

“MOVING ON”

Exodus 3:1-15 September 3, 2017

Fire. Shout the word in a crowded place, and havoc may break loose. The word may inspire panic. Here it preceded by “Ready. Aim” and it may be followed by a solemn volley of rifle shots at a funeral with military honors. The word may convey sadness and grief. But when you are hungry and have only raw meat or grains, or when it gets cool or cold at night, the sight, sounds and heat of fire prompts hope, comfort, even cheerfulness, as Francis of Assisi proclaimed centuries ago.

*Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom You brighten the night.
He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.*
(Francis of Assisi, “Praise of the Creatures,” st. 7).

Our text today is from Exodus and it was part of the Lectionary choices for this Sunday. It seemed to have some special levels of meaning for this Sunday when we are honoring and celebrating Dave and Judy Wilson and all the many ways they have impacted and inspired our lives in the years they have been members here. So let’s begin by looking again at Exodus 3:1-5 (NRSV):

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.”

For Moses at around age 80, tending his father-in-law’s flocks and leading them beyond their usual grazing area toward a place referred to locally as “the mountain of God,” fire, as he saw it that day, prompted something else. It was more than mere curiosity. This was fascination. Fire was leaping from a bush on the side of that mountain, yet the bush itself was entirely unharmed. Here, on the mountain of God, Moses had “to turn aside” from watching the sheep and “see,” get a closer look at, explore, try to comprehend the mystery of this fire.

Rudolph Otto, the Lutheran theologian, would have called this moment in Moses’s life an example of one aspect of the encounter with the Holy, a “*mysterium fascinans*” (a fascinating mystery). As he is drawn toward the holy fire and looks deeper into it, a voice calls his name, and then leads immediately to the other aspect of such an encounter, “*mysterium tremendum*” (a mystery that leaves you trembling). Fascination drew him in, trembling awe stopped him short. This was holy ground. Fire was its sign.

It was not the will of the Holy One who spoke from the fire that this fire be confined to this bush on this mountain on this day. This momentary fire was to be but kindling for an enduring flame it would ignite in Moses’s own heart, A flame to brighten the long, hope-crushing night of suffering, slavery, and oppression that had fallen upon the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses’s kin, and the people of the Holy One’s calling.

It had been forty years since Moses had fled from them, forty years since he had killed an Egyptian overseer who had treated some of them particularly harshly, forty years since his exile into the wilderness of Midian and his

refuge with the local priest's family, marrying his daughter, to escape prosecution and likely execution. That was a lifetime ago. Surely there were still some memories, some stirrings of regret, some wonderings about what was happening there. But the memories were faded. The stirrings were barely noticeable. The wonderings were few and far between now....

Until that fire. That mysterious fire. That fascinating, tremor inducing fire. That holy fire. From which the Holy One continued to speak. Moses may have left his former life, and the people in it, behind him. But the Holy One did not.

“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...So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7b, 10, NRSV).

The Holy One has seen and heard, and the holy fire blazes with passion to deliver the people and establish them in what will become their own land. The Holy One will deliver and establish them. Moses will lead their exodus from Egypt.

For the rest of chapter 3 and the first half of chapter 4, Moses offers question after question. Who do you say you are? What if the leaders of the people don't believe me about meeting you? How will I convince the Pharaoh or even my own people when after all this time away I cannot speak their languages well?

The Holy One does not relent. The fire continues to flame up until it consumes all of Moses's questions like kindling that raises the temperature of his own heart and ignites in him the willingness at least to return to Egypt, and eventually to lead.

The Holy One never forgets the condition of the oppressed, the enslaved, the rejected, the neglected, the dejected, the objects of salvation, and holy fire blazes with compassion, as for sheep without a shepherd.

As on the day Jesus saw the crowds, helpless and harassed, and healed them, and as evening was falling, fed them all.

As on the night of the resurrection, when two dispirited disciples who had travelled to Emmaus with their Lord, unaware who he was until he broke bread and vanished, suddenly became aware their hearts had been ablaze as he was opening the scriptures to them on the way, and so rushed back to Jerusalem at night to report their amazing experience to the other disciples.

As on the day of Pentecost when tongues as of fire came upon disciples at prayer, and they preached in many languages to thousands of pilgrims, and the church was born in waters that baptized over three thousand.

As on the day when some of you were captivated in your hearts by the vision of the fiery intensity of the love of God for you in Jesus Christ, and you answered a call to follow Jesus, and you were baptized, and have since committed to lead your own children and invite many others to follow his way into those fiery, Pentecostal waters as well.

Today we are invited into a time of pause and reflection with Moses as we are given the opportunity to “turn aside to see” how God calls to us and empowers us in and through the whole creation God is out to save. As we are grieving the future loss of our friends’ presence, Dave and Judy, to another location we also acknowledge and celebrate all they have meant to us in the past, and of course, still do today! However, they are moving on in their lives to other pastures where God will be calling them to serve in new and exciting ways. And

He is calling us to do the same!

We stand on Holy ground, separate ground where God is and where He tells us what we need to hear and gives us our marching orders as believers to build kingdom works. Each of you are unqualified to do kingdom work in your own strength and talents. You have great skills and gifts that need to be used, but you are not God. You need His strength to accomplish God things. If you can do it in your own strength, it is not a God thing.

What does God have to do to get your attention? Has He sent you some burning bushes and you have just dismissed them? Are you going to let your past keep you from receiving what the Lord has for you now?

In his book, One Minute After You Die, Erwin Lutzer says, “One minute after you slip behind the parted curtain, you will either be enjoying a personal welcome from Christ or catching a first glimpse of gloom as you have never known it. Either way, your future will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchangeable.”

Now is the time to take care of eternity and now is the time to allow God to help you and use you to move forward in your life as His disciple. Whether it is a change of location, or letting the grief and regret of your past go, or seeing what the fire of the Holy One can do in your life—the moving on from this moment in time is filling with amazing possibilities and opportunities!

What does God have to do to get your attention? Nobody else—what does He see in you this morning? That can build a kingdom? That will help someone else? That will give you self worth and change your life forever? That can give you the assurance that God has called you and that you can now say with Moses as the Spirit calls your name, “Here I am.” Are you willing to go over to that burning bush and check it out? With God’s help, His presence guiding us, we will trust in Him and where He calls us in our journeys.