

“What If Moses Had Not Looked?”

Exodus 3:1-12

Second in Series “What If”

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“Moses looked over and the bush was blazing, but not consumed.”

- **Exodus 3:2**

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may we stop and look to see what you are calling us to see: to listen what to what you are saying and so to walk with you. In Christ’s name we pray: Amen.

Sermon

When we turn to Chapter 3 in Exodus, we read the story about Moses and the burning bush. It is a story central to Judaism and Christianity and to the way we understand who we are as God’s people and who God is as God.

Unfortunately, when we read this story, we may get caught up in the bushes, so to speak, and fail to see the big picture. By that observation, I mean that we can fail to see the larger point that God is wanting to communicate if we get caught up in the kind of bush it was or the kind of chemical reactions that can take place in the desert to cause a bush to burn without being consumed.

It is probably not what the biblical writer had in mind. As one writer has put it, “When God decides to make an appearance, any old bush will do.” Any old bush would do!

And yet, it is the ‘any old bush’ in Exodus that is blazing while not being burned to crisp that gets Moses’ attention – a combination of sight and sound that attracts Moses to come and stand on holy ground: to come into the presence of God (3:3). First, there is sight because fire is coming out of the bush; and second, sound because God is speaking to Moses (3:4).

It is a scene of divine mystery, with God’s disclosing who God is as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (3:6); and it is a scene of clarity with God telling

Moses two important things: first, God hears the cries of his people; God realizes the pain of the Hebrews in Egypt. God knows what is happening (3:7-9). Second, God assures Moses that God will go with him from slavery to freedom (3:11-12). In other words, God speaking out of an ordinary bush is just the beginning of what God is going to do!

God promises to remain close to Moses and the people, though it took a burning bush to get his attention!

What If?

And yet, I wonder. I wonder when Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, how many times had Moses walked by that bush (3:1)? How many times did God try to get Moses to listen?

Obviously, the passage doesn't say, but I can remember Maxie Dunnam ask that question in a Bible Study: how many times did God try to get Moses to look over?

Do you remember years ago the cell phone commercials that asked "Can you hear me now?" Do you remember how people would move from place to place and ask that question with cell phone in hand? The assumption was that we could hear in any place and at any time, in any situation: such were the wonders of technology.

And yet, when God comes to Moses in a bush burning, it is as if God is pleading with Moses: "Moses, listen! Can you hear me? Because if you are not listening," God says, "then maybe I can get your attention by setting to fire this bush? Look over here!" And eventually Moses does! He looks and then he hears!

How many times on our walks do Peggy and I see something that we didn't see before? It was always there, but we just kept on walking. But for some reason, on other occasions, when we look over we see what has always been present. What's the old saying, "If it were a snake, it would have bit you!"

Moses' What If

Well, I wonder sometimes what would have happened if Moses had not looked over. I mean, what would have happened – or not happened – if Moses kept on walking, ignoring the bush altogether?

I ask because *even when* Moses looks over and listens, and *even when* Moses stands on holy ground, and *even when* Moses receives God's call to go to Egypt – Moses is reluctant to go! Moses doesn't want to go. It is not at all convincing at first that Moses wants to hear what God is saying!

To be sure, we know that Moses does go back to Egypt, and we know that he follows the leading of God, but we also know that he does so with great hesitation (Exodus 4:10-12).

And yet, I want ask: What would have happened had Moses *not* looked over to the bush, had he not listened to God?

What if Moses had kept on walking: "Nope! I am not going! I know if I walk over to that bush, something is going to happen. I am sure of it! I have a feeling that if I walk over there it's a game-changer."

Maybe this is why Moses had a list of excuses ready. I mean, have you ever noticed how he just comes up with one reason after another not to go? "God, you know I cannot speak well. God, you know I have a temper. God, you know I killed a man in Egypt! Look at my rap sheet! Find someone else."

Or maybe Moses was content with tending sheep, and he knew that the burning bush meant an end to his happiness! After all, he was away from all the worries of life. He didn't have to deal with people complaining. He and Miriam didn't have a large family yet; they could have settled down. It was a good life (Exodus 2:11-24).

But more: Moses is not the only person in the Bible who wanted to stay clear of God, right? Think Jonah! Jeremiah. Moses is in good company.

And yet, whatever the reasons, I wonder how the story would have gone without Moses: No plagues? No fighting with Pharaoh? No Passover? No freedom? No going through the sea? No covenant on Sinai? No promise? No Joshua? No Samuel? No David? Where does it end?

Where Do We Miss God Now?

And then I think to myself: maybe I am being too harsh on Moses. After all, it is not easy standing on holy ground! Indeed, maybe I am the one who is missing what God is saying. Before I point a finger to Moses, maybe I need to look in my own backyard! No, I have not seen a burning bush lately, but I wonder how I might be walking by what God is doing, or failing to listen to what God is

communicating. Because normally God communicates in the most ordinary of places and in the midst of the most typical of circumstances! Right under our noses. After all, God inhabits the whole world! God can show up wherever God wants to show up!

To be sure, God speaks to people like the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6) and Simeon the priest in the temple (Luke 3). And yes, God is always closer to us than we might think (Psalm 139:1-10). But so many times God comes to us where and when we least expect it.

Think about the Bible: On Pentecost in an upper room? Or in the belly of a fish! Or in the fields watching sheep at night! Or walking along the road to Emmaus! Remember those occurrences? There is no telling *where* and *when* God is trying to get our attention! After all, God is not confined to the four walls of this church! The Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8). The Spirit is always moving in ways we do not always understand, which leads me to say that God is always plotting ways to reach us – to reach you – when you least expect it (Isaiah 55:8)!

To be sure, there are ways we can prepare ourselves to hear what God is saying. There are ways we can be open to receive what God wants to give us: through the reading of scripture, prayer and fasting, worship, Holy Communion, serving and caring for others. It is not that God has left us without the means of grace! We can receive what God wants to share with us, no matter who we are or where we are! After all: *There is always a burning bush somewhere!*

Reluctant to Look Over?

It's why I would like to ask you: What might happen if you take a moment to look over *your* shoulder? How is God trying to get your attention? What might happen if you take a moment and go to the person or place you need to go?

Maybe you are reluctant, just as Moses was, or just as Jonah was when he went to Nineveh. Or maybe like John Wesley you just don't feel like going to Aldersgate; you just don't want to take a risk of preaching to coal miners on the streets because you think it's beneath you.

To be sure, God may not be calling you to liberate a people like Moses, and God may not be calling you to preach like John Wesley. But there is a way, I believe, by virtue of our baptism, that every person *is* called to respond to what God has done for them (Romans 8:31). To stop. Look over. And listen. Even now!

What is it that you need to do to go over and see what the Lord is doing? It might be something big. It might be something small. But whatever it is, it will be crafted to who you are, to your gifts, to your talents, to your life-experiences – *as God works in you according to who you are.*

What would happen if you acted in a way that no matter what would happen, you would be assured of God's blessings?

Indeed, what would happen if we as a church acted in ways that would witness to this truth? In our giving? In our serving? In our worshipping? Acting with assurance. Responding out of gratitude for what God has given us.

I shared with a group last week a piece of information that said that during the pandemic more than 6,000 churches will probably close this year. This pandemic has served to intensify certain trends. And yet, the good news is that many congregations are finding creative and meaningful ways of engaging people, of inviting people to listen and see what God is doing – as they make this transition in the wilderness, as they go through this 'Red Sea Moment.' We don't have to make excuses.

After all, if God is for us, then what possibly can stand in our way, right? Isn't that what God promises Moses? God communicates with Moses how God is going to be *with him* and *for him* through thick and thin; and God is (Exodus 3:13-16). And Jesus says the same thing: "I am with you until the end of time. Now go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:16-20).

What if we act and follow Christ with such assurance? What if we look over and see that there are people who are struggling, and that we can help, that there are people who are dealing with heartache, and we can listen? Remember, there is always a bush burning somewhere. There is always a bush calling out your name. No matter where you are. No matter who you are! There is a bush burning somewhere! And more often than not it is simply a matter of stopping and looking over and listening to what God is saying to you. After all, God knows you by name! God knows you by name.

Those have ears to hear let them hear. And those with the eyes to see let me see. Amen!