more for them. I want them to know that I am with them, and that I am hope and love. Now go, I am sending you to become one in hope and love with them. It’s the only way they’ll know that I am with them.”

If we were to read on into Exodus chapter 4 we’d find that Moses has serious concerns about God’s plan. “I don’t speak so good,” he tells God. “How can I possibly speak for you? What if no one takes me seriously, and they say, there’s no way God would work through *you*? It’s a big job you’re sending me to do, God. Maybe you should send someone else.”

We know what it’s like to have these questions, don’t we? To wonder what our gifts given to people in Texas and Florida—people who have no homes, no food, no insurance with which to rebuild—to wonder what difference our gifts are really going to make. Or, to sit with a loved one in the hospital or the nursing home or the prison—for the second or third time even—to feel their sadness over the fact that life just isn’t what it was supposed to be, to hear them ask, “Why?” and to know you have no answer to give except a hand to hold. To feel the burn of the fire and to not know how long you’ll be able to survive against it.

In her book, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Kenda Creasy Dean tells the story of Eugene Rivers, a clergyman in Boston who helped organize the Boston Miracle, in which a handful of clergy reclaimed a Boston neighborhood that had been overrun by drug dealers. River recalls the day he met a young heroin dealer who had this to say to him: “I’m going to explain to you Christians, who are such good preachers, why you are losing entire generations of people. Listen, this is really all about being there.”

“What do you mean?” Rivers demanded.

² From *Letters and Papers from Prison*; New York: MacMillan Press, p. 218.

The heroin dealer coolly replied: “When Johnny goes to school in the morning, I’m there, you’re not. When Johnny comes home from school in the afternoon, I’m there, you’re not. When Johnny goes out to get a loaf of bread for grandma for dinner, I’m there, you’re not. I win, you lose.”³

My friends, earth is crammed with heaven—and yes with hurricanes and wild fires and earthquakes and terrible amounts of human suffering too, but earth is crammed with heaven. For the sake of the gift you have to give, and of the God who wants to light you on fire, don’t just sit around picking blackberries.

Amen.

³ Dean, Kenda Creasy (2004). *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, p. 74.