# Blazing Bushes

## 3rd Sunday of Lent, Year C – Exodus 3:1-15

*based on a sermon by the Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker*

*preached at Saint Mark’s, Hastings, March 14, 2004*

*preached at Trinity, Columbus, March 11, 2007*

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, February 28, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

It’s what most people might call “the good life” – a steady job, a comfortable home, loving friends and family. Moses pretty much has it *all* once he settles down in Midian. The years go by. Moses is content with small pleasures and day-to-day accomplishments. He never talks about his past. He never dreams about too much of a future. He’s not stirred up by any particular passion. He simply lives the good life.

And then one day, Moses gets up early and leaves for work as always. Off into the countryside he goes, leading his father-in-law’s sheep to find bits of nourishment in the desert sameness. Like the days, and weeks, and months, and *years* before, the sheep move across the landscape, and sun moves across the sky. The landscape is still, except for the gentle, ordinary sounds of the grazing flock of Moses’ good life. Then, in the distance, something interrupts the sameness. There in the distance, Moses sees a bush on fire! Now, bushes blazing in the arid Midian wilderness are not all that uncommon, but they are definitely *not* part of the good life. Should he run and try to put it out before it spreads? Or should he turn the sheep and get them out of the way?

For several minutes he watches the consuming flames, until he realizes that not only has the fire not spread, the flames are not consuming *anything*. The burning bush isn’t burning *up*. The flame just keeps burning, but the leaves and the branches show no sign of being burnt. Now, *there’s* something you don’t see every ordinary day. There’s something that’s never been part of the good life.

Puzzled by the sight, Moses decides to take a closer look. He starts walking toward the bush, when suddenly, a voice rings out. “Moses! Moses!” The sound of that voice *fills* all the open, empty countryside. “Yes, I’m here,” Moses hears his own response, small and weak and tense, The voice declares that the ground on which Moses is standing is *holy* ground. The ordinary, tranquil, *common* ground that Moses has walked a thousand times is now somehow distinctly… *un*-common. Moses pulls off his sandals and then drops to his knees on the dusty, holy ground.

“I am the God of your ancestors!” the voice continues. “I am the God of Abraham. I am the God of Isaac. I am and the God of Jacob.” Now Moses falls flat on the ground, his face in the dirt. If he wants to live, he *dare* not look. Living in his father-in-law’s household, Moses had always been a proper man, a respectful, respectably *pious* man. But now childhood memories return to him, stories he heard of how this God had intruded into the lives of his people. Moses knows of this God from the old stories. But he had never *encountered* this God before – not in dreams, not in visions, and *certainly* not in broad daylight intrusions into his good, ordinary life! Moses feels his heart race.

But the voice will not give Moses time to think. “I have seen the misery of my people! I have heard their cry against their oppressors! I am coming to rescue them from Pharaoh! I will bring them into a new land, a fruitful land, a land where milk and honey flow. And *you*, Moses, *you* will lead my people out of Egypt!”

Laying there with his face in the dust, more memories confront Moses. Moses knows all about Egypt. Rescued from the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh, he was raised as an Egyptian, a son of the king’s court. His blood was Israelite, but he did not suffer with his people. He was both Egyptian *and* Israelite – and yet he was neither. One ordinary day, a lifetime ago, Moses had left the palace grounds, dreamily curious to learn about life. And when he did, he found himself in a world of oppression, where the people of his own flesh were beaten every day, where the people of his own blood died long before their time. Filled with passionate rage, he assaulted and killed an Egyptian overseer who he found beating an Israelite. And then, filled with shame and guilt, he buried the body in the sand. In spite of his efforts, word of what he had done spread quickly, and Moses fled – to Midian, to his good, ordinary life. There, family and home and work keeps him busy. There, the day-to-day sameness makes him happy. There, he forgets about the people of his flesh and blood. He never talks about his past. He never dreams about too much of a future. He’s not stirred up by any true passion. He simply and quietly lives his good life.

But now the God of Abraham tells him to leave his ordinary, comfortable life. The God of Isaac calls him to go back to Egypt. The God of Jacob *demands* that he deliver his people. The God of his ancestors tells Moses to leave off being a shepherd, to become a *savior*. Moses offers first one excuse and then another, but none of his excuses can silence the insistent call, the unrelenting voice from the blazing bush. God promises that he will not desert Moses, and that someday the free Israelites will worship on this very spot. God even reveals to Moses his own awesome, earth-shattering Name, “I am your ancestors’ God. I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am who I am. I have been who I have been. I will be who I will be. I *am*!”

That’s where our lesson today ends. But of course, that’s *not* where the *story* ends, is it? Moses *accepts* God’s call. No longer centered on his own satisfaction, on his own comfort, Moses’ concern become the purposes of God. No longer safe, secure, ordinary, without challenge and without growth, Moses’ life becomes a life of faith and service.

Sure, Moses will bear the grumbling of the people in the valley of discontent, but he will also see the flash of God’s glory on the mountaintop. Sure, Moses will lead a people apparently addicted to slavery through forty years of wilderness, but he will also see a sea parted, and sing a song of victory at the triumph of God over the mightiest army on the face of the earth. Sure, Moses will constantly battle the people’s readiness to flee from their own freedom and promise, but he will also see a pillar of fire lead those people, he will see bread fall from heaven to feed them, he will see a river of water flow from solid rock to sustain them. Sure, Moses will end his life just *short* of God’s promised land, but he will be remembered forever by the *people* of God as God’s own friend and faithful servant, a true hero in the salvation story. Moses will live a distinctly *extra*-ordinary life.

You know, my friends – bushes don’t just blaze for Moses. Bushes blaze for each of us, if we will only keep our eyes open to the sight of God’s work in our lives, if we will only keep our ears open to God’s call upon our lives. But how many bushes have blazed in your life, or in yours, or in yours, and were ignored? How many bushes have blazed and been postponed? How many bushes have blazed and been covered up? How many offered gifts have we been given, that we given up, because we see, but do not perceive, because we hear, but we do not listen, because we know, but we choose not to understand?

This morning, let me leave you with a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning that I carry around with me in my pocket. I hope you’ll carry it with you, too, as we continue our Lenten journey. I hope you’ll maybe let it challenge you to keep your eyes open as you travel this road, open for the very real possibility… no, the distinct probability… no, the absolute *promise*… that the God who was, and is, and ever will be, has something more than an ordinary life in store for each one of us that call upon his mighty name:

Earth’s *crammed* with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
And only he who *sees* takes off his shoes.  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.