

Burned but Not Consumed

Exodus 3:1-6

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
All Saints/Souls Sunday – October 29, 2017

I.

Our scripture reading is Exodus 3:1-6. You'll see I shortened it from what's printed in your bulletin but you are totally welcome to read the full passage, which includes God saying to Moses, "I am who I am," ehyeh-asher-ehyeh, I am who I am. One thing you may know about me is that I like to be organized, and have things in their place and orderly. And with that being said, I'm going to break out of the box and read scripture within the sermon because it's part of a larger story. So thank you for going along with me on this! I promise there will be a scripture reading.

Last week we heard the story of Esau and his tricky brother Jacob, and what reconciliation might look like. Today we are moving into a two-part series on Moses. Part 1: in which Moses sees the face of God and is called upon to return to Egypt.

The Pharaoh ruling Egypt at this time is pretty terrible. He has enslaved the Hebrew people as a way to control them. He has not remembered the saving acts of Joseph, whose dreams helped a previous Pharaoh save the Egyptians from starvation. No, this Pharaoh has forgotten all that, and instead is threatened by the Hebrew people. Not only has he taken the Israelites as slaves, he has basically enacted a slow-moving genocide against them– he's ordered all Hebrew baby boys to be killed by throwing them into the Nile. Moses' mother follows this order, except she wisely puts a basket beneath him, and he floats down to Pharaoh's daughter, who rescues him. In an interesting plot twist, Pharaoh's daughter ends up hiring Moses' own mother to nurse baby Moses. In the end, Moses grows up in Pharaoh's court– he is a Hebrew living in the highest Egyptian household, hiding in plain sight. I wonder sometimes how that experience shaped Moses' identity– did it make him more able to see varying perspectives? Did his own people distrust him because of his upbringing? Would he ever feel accepted or would he always feel like an outsider wherever he went?

At any rate, when Moses witnesses an Egyptian harming one of the Hebrew slaves, he kills the Egyptian. So he flees to Midian to escape– and he has been blending in with the Midianites by marrying a local woman, starting a family, and working as a

shepherd for her father. You get the feeling that Moses' plan is to live out his days tending his father-in-law's sheep, rather than becoming the savior of his people. Moses is out on a hillside keeping watch over his sheep when something wild happens...

A reading from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 3, verses 1-6:

3 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. **2** 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. **3** Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." **4** When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, Hineini, "Here I am." **5** Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." **6** He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

[May these words be to us our light and our life, Amen.]

II.

This week I overheard some young people talking in a coffee shop, saying that they are having a hard time sleeping and they just feel on edge— and they connected their feelings to the aftermath of the Sonoma County firestorm. Maybe you have felt this way too? A friend of mine is a Physician's Assistant at a local hospital, and she said that after the firestorm the most common ailment she's seen is anxiety. Anxiety— especially, she said, in older adults whose mobility might prevent them from an easy evacuation. I've also seen the signs, "the love in the air is thicker than the smoke," and someone gave the statue of the bicyclist outside Burbank Heights a face mask so he could breathe easier. I've read heroic stories of first responders and ordinary citizens alike. Some of my friends are rad chefs and herbalists and body workers who have supported evacuees and first responders using their healing arts. There's a sad beauty about all of it. So I want to acknowledge that we are bringing our feelings and our immediate context to this story, and our own experience of what it means to be "burned but not consumed."

I have to admit that in preparing for today, I've had some feelings about this scripture— and wondered if our community is ready for a story about seeing God in an unconsuming fire? Although my initial impulse was to shrink away from finding holiness and a good word in this story, I would encourage us (myself included) to sink

deeply into our context, and let it inform our hearing of this story. We can only hear with the ears we have.

And, that being said, we trust and give thanks that our context is not the only context. This story has been heard by many different people in many different situations, and it has proven over time to provide a life-giving message. I bet that most if not all of the “saints” we honor on our altar today, heard this story in their lifetimes. I wonder where you will find a good word in this story– a good word for you, and for our community?

III.

In her epic poem, “Aurora Leigh,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; But only [the ones] who see take off [their] shoes– the rest sit round and pluck blackberries.” Only the ones who see. But how do we really see? How does Moses see?

First, Moses notices the thorn-bush aflame, and he only sees it because he turns aside. It can be difficult for any of us to slow down enough to turn aside and see holiness these days. I’m not sure what gets in the way for you, but I sure know one thing that gets me: I love my smartphone, probably too much. I am really trying to set it down more and attend to the life that’s right in front of me. But it takes a lot of discipline, I have to set parameters for myself. I mean, what if Moses had an iphone? What if he walked right by the burning bush because he was updating his facebook page?! At least all he had to think about was herding sheep under a big blue sky. But he does, Moses does notice, and he turns aside. This can be a model for all of us, especially if we are involved in disaster recovery and activism in the current political climate. We really do need to make time to turn aside, to sink deeply into the noticing. It’s so hard to take time for this, because it seems superfluous– like we aren’t DOING something important. But we are– if we are to be helpers in any capacity, –in fact if we want to increase our capacity– we need to take time to turn aside and witness the sacred in our midst.

God directs Moses: “take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.” He must keep noticing the holiness around him, if he is to be supported in his next steps, because Moses is about to be given an implausible job: to stand up to Pharaoh and deliver his people from slavery. To prepare for this great task, Moses must first recognize the sacred around him. Out of reflection comes action. When Moses turns and wonders about the burning bush, God calls out to him and Moses responds, “Hineini,” which means “Here I am.”

The word "Hineini" only appears 8 times in the Hebrew scriptures, it's a terribly important word. And in this case, because he has noticed, because he has done the work of reflection and wonderment, Moses is ready to act, he is ready for what might be called a "hineini moment." When the firestorms hit, we had a hineini moment- our church said, yes Here We Are, we are ready to help, and we opened our doors as an evacuation site. When our staff and church council were asked to kick off our pledge campaign for 2018, they had a \$xxx,xxx hineini moment. Here we are, we are ready. When I called Paula Berndt and asked her to lead Godly Play this morning, she was ready, she said "hineini," here I am. (Actually she just said, sure I can do that, but for the children in Godly Play, that was a hineini moment). Brian McLaren says, "often in the Bible, when there is a big problem, God prepares a person or people to act as God's partners or agents in solving it. In other words, God gets involved by challenging us to get involved." I wonder, do you feel ready for a hineini moment? I wonder how your relationship with God, your experience of *Earth crammed with heaven*, might be supported by a spiritual practice that involves turning aside, listening, reflecting?

In the wake of the firestorm, we are on a recovery journey that will unfold over many years. It's going to be a process. We have to be so careful about burnout- we really do need to be aware of the movement from reflection to action, and to reflection again, if we aren't going to work ourselves into the ground. Especially when we are recovering amidst a political environment that many of us find challenging. It's easy to become overwhelmed, and we must really do the good work of spiritual preparation and reflection, so we are ready for our hineini moments.

IV.

In his first sermon after the firestorm, Rabbi Gittleman of Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa said- you know, even without the fires, the dominant landscape in Northern California this time of year is brown. He said when he first moved here, having grown up in Louisville, Kentucky, he thought it was really ugly. Then it rained, and he said, "it was like the resurrection of the dead, everything turned green."

If we are going to be living signs of resurrection, if we are going to be part of the greening of our county, the resistance of oppression in our country, if we are going to be the living body of Christ in our community, we need two things: To turn aside. To say Here I am. Amen.