

**The Burning Bush**  
**Exodus 3:1-15, Pentecost 16, Year A**  
**31 August 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

After experiencing the busiest and fastest-paced year of our lives, my family and I found ourselves in need of vacation this summer. We took two. The first was, as many of you know, writ large across the pages of the *Roanoke Times* on a very slow news day. The second was a trip to the South Carolina coast. We drove to Litchfield two weeks after most of the rest of the Roanoke Diaspora had returned to Southwest Virginia. Our first evening there I didn't wait to change into swimming trunks or take off my shoes before we moved beach chairs out onto the sand. The sun was setting behind us, allowing the breeze to turn pleasantly cool. While the kids ran around with buckets and shovels, I sank into my chair and became pleasantly numb. I expected nothing but to be lulled into semi-consciousness by the cadence of the surf, but then I caught something out of the corner of my eye...

---

Our first reading this morning opens with the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Exodus, and, oddly, we're missing a main character. In the book of *Genesis*, the voice of God is heard in the first paragraph of the entire book. God is an active character from the outset. But here in Exodus, we're already three chapters in, and we have yet to see or hear from God. There's been but one brief mention made of him near the end of chapter one.

Who we do meet is Moses, and he undoubtedly wonders about God's absence as much as we do. Moses has surely heard about the God of the Israelites from his biological mother, and he must lament that this God who was so close to his ancestors has not made himself known to Moses.

Moses certainly could have benefited from God's presence. He's experiences the pressure of living a dual life, as the child of Hebrews being reared as a prince of Egypt in Pharaoh's own household. The pressure finally becomes too much when Moses witnesses an Egyptian man beating an Israelite. Moses snaps, and he kills the Egyptian. Afterwards he has to flee from the royal household and finds himself living in the wilderness of Sinai tending sheep. In a life as complicated as Moses', he could use God! As he struggles, he must wonder why God is so palpably absent.

But then, on this particular day Moses is grazing sheep on the mountain, and something—a flicker of flame—catches the periphery of his vision. He almost misses it, but for some reason he turns his *sight* and his *attention*, and when he does—and only then—the God

who has seemed so very absent calls to him from a burning bush unconsumed by the fire enveloping it. Moses is stunned, and in reverent acknowledgement of in whose presence he stands he reaches down and removes his shoes. He is on holy ground.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning says, “Earth’s *crammed* with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: But only [for] he who sees, [who] takes off his shoes...”

I believe that, at least intellectually. Holy Scripture from Genesis to John affirms that the Spirit of God breathes life into each and every thing and through the Word Incarnate are all things made. But if it is so—if every common bush is afire with the presence of God—then why do we so often feel alone? Why do our walks through life—our experiences of fortune *and* misfortune, our days as princes of Egypt *and* as wanderers in the wilderness—seem so often to pass in the absence rather than the presence of God?

The answer surely lies in the scope of our sight. We wish for God’s presence, as Moses must have done throughout his days, but we wish for God to appear at *our* pace and in *our* direct line of vision. Most of the time, even when we have greatest need of God, we walk through life with blinders on, unwilling to pause, to turn aside, to widen our vision and take in things at the periphery. We wistfully wish for God, but we rarely take off our shoes and acknowledge the hallowed ground upon which we tread each day. The burning bush shows us that only when we do so—only when we open our eyes more broadly and *turn our attention*—does God call out to us.

I wonder how many burning bushes Moses had passed by before that day on the mountain? How many times in Egypt had his lush, princely living prevented him from pausing and turning aside? And later, how many times in the wilderness had he been so defeated and deflated by the misfortune in his life that he could not lift his eyes to look around him?

It is difficult to know just why, on this day, Moses shifts his sight. But what is clear is that once he does so he is unable any longer to see the world with such narrow vision. In the course of their conversation at the burning bush, God offers Moses both promise and call, and the former makes possible Moses’ response to the latter. “I will be with you,” God promises. “When you confront Pharaoh; when you lead your people; when you continue to struggle with your lack of confidence and your fear (and you will continue to struggle), I will be with you.”

That is the promise, but there is more. There is a calling forth. God also says, “So come,” and he shares with Moses the life Moses must now live, now that God has entered into his vision. Life can never again be that of the blind and carefree prince, but it will also never again be that of the despondent wanderer in the wilderness. It is now a life like that of the

burning bush itself: enveloped by the very fire of God, and yet strengthened, enlivened, and preserved by that fire and not consumed.

Moses entire life is different after the encounter on Sinai. And he very nearly passed it by. That day could have been like any other but that he paid attention and opened his eyes. Moses comes down that mountain with vision broadened, with a promise and a call. From then on he sees the world differently. He follows God and was followed by God all the days of his life. And it all began when he paused, turned aside, and took off his shoes.

---

It is easy—too easy—for even a priest to walk through life with blinders on. Like anyone, I sometimes wonder why God doesn't speak to me, why God doesn't reveal himself, when in fact I rarely pause and pay attention to what's in the scope of my vision. I rarely turn aside to see.

I sat in that canvass chair on Litchfield Beach wanting only to be lulled into a stupor by the waves when something caught the corner of my eye. I almost missed it, but I turned my head slightly, and I saw my eight-year-old son at the edge of the tide. He was running along the beach like a general arranging his troops. He had his shovel raised toward the surf, as if he could by himself fight back the relentless power of the ocean. With a knowing and melancholy smile I watched him, thinking about the futility of his effort. But then I blinked, and it all appeared different. The warm glow of the setting sun *enveloped Griffin like a presence*. Something about the texture of that evening light accentuated the joy in his face as if by the glow of a fire, and his actions at the shoreline became a revelation. Somehow in the presence of that enveloping light the scene became sacramental; like the burning bush, it became a disclosure of the Holy. It represented to me all those who struggle but who do so knowing they are not alone. It represented those *who don't lose sight* of the God who remains with power and fidelity at their side. "I will be with you," says the God of heaven and earth, "Everywhere, at all times, without fail, I will be with you. When you struggle against the tide, I will be with you. When the waves pound, I will be with you.... So come." I was enlivened and rejuvenated to come back here at week's end to the work God has called me to do.

We *can* continue to walk straight ahead, without pause and with narrow vision. We can live uncalled lives, never turning aside to see the presence of God, lives in which, as one scholar says, "there is no intrusion, disruption, or redefinition, no appearance or utterance of the Holy."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, volume 2, pg. 719.

Or we can turn aside—allow an adjustment of vision—and hear God’s call. We can *see* that we are never alone, and we can follow.

“Earths’ crammed with heaven, and *every* common bush afire with God.” As I watched Griffin in amazement, I felt the cool sand between my toes. I looked down and realized I had, without thinking, slipped off my shoes. God was present—though I’d almost missed it—and this, too, was holy ground. *Amen.*