

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church
Keller, Texas
Sermon for August 30, 2020 ~ Proper 17A
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

There's a scene in James Michener's novel, *Space*, in which one of his characters makes a presentation on the skies as they were almost a thousand years ago, from July 11 to August 2, 1054. During those 23 days there was a supernova in space, in the constellation of Taurus the Bull. The exploding star was almost as bright as our Sun. Its appearance is recorded in history in most parts of the world including China, Arabia, Alaska, in the South Pacific, even in Arizona, in all the world except on the European continent. For Europe was deep into the Dark Ages and no one had their eyes focused on the heavens, but they were all focused on their own internal concerns and ignored everything above or beyond themselves. Michener's character, an aged professor of astronomy, comments, "An age is called *Dark* not because the *Light* fails to shine, but because people refuse to see it."

God's people in Egypt were in a dark age of their own when Moses conscience was awakened by the sight of an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew. When Moses intervened, he killed the Egyptian and brought the wrath of Pharaoh down upon himself. He fled as a fugitive, charged with murder, to the land of Midian. There, he met the daughters of the Bedouin priest, Jethro, and through his kindness toward them earned himself a place in Jethro's household. He lived among them under their protection. Once again, Moses was, in a sense, adopted. Once again he was forced by circumstances to live apart from his own people. Moses was not in the mainstream of the life of his people. He was a kind of outcast. You have to wonder, therefore, why God would reveal divine light to him and choose him to become the agent of his people's liberation. Maybe it was because Moses was spiritually ready to see the light of God when it appeared.

Moses was out herding sheep - not an especially prestigious job at his age - when he saw an astounding bush that burned but was not consumed. He saw it and approached it. Then he heard the voice of God speaking first with a warning that he is on holy ground, then with self-introduction, and finally with a call. Moses' response was only the first of a series of objections, but God reacted with words of reassurance and promise.

Two major themes are found in this passage.

The first is the divine self-revelation to a particular individual. How does God make himself known? According to many OT accounts, it is by means of a dramatic appearance at a holy place. Here, that place is on or near "the mountain of God." As in most other such reports, the individual who witnesses the theophany did not choose the place, nor did he even set out to find such a place or such an experience. It is almost providential or fortuitous that Moses strayed where - it is clear - God wanted him to be. The encounter was awesome and frightening. It is dangerous to approach the boundary between the divine and the human.

A passage from *The Midrash* helps explain the meaning of holy ground. "A heathen once asked Rabbi Joshua Ben Karhah: 'Why did God choose a thorn bush from which to speak to Moses?' He replied: 'To teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even the humblest thorn bush.'"

The meaning of God's name is obscured by the conventional translation **I am who I am**, which implies that God is the ground of his own existence. The Hebrew verb denotes, not abstract being, but manifestation in a definite character, or name; as its form indicates habitual manifestation in past, present, or future. Since English requires a tense, the best rendering is **I will be as I will be**. *The famous declaration signifies that God is known in his dynamic confrontation with humans and in our active response to God.*

The second major theme is God's call and Moses' response. Moses is called to something in particular, not just to believe a certain thing or act a certain way. He has a ministry to perform so that God's will may be expressed in a tangible, concrete way in history. Moses' reluctance is typical of those called of God. In the presence of the Holy One of Israel, he was aware of the otherness of God and his own unworthiness and inadequacy. God reassured Moses that it is God who will bring the people out of Egypt, but a human agent will be required to effect that will. Moreover, the will of the one called is not subsumed completely into the will of God. Rather, he has - and is allowed to have - autonomy to continue to question, to resist, or to choose to obey the One who called him.

Just as God's call comes to you and to me, that call is to do something in particular so that God's will may be done "on earth as it is in heaven." God has a ministry for each one of us. We, like Moses, are free to question, free to resist, and free to choose to obey God. It is awesome and dangerous to get too close to those burning bushes. Perhaps that's why people stay away from churches (besides COVID-19!) and why many of us come but make busy work when we are here. Our secular society isn't perfect, but we know how to adapt, don't we?

God is at work to redeem and re-create the world. And we are to be the instruments God uses to bring other persons to redemption. Only God can deliver people from bondage, but God works through persons. We keep coming back here to be reminded of the voice from the bush and to be reminded that the work to which God calls us is humanly impossible. If we can do it without divine grace, it probably isn't God's work.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus, who had just called Simon Peter a "rock," rebukes him and calls him a stumbling block. Why? Because Peter still didn't understand the radical mission of God in the Flesh. Jesus spoke of the cross and Peter suggested that there must be another, easier way. One that is humanly possible. But Jesus tells Peter and his other Disciples that the way of life, the way of true freedom, is the way of the cross, then invites them to take up their crosses and follow him. That's the cost of Christian discipleship. That was a burning bush moment for them and they almost missed it.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a poem once said, "Earth is crammed with Heaven and every common bush is afire with God. Only those who see take off their shoes. The rest just sit around and pick blackberries." The next time there's a burning bush, will you see it and take off your shoes on holy ground, or will you join the others in sitting around picking blackberries?