

March 20, 2022

# Third Sunday in Lent

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

**Exodus 3:1-15**





Do you remember the WWJD bracelets that were wildly popular – especially in evangelical circles – back in the day? Did any of you ever wear one? I actually wore one in high school for about 4 days before I took it off. I took it off because I wasn't exactly sure how I, a pimply and moody teenager, was actually supposed to do what the Eternal Word made incarnate did. Back at that time, Jesus felt too divine for my all too human existence. After all, Jesus never had to suffer the imponderable boredom of AP Calculus – try being holy after that class? And Jesus never asked a girl to prom who had already rejected him 2 times before? He said, turn the other cheek; there was no other cheek to turn.

WWJD feels quite impossible to implement. And that's why I am so glad that Scripture gives us other portraits of people trying to live holy lives. Other messier, less perfected lives. Today we get to encounter Moses, the great prophet of Israel. We know more about Moses than we do any other figure in the Bible, outside of Jesus. We see a portrait of his birth, his calling, his struggles with leadership, and his death. The fact that we know his words and actions suggests that we might look to him as something of a template for our own; this morning I'd like us to focus on WDM. What does Moses do?

This is a good thing to think about during Lent, when we are trying to adjust our behavior, in ways however small, so that we too may come closer to God. And our lesson this morning gives us the best place to start: at the beginning of the long, intimate relationship between Moses and God. That relationship will last 40 years; and, like all intimate relationships of long duration, it will have its stresses and strains, especially when it comes for sharing responsibility for the children – the children of Israel that is.

Sometimes Moses and God sound like an old married couple, bickering about the kids. They won't ever give up on each other, but you cannot always tell that from the way God and Moses argue. However, today takes us to the moment when the spark of intimacy first gets ignited between them, quite literally at the burning bush. What does Moses do that draws God's attention, that draws him into an everlasting covenant with the living God?

First, Moses turns aside from his regular business to see what

God is up to: “I must turn aside and see this great sight. Why does the bush not burn up?” That is the signal God was looking for, as the narrator implies: And when God saw that Moses had turned aside to see, then God called out to him. What God sees in Moses, it would seem, is someone who has enough healthy curiosity and imagination to set aside his usual business – tending sheep – and turns to tend to what God is up to, looking up from his work to notice God’s work.

This isn’t the first time for him to do this. As soon as Moses had grown up, an earlier story tells us, this adopted grandson of Pharaoh left the palace. He went out to where his fellow Hebrews, the slaves, were laboring, and he looked upon their burdens. He saw their burdens and something more, an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and you remember what happens: Moses kills the Egyptian. That episode is the end of Moses Prince of Egypt. Suddenly Pharaoh recognizes him as an Enemy inside the palace, a Hebrew sympathizer, and Moses has to flee for his life. From that story we learn that God and Moses have one thing in common: they see the affliction of the weak, and they do something about it, even if it costs them a lot.

Who are the weak around you who need to be delivered? How is God calling you to act on behalf of those in need of compassion and care? Is there a place in your life that you are forgetting to look? Are we too distracted with our projects, our plans, our work to stop and notice the work of God? Today is a day we can change that.

WDMD – what does Moses do? A second thing: he wonders. Why does the bush burn and burn and yet not burn up? Moses wonders. One of the things I love most about this church is how I sense that we are a community open to wonder.

I was having a conversation with one of our 6th graders who had some big stuff on his mind. Having gotten really into Marvel movies and comics, he was wondering if God was God of the Marvelverse, too? Did God have power over the Hulk, Captain America, and Ironman? Was God big enough, strong enough, might enough? My friend was working towards a new God image. He said, It just seems unlikely that God is an old guy sitting on

a cloud dishing out commandments while he snacks on grapes. Knowing that he was the science type, and remembering the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg from seminary days, I pitched the idea that maybe God was less like a big human in the clouds and more like a force field of energy. I wondered with him if Holy Spirit might be like that. Connecting and flowing throwing all things; the material reality an expression of this deeper energy. I told him this idea came from a guy named Wolfhart. He said it sounded like a Marvel character. He then said: I wonder if when we pray we let more of God's energy into the world.

There is an ancient story about a man who wondered about the burning bush: why (he asked) did God speak to Moses out of a thornbush? He brought his question to a great rabbi, who offered him one possible answer: to teach you that there is no space free of the divine presence, not even a thorn bush.

There is no space free from the divine presence. I think Lent is an invitation to realize the divine presence wherever our physical bodies are, the space we inhabit physically, as well as the space we inhabit through prayer and imagination.

How is God's presence felt in your garden or your kitchen or your basement couch....

How is God's presence in your favorite chair, where you read and pray, and think and dream, and even feel your own pain....

How is God's presence felt when you watch your child sleep; when you notice the rise and fall of their chests....

How is God's presence felt in the weightier spaces: in grief, in the smell of your childhood home, at the graveside of a dear friend...

There is no space free of the divine presence.

WDMD? First he turns aside from his work and notices the work of God; he wonders at the bush that burns and burns and yet isn't burned up; and lastly he gives his life over to the mystery of God. Moses lets himself be claimed by a God he can hardly comprehend. This mysterious God sends Moses back to Egypt, and it's only natural that Moses wants his name to back him up

when he has to go toe to toe with the Pharaoh. Who shall I say sent me? The Mysterious One says, “I am who I am,” tell them that is who sent you. And Moses surely, at this point, cocked his head up to the sky and wondered, “Great, just great.”

Actually this name is more instructive than Moses might have first realized. For God to say I am who I am, also translated I will be who I will be, is to say:

There is no box you can put me in. There is no reducing my presence down to your agenda, to any agenda. There is no marketing me. No one can enlist me to have all the same enemies as them. I am who I am. The Eternal Presence.

This is the fiery presence; the Holy One. And to be enlisted by this God is to join Moses in confronting the power of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the one who reduced Israel to slavery. He stole their names. In following the great I AM, the eternal mystery, we stand up to anyone and anything that effaces the mystery of God’s good world. If God is an inexpressible mystery, then we, created in this God’s image, are too. And like Moses before the Pharaoh we stand up against any power that wants to label and reduce human life down to junk.

We stand up against racist ideologies that reduce the mysterious depth of persons to property to be bought and sold and incarcerated. We stand against the corporations, the money men, who want to reduce the mystery of creation down to the lowest common denominator of production value. Moses doesn’t just worship Yahweh on the mountain side; he is Yahweh’s voice confronting Pharaoh. This is something that I am convicted by: I just as much as anyone else want to wonder at the mystery of God, join in the church’s alleluias, celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death. I am quite comfortable helping us to think about an everyday spirituality. Taking a stand against the Pharaoh’s all around us that want to reduce life to junk – that’s harder. That takes courage. It’s why we need our justice ministries – our Racial Justice Group; our Climate Justice Group. And that’s why we draw near to the Fiery presence in Lent and ask that our fearful judgements be burned up.

To walk in the way of Moses takes courage and more than a little bit of child-like imagination. To grow in the faith of Moses we need to grow in the capacity to be surprised. Surprised by what God is up to. We need that capacity to accompany us all our lives, and especially in this season of Lent, when the tradition of the church asks us not just to examine our sin but to think about our lives in terms of our mortality. Lent is a preparation in dying. Dying to self and rising into life in God. And perhaps that is why we read the story of the Burning Bush this season. Death will be burning bush for each of us, the point of entry into the fuller mystery of God.

I was talking to a parishioner a couple of years ago, and she was reflecting back on the passing of his wife. She said to me, “I have seen just enough mystery in this life to keep my mind open for the next. I don’t know what life will be like on the other side of death, but I am sure of this: when I get there I will say, “I had no idea...”

Lent is an invitation walk in the way of Moses by turning aside, by being a people of wonder, and by giving our lives to the mission of mystery. May we draw near to the Consuming Presence, until our lives burn with its love, and our imaginations are gripped by its mystery.

