

“Every Bush Afire With God”

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Rev. Bill Eichhorn



God and Moses at the Burning Bush

Earl Mott

Readings

Exodus 3:1-3 (RSV)

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.”

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 powerful song “Anthem,” which contains 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 provide an entryway for light to enter our lives. So 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 which rings nonetheless. In the face of continuing wars, lawless politicians, and the widowhood 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.

There's a crack in everything. There's the light. But how does the light – and by that I mean the Divine Light – how does the light get in to illuminate our minds, to resurrect our courage, to strengthen our hearts? Does the Divine light just suddenly flood into us as we go about our business of daily living? Does it zap us whenever it feels like it? I find an answer to that question in the pivotal story of Moses and the Burning Bush.

Now Moses was a man full of cracks. He murdered an Egyptian for starters. He lived in the shadow of his eloquent brother Aaron, and was ashamed of his stammering, stuttering speech. Fearing for his life at the hands of 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 never 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, *well 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." Please note that Moses did not run off, hearing that the voice in the bush knew his name.

The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber believed that the burning bush narrative is crucial for understanding how the encounter with the Divine Presence 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 past the burning bush. In spite of the boring work of herding sheep in a barren wilderness, he was present to the moment. He was walking along in the dust and heat, but practicing Mary Oliver's spiritual practice of "noticing." He noticed the burning bush and turned aside, wondering why it burned without being consumed.

Moses and the burning bush is a story about revelation, about how the Divine Presence encounters us. It is a story showing us that in order for the Divine Light to be present to us, we must be present to the Divine Light. It is a story wrapped in mystery, something Buber called "Holy Insecurity," because these encounters with the Divine Light don't occur at our beck and call. These burning bush encounters with the Sacred come as a gift, and if we are present to the moment, if we turn aside, if we are receptive, all we need to do is receive the light pouring through those scarred cracks of ours.

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.

When we do that, when we empty ourselves, wait and listen, what do we see and hear? What do we encounter or what encounters us? Another 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 meant by those words, I assume, is that the whole world is filled with the beauty and power of the Divine Presence, and those who pay attention will notice and turn aside. They will get up every morning and, as in Mary Oliver's poem "Morning in a New Land," rub their eyes, listening, parting the leaves, like tissue on some vast incredible gift." They will recognize the Divine Presence crammed into the everyday, and they will turn aside, take off their shoes and learn from the encounter.

A week ago, on one of those rainy, cold mornings, I opened the door to our deck to fill the bird feeder. I stepped outside, but before I could take a second step, I was stunned by the dazzling sight of the fresh white blossoms and brilliant pink buds on one of our apple trees. I didn't take off my shoes at the sight of this small tree "afire with God," but I took a deep breath and I took in the beauty, the sacredness of what I saw. I let the light flow into the cracks of my soul where both pain and possibilities dwell. The apple tree didn't call out my name, but it did invite me to turn aside from my chores and be enlightened.

Yesterday, some of us gathered here for the first session of our Lenten series Seeds of Understanding which was entitled Sacred Earth. We considered Thomas Berry's idea that there are three sources of revelation to guide us in our spiritual journey. First, there are the sacred writings of each religious tradition, which sadly often have been turned into sectarian fundamentalism. Second, there is the cosmic text of the natural world. Third, there is the sacred text of our interior soul that we know in dreams and through imagination. Berry contends that all three are needed if religion is to play a role in healing the earth and realizing peace.

So how do we read the sacred text of the earth? Yesterday we passed out short quotes from the writings of John Muir and reflected on how *he* did it. Here's one example:

With the approach of evening long, blue, spiky-edged shadows creep out over the snowfields, while a rosy glow, at first scarcely discernable, gradually deepens, suffusing every peak and flushing the glaciers and the harsh crags above them. This is the alpenglow, the most impressive of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. At the touch of this divine light the mountains seem to kindle to a rapt religious consciousness, and stand hushed like worshippers waiting to be blessed.

Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple, Chris Highland, p.127

Muir believe that every spiritual lesson we need is subtly and spectacularly revealed in nature. In order to learn those lessons we need to go outside into our gardens, neighborhoods, lakes, beaches, and mountains. We are fortunate to live in such a profoundly beautiful natural environment which includes Muir Woods. When was the last time you walked under the beautiful redwoods that dwell there? Perhaps a CCC pilgrimage to Muir Woods should be on our outdoor calendar of events.

Let's return to Moses, who realized he was on holy ground and took off his shoes, after which he asked the blazing bush "Who are you and what do you want?" The Presence answers "I am who I am." Moses must have 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, the Sacred Voice says "but I will be with you."

This story of Moses and the burning bush shows us two things. First, none of the Divine Light of the encounter would have gotten through the cracks in Moses' soul if he hadn't turned aside. 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.

If we take Exodus seriously, and if we are to trust every one of the 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, then, as 1 John puts it, "as God is, so are we in this world."

Is it just possible that such "burning bushes" calling us to show compassion where there is suffering and injustice are more commonly a part of our surroundings than we might suppose? Is it possible we too often fail to notice the natural world around us that is "crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God?"

Mary Oliver, John Muir, and Moses show us how the Divine Light gets in. Shaken out of our sleep, we must stand in the garden like Adam on that first morning, rub our eyes, and look out on the world with utter amazement. We must look at sights like the alpenglow and recognize it as a manifestation of the Source of Divine Light. When we hear our name called from a burning bush and we say "here am I," we find ourselves embraced and energized by a Spirit of compassion that says "I will be with you."

