



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

IT'S NOT ABOUT ME (OR YOU)

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Judeo-Christian

Exodus 3.1-15 (abbreviated)

As Moses was tending the flocks, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Though the bush was on fire, it was not consumed. God called to Moses from within the burning bush, and Moses said "Here I am." Then God said to Moses "take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people enslaved in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them and to bring them to a land of milk and honey, a good and spacious land. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

Moses replied, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

And God said, "I will be with you." Moses asked, "When I go to the Israelites, who should I say has sent me? What is your name?" God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. Tell them I Am has sent you. This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."

Islam

Koran 28.29-32 (abbreviated)

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful:

When Moses was journeying with his folk, he saw a fire on the mountain side. He said to his people: 'Stay here, for I can see a fire. Perhaps I can bring you news, or a lighted torch to warm yourselves with.' When he came near, a voice called out to him from a bush in a blessed spot on the right side of the valley, saying: 'Moses, I am God, Lord of the Universe. Approach and have no fear; You are safe.'

Brothers Kevin, age 7 and Ryan, age 5 were sitting at the breakfast table of a morning. Their mother was preparing pancakes for them when the boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Seeing an opportunity for a moral lesson, their mother said, "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say 'Let my brother have the first pancake.'" Kevin immediately turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"

All too often we, like this boy, turn a biblical story into something about us. We mistakenly, selfishly think that God has written to us personally through the pages of the Bible; that all of its stories have some moral value to reward or punish our behavior; that God's primary purpose is to attend to our needs, make us succeed, give us the good things of life; that religion is about us.

Moses did. He stood before the burning bush that was never consumed by the fire, shaking in his sandals as he heard God call him to lead the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt. He enumerated several reasons for not being the one to organize an exodus; he stuttered when he spoke and felt woefully inadequate as an orator to convince the Pharaoh to let these slaves go; he was a wanted man, having murdered an Egyptian some years before. This in-your-face announcement that he would be leading the Israelites out of the bondage of their Egyptian captors would be suicide; and the thought of the organizational nightmare that was before him if he was successful against the Pharaoh was enough to make him jump into the fire of the burning bush right then and there.

But God said "Moses, this isn't about you. Don't flatter yourself to think that your inadequacies, or even your accomplishments for that matter, have anything to do with it. This isn't about what you can do or can't do, but about what I'm able to do through you for the sake of the people. I will bring justice and freedom to an oppressed people, and I'm enlisting your leadership. It isn't about your personal assessment of the odds or your capabilities; it isn't about your comfort level, your chances for success or your fear of failure. It's about justice. It's about freedom. It's about others."

We play with fire when we dabble in selfish interests in matters of faith and religion. We in modern Western culture are so ingrained with the value of the individual that we cannot grasp easily, if at all, the concept of a communal, egalitarian society where individual rights take a second seat to the needs of the community. We tend to read the Bible as if it were a book of personal comfort to assuage our every fear and address our every woe. We tend, like 5-year-old Kevin, to think the words of Joseph, Joshua, Jesus or Jehovah were written so we might be given the first pancake, the answer to every problem and enough of what we need to protect us from the angel of death that visited the Egyptians when Moses finally led the Israelites out of oppression. But it's not about us. More often the words of scripture are about sacrifice not comfort, calling us to put aside our own personal issues for the welfare of the larger community. It isn't about how you *feel* before Pharaoh, Moses; it isn't about what will *happen* to you. Don't be afraid, I am with you, and I have a job for you on behalf of my people and it has little to do with personal comfort or personal ability.

Moses, whose name means 'drawn out of the water,' had been saved by being pulled from the Nile and raised right under Pharaoh's nose. Now, God calls Moses to save the lives of others, to lead them through the water of the Red Sea that stands between their oppression and freedom. Ultimately Moses took the challenge but didn't live long enough to see the rewards of all of his hard work; he didn't get to enjoy the promised land of milk and honey and freedom because ultimately it was not about him.

St. Augustine likened an undue fascination with God's gifts to us to a bride who falls in love with her wedding ring rather than her groom. The clamor for what God can give us, what pain God can take away from us is idolatry. It worships ourselves. Faith isn't about what God can *do* for us; it is about who God *is*. "I am who I am" God told Moses. That's my name. I am. I will be what I will be. It isn't about you or how you'll benefit from this.

Many of us have known a very privatized religion in our formative years in a fundamentalist environment. We were taught to pray that we might pass a test in school or to be spared disease or protected from bad things so that we might be happy, so that others would see what is to be gained personally from being a Christian, and therefore become one themselves. It was idolatry in its most wretched incarnation. Once while traveling with my family, we came upon an accident on the road. My folks immediately gave thanks that my sister had been slow back at the rest stop, something for which they were angry with her then, but which now they saw as God's way of detaining us so that WE were not in this accident. And if harm did come our way, it was seen as God's punishment for some act of sin or rebellion on our part. It was as if God had nothing else to do but be concerned about our personal comforts, our personal salvation.

It's a bit dicey believing in a God who is so concerned about every little detail of our lives that the order of things is changed to suit our whim or even our needs. The farmer prays for rain and the family planning a picnic prays that it won't rain. We trivialize God if we think that the great I Am responds to each individual request for our personal gain. It is misguided to think that the great I Am is our personal concierge to arrange for us all things good to ensure a happy life.

Theologian Henri Nouwen says we are called to be wounded healers. He tells the story in the rich tradition of ancient Israel about the Messiah covered with sores and wounds, sitting at the gate of the city with all the others who are sick and wounded. The Messiah is with the wounded and poor. But one can distinguish Messiah from all of the others because, while the others take off all of their bandages at once to care for their wounds or to pity themselves, Messiah uncovers one wound at a time in order to be available if someone else is in need. If this is the way the Messiah acts, ought not we to do at least as much?

Like Moses in front of the eternal flame of the great I Am, we stand on holy ground wherever we are, whatever we do, whoever we are. Wounded and incapable, inadequate and afraid, unwilling and alone we are tempted to seek a personal God to take away our infirmities and worries. We uncover the wounds that life has dealt us so God and everyone else can see and have pity. We are commanded instead to take off our shoes in humility, to not be afraid. We are called to care for our wounds in order to get back to the business of caring for a world that is shackled with systems that oppress and situations that limit and people that are enslaved to their own personal needs. Get over yourself, says God. It's not about you.

Life is often the wilderness which Moses traversed when he encountered the burning bush, and we become afraid. We lose a job or a parent dies. A marriage feels shaky, a child fails or gets drunk, or we fail or get drunk, an old anger bursts into bitter flames, feelings of envy or judgment consume us. We feel sorry for ourselves, we think ourselves ill-used because we're good people. We wonder why God allows bad things to happen to us. But you know what? It isn't about us. It isn't about me; it isn't about you. These things are a part of life, everyone's life. In and of themselves they do not make or break life unless we allow ourselves to get caught up in personal pride or in private comfort.

The burning bush reminds us we are always on holy ground. Holy ground is God's ground. It is the ground of freedom; the residence of the community; the home of justice.

Today the choir sang that being in the presence of God leaves no room for personal, selfish pride. Wherever we are is holy ground. Wherever we are, there are burning bushes through which God calls us to lead people out of oppression into freedom. It's not about getting the first pancake or first place. Whether we're at the breakfast table or on the race track, we're standing on holy ground. Take off your shoes and risk getting burned or looking foolish. Investigate every bush, every face, every experience for God's presence. Then let yourself be used....by God, for the sake of someone else. Let that fire be a part of you and do not be afraid—like the bush, you will not be consumed and you will not be alone. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann