

When God Calls Us: Our Burning Bush

Our second Scripture is Exodus 3:1-12. In Exodus 1, the Israelites encountered the sudden hostility, persecution and attempted genocide by the Pharaoh (king) of Egypt. Exodus 2 is the narrative of how God rescued baby Moses from the decree of Pharaoh to have all male Israelite babies slain. Moses' mother hid him in a basket in the Nile, where he was discovered and rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who enlisted Moses' mother to care for him. He then was reared in the royal household, being given a privileged upbringing. As a young man, Moses rescued a fellow Israelite by killing his assailant and hiding his body in the sand. The next day when he tried to settle a dispute between two Israelites, he realized his crime had become known, even to Pharaoh, who attempted to kill Moses, forcing him to flee Egypt. Now Moses, as we find him in our text, is living as a refugee in the land of Midian. A pagan priest gave Moses one of his daughters, Zipporah, to be his wife, who bore him a son, Gershom. Fugitive Moses is reduced to serving his father-in-law as a shepherd. He's about 80 years of age by this time, when he meets God in a burning bush on the mountain that's to figure prominently in Exodus.

I read **Exodus 3:1-12**: *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, "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." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. ⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."*

Have you had your "burning bush" encounter with God? A "burning bush" commonly refers to a dramatic, life-changing encounter; as it certainly was for Moses. At this

original burning bush, Moses was called by God to be his chosen instrument in delivering his people from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses's standing before God in his bare feet is a model for each one of us. We should all be able to say we've stood before God's burning bush in our bare feet, on God's holy ground. This doesn't mean that your conversion experience needs to be as dramatic as was Moses' in order to be authentic, but the elements of God's call should be just as life-changing and profound.

Moses' life story is one of pure grace, with God's delivering him from his infancy to the burning bush, a place of divine encounter. We who've come to God's saving grace through Christ agree with the words of Jesus, as we look back upon our conversion experience, that we did not choose him but rather he chose us (Jn. 15:16). The Apostle Paul notes that the Father chose us in Christ before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

The Lord was drawing Moses to an encounter with him at a miraculously burning bush, which was none other than the heavenly fire of God, which burned without consuming the bush; and here with the angel of the Lord in the fire is a theophany, a God-appearing. This angelic appearance in the miraculous fire may have been none other than a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was the great French mathematical genius and Christian apologist "whose faith grew in fits and starts" before finally emerging in full maturity on November 23, 1654. It was on that evening that he had a 'definite conversion,' the result of a mystical vision that lasted two hours and which he called a "night of fire."

Your and my conversion experiences were likely not as dramatic as Moses' or Pascal's, but the only way we could be awakened from spiritual death to the life of God was for the fire of God to burn in us and the light of Christ to shine upon us. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk. 3:16). "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn. 12:32).

Moses was drawn to the burning bush and God spoke to him from the fire. We can't see the full glory of Christ's face in our unredeemed flesh, but we may, and in fact we must see, his saving glory in the face of Christ through his written and spoken word. God speaks to us through his word that brings about the understanding of faith, resulting in our conversion (Rom. 10:6-13). He speaks to us about his holy love as revealed in Christ and his death on the cross, and about our lost and sinful condition. Paul compares the light God shines in us to his creation original creation of light, saying that God *has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ* (2 Cor. 4:6). We then are able to turn from sin and self and to believe in and follow Jesus as Lord. God draws us and speaks to us, and then *he connects with us*.

When the Lord drew Moses and spoke to him from the burning bush, he then told him to take off his sandals, “for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (5). Taking off one’s shoes is a sign of reverence still practiced in the Middle East. With Moses’ standing before him with bare feet, the Lord introduced himself to him as the God of his fathers (6). Moses encountered the holiness of God. He was a sinner made righteous before God, able by grace to stand completely forgiven and made acceptable in the eyes of holy God. When God called Moses to stand before him he chose him as an unworthy, broken sinner who had made a grievous error in Egypt 40 years before, and had been spending 40 years in exile. And unlike Moses (6), we don’t fear to look upon God because when we see Jesus we see him in his perfect, unconditional love.

When God calls us he uses us. God’s call to Moses was a call to conversion but also to a life of obedient living and service. God doesn’t call us just to keep us out of hell and to guarantee we’ll “go to heaven when we die,” which is about all the value some place on conversion. God calls us into a dynamic relationship and a new level of living, which changes our life orientation as well as our everlasting destination. We can’t separate Moses’ call to saving faith and his call to service.

At the very beginning of his life-changing relationship, Moses received from the Lord his assignment to deliver his people from their suffering (7-9). God’s plan is to bring his chosen people into his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. God calls all his people to join him in that work of deliverance and expansion of his kingdom, until it embraces all who have been chosen for eternal life. If we’ve been truly converted and brought into a relationship with Christ, he begins to lead us immediately into a life of service.

God’s plan is to expand his kingdom and to bring the entire world under his reign, through spreading the message of Christ to the ends of the earth; it’s bringing the kingdoms of this world into submission to the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15). The work before us is one of evangelistic proclamation but also one of social justice and acts of compassion that reveal Christ to the world and prepare the way of the Lord (Matt. 25:31-46; Lk. 3:7-14; Rom. 8:21f).

The amazing thing is that God uses us in the work of his kingdom and gives us *our overwhelming assignment*. After the Lord told Moses his agenda to deliver the Israelites, he then gave Moses an overwhelming assignment, at which Moses demurred. Moses, at age 80, exiled into Midian as a refugee from Pharaoh’s justice, now unknown to his fellow Israelites back in Egypt, was called to join the Lord in his humanly impossible task of leading the people of God from bondage to freedom in the Promised Land.

After 40 years in Midian in the service of his father-in-law as a shepherd tending his sheep, it must have seemed that God had passed him by, but God had a purpose for Moses. You might think it’s too late for you, that your best years are already spent;

but when God calls he's saying that the time is just right to do what he has prepared for you to do. God would use Moses' previous 40 years in Egypt, where he received his education and knowledge of the culture and people. He would also use those 40 years in Midian, and those years of shepherding sheep, when God was teaching him lessons to prepare him to shepherd God's people in the wilderness. Moses probably thought his life had been detoured onto a dead end of uselessness. And in your life, God may simply be giving you time to train for a greater work. Now is always the best time to give your life to him and follow him in surrender and joyful service. He will even use your past failures and defeats to better equip you with understanding and compassion.

When God gave this call, Moses was overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy. Moses offered a series of objections to the Lord that stretch all the way to 4:17. At first he protested his inadequacies as a leader, then as a speaker, then finally begged off the assignment altogether (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). But the Lord assured Moses that he would provide what he needed. The Lord understands our weaknesses and even our reluctance, which he overcomes by his gracious assurance.

The Lord became angry with Moses only when he wanted to be excused from the call altogether (4:14). The call to a relationship with Christ is a complete call, not just to believe certain things about God and decide that going to heaven is to be preferred to going to hell. The call of God is a "complete package deal." While Moses was demurring and raising questions and objections, God was patiently at work forming an honest relationship with him. Had Moses responded quickly and easily with a self-confident "yes!" without the struggle, then he likely would not have been God's person for the job. Our struggles with God will result in a stronger bond with God, but eventually our struggle must lead to surrender to him and to his assignment for us.

When the argument was over, God gave Moses his greatest promise—his presence with him (12). That's the greatest and the only truly necessary promise the Lord gives to us to guarantee our success in the life and service of discipleship. He'll be with us always (Matt. 28:20).

This is the meaning of the burning bush and the bare feet. God calls us to stand before his holy presence in worship, with bared feet sensing his presence beneath us, bearing us up and assuring us of his love to guide and provide. In fact, everywhere we go with the risen Lord Jesus is a place of worship, with his presence burning out our sin and burning his holy love into our hearts (Lk. 24:32). Wherever we set our feet becomes holy ground, because the Lord of glory dwells in our hearts, as well as goes before us and guards our way behind us (Is. 52:12). We need to be mindful of "fire and feet"!

The Lord promised a sign of success to Moses, but one which may not have been particularly appealing to him (12). The Lord didn't give Moses an advanced sign before he launched out toward Egypt. Rather, he said the sign of success would come after his obedience. I'm almost tempted, were it not for the sake of Presbyterian propriety and dignity, to ask that we all take off our shoes and realize that we are standing together on holy ground. We're standing before the burning, glorious presence of the Lord, who is the one who calls us to know him, worship and serve him. Whether your shoes are on or off, he's here. And the place where you stand right now is holy ground. Everywhere you go becomes holy ground, the place where he calls and uses you.