

Sermon, Proper 17, August 30, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” (Romans 12:9-11)

In the Christian tradition, the men and women that would seem most conversant with the phenomenon of the burning bush and what it teaches us about holiness are the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Many of them lived in the Sinai region where we find Moses in today’s passage from Exodus. Their pithy collected sayings are available to us today even though they come out of an oral tradition in 4th-century Egypt. Some of the sayings seem to have an affinity with the *Zen koan*. The saying is meant to startle, to pull one out of spiritual complacency through the use of paradox. They often take the form of a conversation between a younger seeker and an older, wiser hermit. The seeker would begin by asking, “Give me a word, Abba.”

In talking about today’s readings with a friend, I was lucky enough to be given such a word—it just popped out at us. And that word is “ardent.” Paul urges us to “...be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” (Romans 12:11) The Greek word is *zeontes*. One commentator, Robert Jewett, suggests that this verse be translated “remain effervescent in the spirit.” Perhaps we are to be like spiritual champagne. While the word does mean “burning,” it can be in the sense of boiling, bubbling or

seething. It implies high emotion; in the context of Paul's letter it points to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then I consulted my all-time favorite reference work, the online OED, to look up the English word "ardent." Here are some of its meanings: "burning, on fire, red-hot; fiery, hot, parching. Glowing with passion, animated by keen desire; intensely eager, zealous, fervent, fervid." What might it mean to be "ardent in spirit? Why not turn aside and look at the thing that is burning nearby: the bush?

When we come upon Moses in today's reading from Exodus, he has been living in Midian for some time. He is essentially hiding out after having killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew. The Pharaoh who wants to kill Moses in retaliation finally dies. However, the Hebrew people are still suffering in their slavery. They cry for help to God and God hears them. In the opening scene of chapter three of Exodus, Moses is keeping a flock, the standard activity of a would-be prophet and leader of the Hebrew people.

Moses has led the flock beyond the wilderness. One commentator on Exodus observes that the use of the Hebrew word for "beyond" is unusual. What the passage is saying is that Moses has brought the flock into the far reaches of the desert. What is depicted in this scene is a fantastic geography, a location of

mystery at the edges of human experience.¹ The commentator also says that this passage alludes to Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Horeb is the “mountain of God.” It is believed that God lives there and it becomes the site of revelation and worship. Apparently the Hebrew word for “bush” has the same consonants as Sinai, another allusion to a sacred mountain.² Moses has gone completely off the beaten path. What will happen next?

As is usual while one is watching a flock, an angel appears—and in a flame of fire out of a bush. “[Moses] looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2) Moses decides to turn aside to see why the bush is not being burned up. The burning bush brings to mind the eternal flame representing God’s presence that later becomes a standard feature of the tabernacle, the temple, and the Christian church. God admonishes Moses to take off his shoes because the place he is standing on is holy ground. The Hebrew word for “place” used in verse five is also the word used for “sanctuary.” This is all wonderful and metaphorical.

Why a bush, though? I happened on some fascinating midrashim on the burning bush assembled by Prof. Etan Levine. Perhaps God chooses the bush because of its lowliness. God could have become manifest in high mountains or the

¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, The Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Variation: Eerdmans Critical Commentary. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 117.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

vastness of space. Instead God's purpose is to convey intimacy, nearness and accessibility.³ When Moses shows his trepidation at what God is asking him to do, God says, "I will be with you." Another midrash concerns the presence of the angel in the fire. He is most frequently identified as the archangel Michael. Once again with the alchemy of Hebrew vowels that allows interesting word associations, the angel appearing in a "flame of fire" could also be an angel with a "heart of fire." This angel is able to inspire Moses with courage. The fire kindles Moses' spirit.⁴ Finally there is a midrash relating the burning bush to the spiritual experience of a human being "on fire" for God. "The bush signifies the heart; or the bush signifies the body. A flame burns in the heart and the heart is not consumed; a flame burns in the heart and the body is not consumed."⁵

This leads me, believe or not, to today's Gospel reading and the disciple Peter. Is not Peter an example of a disciple whose heart is on fire, who is "ardent in spirit?" Just last week, a few verses earlier in Matthew, it is Peter who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. And yet today, in typical fashion for Peter, he gets it wrong yet again. Last week Peter was the "rock." This week he is the "stumbling block"—and an unwitting messenger of Satan. Peter is the fool that rushes in

³ Etan Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," *Reconstructionist* 36, no. 14 (January 1, 1971): 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

where angels fear to tread. But I love him for that. Simon Peter, together with his brother Andrew, is the first to be called as a disciple. And he follows Jesus *immediately*. He is the only one as far as we know to try walking on the sea. He sinks, Jesus has to yank him back out, but he tries. As heartbreaking as his denial of Jesus in Jerusalem is, Peter has attempted to follow Jesus all the way there. How many of us would have traveled so far?

Peter does not want to hear that Jesus must suffer and be killed. None of us want to hear that. It is so hard to imagine how it would be possible for Jesus to be raised on the third day. This road, the road to Jerusalem, takes us to the edge of the wilderness where there seems to be no map. And yet it is the only way to encounter the burning bush. It is blazing, yet not consumed. Archangel Michael is waiting to wield his sword for us so that Satan will get behind us. We have Jesus telling us that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25) Moses leaves his flock in Midian and gains another. Peter leaves his nets and we know from Acts that he does become a fisher of people. Neither man is perfect but both exhibit much zeal. We each have a cross that we are meant to bear. That cross is made of the same passion that Peter possesses—and the same denial. It can be tempting to ignore it, to pretend that we are perfect without it. But the flame in that bush burns away any pretense. As Paul says, “Let your love be genuine.”

There is a wonderful resonance between Moses' journey to leadership of the Hebrew people and Peter's journey to becoming an early leader of the Christian church. Moses is not sure he is up to the task. He says to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?" Who am I? Later in the passage God tells Moses to say, "I AM has sent me to you." God comes to Moses and the Hebrew people as Presence itself: living and powerful. Moses, in even in his sense of inadequacy, needs nothing more. In some stories of call, the person receives a new name—as Peter does. Moses has been named by Pharaoh's daughter because he has been pulled from the water. Ultimately he becomes the leader who guides his people through the water. Peter, too, is pulled from the water by Jesus. All of us because of our baptisms have been pulled from the water.

All we need to do is to turn aside when we become aware of that burning bush. It can be God's very Presence, God's I AM. Or we can become aware of that "ardent spirit" that God has kindled in our hearts. It could be the beginning of a new journey with God, or a reminder that God is always with us. Later today our newest member will receive the Light of Christ. Together with Lidia, "[May our] light[s] shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

I will leave you with one of my favorite sayings from the Desert Father, Abba Joseph:

“[Abba] Lot went to [Abba] Joseph and said, “Abba, as far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a little fasting, and prayer and meditation, and quiet: and as far as I can I try to cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. What else should I do?” Then the hermit stood up and spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten flames of fire, and he said, “If you will, you can become all flame.”⁶

⁶ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, Penguin Classics; Variation: Penguin Classics. (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003).