

## **“Turn Aside, Take Off Your Shoes”**

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Rev. Bill Eichhorn



*The Burning Bush - Moses on Holy Ground*  
Melani Pyke

### **Readings**

#### **Exodus 3:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)**

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. 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. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” 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.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

#### **Morning in a New Land**

Mary Oliver

In trees still dripping night, some nameless birds  
Woke, shook out their arrowy wings, and sang,  
Slowly, like finches sifting through a dream.  
The pink sun fell, like glass, into the fields.  
Two chestnuts, and a dapple gray,  
Their shoulders wet with light, their dark hair streaming,  
Climbed the hill. The last mist fell away,  
And under the trees, beyond time’s brittle drift,  
I stood like Adam in his lonely garden  
On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,  
Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the leaves,  
Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift.

The thirteenth century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi wrote: "The wound is the place where the light enters you." Leonard Cohen, a Jewish-Canadian singer-songwriter, poet, and novelist, wrote the song "Anthem" containing the line, "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." We all carry the wounds and scars of betrayal, failure and the grief accompanying loss. Each one of us bears the burden of imperfections, regrets, and shortcomings. Nonetheless, these very wounds and burdens that break us open provide an entryway for light to enter our lives. Cohen urges us not to get hung up on perfection. "Forget your perfect offering." Instead, he says: "Ring the bells that still can ring."

Cohen hears the birds singing a song at the break of day telling us not to dwell on what has passed away or what is yet to be. Instead, we are to ring the bells that still ring, even if they are cracked. Some commentators take the cracked bells to be a reference to our nation's Liberty Bell, which is cracked, but rings, nonetheless.

In the face of continuing wars, lawless politicians and the imperfections of every government, citizens should raise their voices in protest over injustice and harm done to persons and the planet. We should ring the bells that still can ring and not let our imperfections still us. I want to thank Lillie Kocher for every Friday in the newsletter giving us a cracked bell to ring, a bell for peace, justice and ways to help our unhoused neighbors.

Our Old Testament reading of Moses and the burning bush provides a vivid example of how the Divine Light enters our lives and where it comes from. Now, Moses was a man full of cracks. He murdered an Egyptian, for starters. He lived in the shadow of his eloquent brother Arron, and was ashamed of his stammering, stuttering speech. Fearing for his life and fearing the Egyptian tyrant Pharaoh, Moses hid out shepherding sheep on his father-in-law's farm. Exodus 3 tells us he was leading the flock to the west side of the wilderness when he encountered a bush that burned without being consumed. Having not seen such a thing before, Moses said to himself: "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why this bush is not consumed."

Now, you may be thinking, who wouldn't stop to look at such a thing? Wouldn't any of us stop dead in our tracks if we came upon a burning bush that wasn't being consumed, especially a burning bush that begins speaking to us? Well, Exodus suggests that the voice coming from the bush waited until it saw that Moses had turned aside to see the burning bush: "When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called him from out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here am I." The burning bush gets Moses' attention so the voice of God can speak to him.

The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber believed that the burning bush narrative is crucial for understanding how the encounter with God occurs in our lives, how the light enters the cracks we bear. The miracle of the burning bush, says Buber, is that Moses turned aside. He was not so self-absorbed that he just wandered on by the burning bush. Despite the boring work of herding sheep in a barren wilderness, he turned aside.

Poet Annie Dillard says it this way: “At a certain point, you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening.” That is what Moses did. That is what it takes for the light to get in, to hear the voice that calls to us, that calls us.

When I was nineteen years old and recovering from knee surgery, I was sitting on the back porch of my parents’ Ohio home, not thinking about much of anything, when I heard a voice say, “Go into the ministry.” No burning bush. It wasn’t a question. “Go into the ministry.” Even at nineteen, I recognized that the voice came from a deep place within me. I never questioned that call. I know some of you have heard and trusted a voice that was within you but not of you. Sometimes God’s voice comes to us from another. In 1984 a San Francisco attorney and labor leader asked Ann to join a seven-member women’s delegation for a fact-finding trip to El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua after the Kissinger Report whitewashed the extent of U.S. involvement. Ann felt called to say “yes”.

The burning bush is a story about revelation, about how God encounters us, calls us. It is a story wrapped in mystery, something Buber called “Holy Insecurity,” because these encounters with God don’t occur at our beck and call. These burning bush encounters with the Holy One come as a gift. The poet, Elizabeth Barret Browning, declares:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only they who see, take off their shoes.*

What the poet means is that the whole world is filled with the beauty and power of the Divine Presence. Those who stop and listen, those who empty themselves and notice, will turn aside. Those who get up every morning and, as in Mary Oliver’s poem, “rub their eyes, listening, parting the leaves, like tissue on some vast incredible gift,” will recognize the Divine Presence crammed into the everyday. They will turn aside and take off their shoes because they realize they are on Holy Ground.

Moses realized he was on Holy Ground and took off his shoes. Then he asked the blazing bush, “Who are you and what do you want?” God answers: “I am who I am.” Moses must have surely scratched his head at that. Then the voice says, “Behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen their oppression. It breaks my heart to see them suffer, so I am sending you to lead them to freedom.” When Moses protests, saying he is just a nobody, God says: “But I will be with you.”

Did Moses actually see a burning bush that wasn’t consumed and hear a voice call him to lead an enslaved people to freedom? I don’t know and it doesn’t matter to me. What does matter is that Moses had the experience of being called by God to liberate his people. What does matter is that a people freed from slavery told the story of Moses’ calling so that it was perfectly clear who was doing the calling. Just as the God of Abraham called Moses at the burning bush, that same God, through Moses, called the Hebrew slaves to remember a deeper identity than slave, namely, the people of the Covenant with God. The great saga of Moses answers the existential question of how slaves could throw off that identity and become the people of Israel.

This story of Moses and the burning bush shows us two other things. First, none of the Divine Light of the encounter would have gotten through the cracks in Moses if he hadn't turned aside. That is the mustard seed of faith, and all God needs from each of us. Second, the nature of that light was compassion. This Presence revealed in the bush, this "I am, who I am" is One who sees and feels compassion for the suffering of humanity, One who sends people like you and me, people who think they aren't up to the task, to alleviate that suffering.

Whatever issues you have with the Bible, I urge you to take the story of Moses and his call seriously. I urge you to remember there are hundreds of passages of scripture in which God communicates a special regard and consistent care for the downtrodden, the abused, and the tyrannized among us. May these simple but profound words from First John guide us: "as God is, so are we in this world."

So, the next time you come upon a burning bush, one afire with the Holy One, turn aside, take off your shoes and listen, as Moses did, to how God is calling you, calling us. On being called, Professor Walter Brueggemann writes: "...the notion of being called beyond ourselves, to yield to a purpose other than one's own, is an odd way to understand our lives, an even odder way to live our lives." But called we are, dear friends, and being called isn't just for ministers. All of us are called just as Moses was, just as the original disciples were.

I like the way the UCC Statement of Faith proclaims our calling. "You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others....You promise to all who trust you...courage in the struggle for justice and peace..."

There is a bell that hangs at the entrance to our labyrinth. It was a gift from Rev. Curran Reichert. On the bell are three words: "Beloved, Called, Equipped" – and I would add "Sent." Each time one of us rings that bell, it is a reminder to

*Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.*



*There's a Crack in Everything*  
Jane Dill