Burning Bush Sermon

I want us to be sure to include in our prayers today all the victims of flooding, the terrible floods in Houston and along the Gulf Coast, the deadly floods in Bangladesh, Nepal and India. They will need our prayers, support and contributions long after the flood waters recede.

I also hope each of us will take a warning from the events in Houston and restock our own earthquake kits. The most likely person to help you survive a natural disaster is you and what you did in preparation. End of my mini-sermon, on to Moses and the burning bush.

We have had the opportunity this summer to hear some of the most significant stories from the Old Testament and none is more key than the story of Moses we heard today. Heidi Haverkamp in her sermon on this passage set the scene in its proper context:

“Moses has come a long way before he happens upon the bush – his mother put him in a basket and set it afloat on the River Nile to save him from Pharoah’s soldiers, who were murdering baby Hebrew boys. Pharoah’s daughter found him and raised him at Court; he grew up with Ramses who’d become the next Pharoah. One day he saw an overseer cruelly beating a Hebrew slave – one of Moses’ own people – and out of rage, he killed that overseer. Then Moses ran away and ended up with tribal sheep herders out in the desert, which is why he’s out in the wilderness here. He’s many things as he’s stands watching his sheep, here, in the desert. He’s a refugee and a former prince, an escaped convict and an educated man, an Egyptian and a Hebrew, an orphan who’s married into a tribe that’s not his own, a murderer and apparently, a redeemer. He’s both a total outsider and man who comes from great privilege and education. He brings a whole life story to this encounter with God, at this bush in the middle of nowhere.”

Moses life had been full of intrigue, challenge and excitement since his birth right up until he fled into exile. Then for 40 straight years, nothing but the simple life of a shepherd, tending someone else’s sheep. How many times in the past 40 years has he walked by this place? And might it not have been that the burning bush, that same burning bush, was burning there all that time?

Bruce Epperly shared this reflection: “Legend has it that some rabbis once had a debate on the following question, “Why was the bush that Moses encountered burning but not consumed by the flames?”  After many suggestions, one rabbi responded, “It was not consumed by the fire, so that one day when Moses was walking to his job, he would finally notice it!”  The rabbi believed the burning bush was there all the time, but that Moses needed to stop long enough and to let go of his personal agenda in order to see and respond.”

There are burning bushes in our midst, all around us, all the time, but so rarely do we stop, take off our shoes and listen for the voice of God.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning beautifully writes about this insight in the “Seventh Book” of her epic poem Aurora Leigh (1856):

Earth is crammed with heaven,

And every common bush afire with God:

But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,

The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.

If you do stop and take off your shoes and meet God in the everyday, exactly who is this God you will meet?

That was certainly on Moses’s mind in his encounter with the burning bush. From the bush came the voice of God directing Moses to go to the Hebrew people in captivity in Egypt and tell them that God has heard their plea and is ready to set them free. “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.’“

I am who I am. I am becoming who I am becoming. I am.

This name of God is as mysterious as the burning bush from which God speaks God’s name. It adds yet another layer of what Rudolph Otto the German theologian called God’s mysterium tremendum et fascinans - the mystery which terrifies and fascinates, before which we are in reverent awe and yet to which we are deeply attracted.

The encounter with the awesome unknowable, fascinating nature of God is available everyday, in the everyday. But we end up picking blackberries instead.

We do so because like Moses we are unsure of ourselves and our ability to embrace the divine. Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharoah?” Who indeed?

And yet God knows our hearts and waits patiently for us to come close. That bush just may have been burning for a very, very long time.

Is there a bush burning out there waiting for you to notice it?

Never, never turn away from a burning bush. Your burning bush today might be to turn toward those suffering in Houston and offer your aid. Your burning bush today might be to turn toward reconciliation with an estranged loved one. Your burning bush today might be to face that darkness inside that feels unfaceable. Your burning bush today might be to simply go to the mountains and encounter the Great I AM in their midst.

Never, ever turn away from a burning bush.

And always remember to take off your shoes because you will be walking on Holy Ground.

Do you know how ordinary and sad and predictable and empty Moses’ life would have been if he had turned away? A broken man, a boring life, a sad ending. Instead he took off his shoes, encountered God and set a people free.

I close with this beautiful poem from Storyteller Tracy Radosevic:

My bare feet walk the earth reverently

for everything keeps crying,

“Take off your shoes

The ground you stand on is holy

The ground of your being is holy.”

When the wind sings through the pines

like a breath of God

awakening you to the sacred present

calling your soul to new insights

Take off your shoes!

When the sun rises above your rooftop

coloring your world with dawn

Be receptive to this awesome beauty

Put on your garment of adoration

Take off your shoes!

When the Red Maple drops its last leaf of summer

wearing its “burning bush” robes no longer

read between its barren branches, and

Take off your shoes!

When a new person comes into your life

like a mystery about to unfold

and you find yourself marveling over

the frailty and splendor of every human being

Take off your shoes!

Take off your shoes of distraction

Take off your shoes of ignorance and blindness

Take off your shoes of hurry and worry

Take off anything that prevents you

from being a child of wonder.

Take off your shoes;

The ground you stand on is holy.

The ground you are is holy.