

Christ Church + Washington Parish  
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli  
Third Sunday in Lent; March 24, 2019  
Exodus 3:1-15<sup>1</sup>

We are back to Moses. A year and a half ago we spent 8 weeks with Moses, but we did not exhaust Moses' preaching possibilities. The story of Moses and the Israelites and their journey of faith that spans more than hundred years and four books of the Bible is one of the most important and most accessible stories in the Bible of what it means to be God's people and what it is like to be a leader and a follower among God's people. It is accessible even though it happened 3000 years ago because it lays open the struggle of humans trying to live in community and the confusion, struggle, fear, joy, anxiety of all of that. It is a story rich in sermon material, but the piece of it I want to lift up today is a question that I have heard over and over again in various ways in my time with you - How do I know what I'm supposed to do? In work, in parenting, in relationships, whether to stay in DC or move closer to home, when to downsize my home, when to retire, what to do in retirement? All kinds of contexts where people of faith struggle to include God in a decision-making, often wishing there were some kind of burning bush.

Let's start with a little back story and then actually go beyond the excerpt of today's reading because this isn't all that happens at the burning bush. We first meet Moses as a baby when a group of women, including his mother and midwives, come together and protect him from being killed as part of Pharaoh's attempt to decrease the Israelite population in his land. Pharaoh's daughter finds him in the reeds and adopts him, raising him in the palace. He grows into an adult

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<sup>1</sup> When I deliver a sermon, I do not read from the text, so this text matches the audio only in substance.

and is deeply bothered by the enslavement of his people and one day his anger erupts and he kills an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite. He flees retribution by heading to land of Midian and ends up meeting his future wife, Zipporah, and being adopted into her family and becoming a shepherd - far different from his life in the palace.

Forty years later, we find Moses on this day leading his flock “beyond the wilderness” the text says, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Now this did not just happen to be where Moses ended up. He intentionally went to the mountain of God. What question, what concern, what desire was on his heart, we do not know. But he headed there because he wanted to be in a sacred place where perhaps he’d get some insight on what he was carrying. The blazing bush that was not consumed catches his eye, and he says to himself, “I must turn aside and look.” So it begins and Moses gets way more than he was bargaining for. He was not looking for a grand mission, but God had one for him. God had heard the suffering of his people, and God wanted someone, God wanted Moses, to go and free them from Pharaoh and lead them to a new land. Moses was understandably reluctant - Who am I to do this? Now typically we stop reading the story here where God names God’s self, but actually this dialogue goes on much longer. The conversation at the burning bush goes for two chapters, and it involves a lot of this back and forth between Moses and God. I’m not the right person, I don’t speak well, how will people believe me and God countering each concern - you are the right person because I will be with you, your brother Aaron and the elders will help you, you can do these miracles and previews the plagues and miracles he will do with Pharaoh. Moses though remains unconvinced and finally exasperated says, “Please just send someone else.” God’s response is a stern, buck up and do what I’m telling you to do. And Moses does. He goes to meet Aaron and the elders of

the Israelites and tells them what God has said, and they do not demonstrate Moses' reluctance but offer their support - they are all in with him.

There may not be any Mt. Horeb within driving distance of DC and certainly a bush that blazes without being consumed isn't an everyday occurrence, but there is a lot here that is helpful in engaging the questions of our lives. First, it starts with openness to asking the question. Moses intentionally seeks out God, and he sticks with it. There is this line in the passage today that imagines God's thought when Moses stops at the bush - "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him." It makes me think that God wasn't exactly expecting Moses to stop and maybe that bush had been blazing for quite some time, maybe it was even here other times Moses had visited Mt. Horeb, but it was this day he saw it and walked towards it. I can believe that. How many times do you have an inkling, a thought, that makes you stop and wonder, but then you just move on to the next thing? On this day Moses was open and willing to engage.

Even when he didn't like what he heard. What God has to say immediately makes Moses afraid. Confronting Pharaoh is a fool's errand - even if a burning bush tells you to do it. But he sticks with the back and forth with God until God's confidence overpowers Moses' fear. What Moses doesn't see, because he's too deep in it, and this is true for us as well, is how uniquely he is prepared for the task God is calling him to. He was educated in culture and law in the Pharaoh's palace giving him both understanding of Pharaoh and some useful skills when he is setting up the legal bounds of the new community in the wilderness after freeing them from Egypt. He has also been educated in the skills of a shepherd, quite different from the authoritarian leadership skills

of the palace. He knows how to be resourceful in the wilderness, how to care for others, and how to move a flock of wandering souls in the same direction. Though we are the most knowledgeable about the life we have lived, we often are not good at drawing the connections between how we are being prepared for the next thing until we are already there. Sometimes we need to trust what another sees in us.

It takes awhile, a long while, but Moses is moved from reluctance to acceptance, not because the arguments change, but because at some point, you just got to move. God delivers that message and Moses accepts it. But he doesn't go it alone. The first thing he does is test his decision with others, trusted others, in this case, others that God even pointed him towards. I imagine if Aaron and the elders of the Israelites had said, you're crazy; he would have gone home or maybe back to Mt. Horeb to consult the bush again. But they didn't, and Aaron and the elders become important to both getting the Israelites out of Egypt and forming the new people in the wilderness. They are as essential as Moses to the task God has called him to.

Few come to me asking for a burning bush when discerning the major decisions of their life. Maybe they think that is too much to ask for. Yet when you struggle with the question of what to do and you invite God into that discussion, you are already at the burning bush. **The burning bush is not a sign; it's an invitation to a conversation.** That conversation can go on for quite some time.

In the past few weeks, call has come up a lot in conversations. How did I know I was being called to this church in Indiana? I felt the expectation to identify some kind of sign, and it wasn't

like that. It was a conversation spread over many months. One of openness and reluctance and dealing with internal objections and consulting wise colleagues. It was a conversation with God about staying and it was a conversation about going. Unlike for Moses, God didn't share a particular direction to go, only to stay in the conversation. There were moments of clarity along the way but nothing directive.

The same was true when I came here. No clear directive, just moments of clarity along the path of the conversation. Looking back though, it makes all the sense in the world why I ended up here and the experiences of my life that made me well-suited for this congregation at the time and place I came to it.

Maybe that is what most burning bush moments are - not God issuing a charge, but God engaging us in a conversation where clarity about the path forward can emerge. It is a back and forth, sometimes trapped in the same argument going round and round until we come to the moment where we have to buck up and move forward even if we aren't confident in where we are going, and times where the right people affirm the inklings of our heart.

What burning bush in your life is waiting for you to stop, turn aside, and look? What conversation are you being invited to have with God? Apprehension, openness, reluctance, excitement - they are all appropriate responses to the conversation, but stay in the conversation for the conversation has a way of bringing out of you what your life has been preparing you to be even when you don't know it. And when it is time to buck up and move on it - find some trusted voices to share it with - you'll need their support no doubt to go where you are being called.