



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 23, 2025
EXODUS: 3:1-15; PSALM 63: 1-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13; LUKE 13:1-9

BURNING BUSHES AND ALL

Exodus 3:1-15 [Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from 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 country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."]

Moses was a migrant, a refugee actually, who had fled Egypt and found a home among the Midianites in the hot dusty desert of the Sinai Peninsula. He marries into a shepherding family, and he and wife Zipporah have two

sons, Eliezer and Gershom. The drama surrounding this family—how he first met Zipporah as a woman at the well, how they find their way through thick and thin, how they lead the Israelites out of Egypt into the

Sinai wilderness they know all too well—it is all found in the Book of Exodus, a pithy saga bearing marks of love, loss and survival, lending meaning even into our own times.

I suspect many of us know mostly about Moses from Cecil B. DeMille and Charlton Heston's epic portrayal in *The Ten Commandments*, but there's much more to be gleaned from this great book than a Hollywood reduction could ever offer. I encourage you to read the Book of Exodus as you would a novella. Read it, really, and know it is at once spiritual scripture, mythic tale, hero epic, historical fiction, biography, graphic novel, thriller, political intrigue, and much more...AND it is your story and mine, and the story of God's deliverance in a time of oppression and chaos. We need this story of hope as much now as ever.

We get just a teaser this morning, an excerpt from early in the story: Moses is about his mundane business of tending sheep when something catches the corner of his eye. He is drawn to see it up close, up on the mountain, the place where heaven comes close to earth, the place where angels linger on some terrestrial assignment sent by God for a purpose.

That purpose on this particular day is to call Moses, a Hebrew turned Egyptian turned murderous shepherd, a vagrant just trying to

eke out a living in the sunbaked hills of the Sinai desert.

He leaves his flock of sheep behind in the familiar valley, a harbinger of things to come when he later climbs the mountain again to receive a communal rule of life on stone tablets, leaving the Israelites below to sort things in his absence until he returns with face aglow.

But here on this day, early in the story, the bleating sheep sound their fretful alarm as he straddles the ground above and below, drawn to see firsthand the mountaintop bush afire and yet not consumed.

What was, and is, and will yet be is bound up in this holy encounter that stands in time and beyond it, too. God is...and Moses becomes who he is called to be...a timeless meeting of vocational identity.

Moses steps onto holy ground, discolored and deferential. How many burning bushes had he passed by in his life without seeing? How had rote day strung on to rote day in his quotidian desert, barren of deep meaning?

But today he sees the burning bush and hears God speak his name, Moses, Moses, the double appellation signaling divine call.

He engages in what will become the first of many conversations with God across the rest of his life. An intimate encounter of honest

discourse with the God he had longed to know all along. Everything changes for Moses from there; everything changes for those who will follow Moses on the journey to unfold; indeed, everything changes for all those who will follow in the Judeo-Christian tradition, including you and me.

The bedrock truth of Exodus is that God told Moses that day: I have seen the suffering of my people, and I intend to use you to relieve them from their distress. I will use you for good.

In one way or another, this is the message God gives to every person who would lean into the holy encounters of vocation.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning famously wrote: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, every bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes...”¹

We need not all be Moses-style leaders to train our sights on the burning bushes of our lives and hear God’s words of encouragement spoken in our direction. But neither should we forget that Moses was decidedly imperfect—arrogant at times, prone to furious anger and reactivity, a self-described cad with a stutter.

To which God says, I will be with you. In the face of the evil of this world, I will use you for good.

Earth’s crammed with heaven, every bush afire with God. But only those who see take off their shoes and have a conversation with God.

Friends, if you are wondering where God is calling you to serve for good in this world in the face of evil in this world, if you are wandering in the desert of days stretched end on end, barren of deep meaning, if you are longing for an honest conversation with a God, look for the burning bushes. Listen for your name to be called.

Did you know we have mutual discernment groups here at Saint Mark’s that are designed to help us hone our senses to such things? Two small groups are engaged right now in which participants are asking their questions of vocation and purpose and meaning. Intimate encounters of honest discourse. We will gladly form additional groups if there is interest. Just talk to one of the priests. It’s only one way to approach this work of vocational identity—as the saying goes: all may, none must, some should.

¹ From Aurora Leigh, Book 7, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html>

The bottom line is this: that God seeks to use you for good, and when you respond with whatever reasons you may think disqualify you from the call, God shares the timeless promise, I will be with you.

Yes, Pharaoh's heart hardens in the face of Moses' courageous yes, and things get tougher before turning for good, but beyond

the political intrigue, remember this is your story and mine, and it is the story of God's deliverance in a time of oppression and chaos.

We need this story of hope as much now as ever.

And God is calling you and me into it, burning bush and all.



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Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!