

Burning Encounters

The Art and Architecture of Faith Series, Part 4

from the pulpit of
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Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Exodus 3:1-15

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. ²There 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. ³Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴When 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.” ⁵Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶He 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.

⁷Then 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, ⁸and 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. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He 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.” ¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

By the time I got there, the outhouse was already on fire.

You see, since the turn of the 19th century it was a tradition at my alma mater, Franklin College, for students to acquire a neighboring outhouse, often without permission, on homecoming weekend and burn it in celebration the night before the big game.

The guys who historically were responsible for stealing this privy proudly called themselves the privy council.

At the time of possession, the outhouse would ideally be unoccupied. Yet not even that level of collegiate thoughtfulness seemed to quell the anger of local farmers who awoke to find their commodes missing. So sometime in the late 1950s, the college began building their own privy for the students to burn.

It is a major highlight of homecoming weekend every fall. And so my freshman year, I journeyed that evening to the edge of campus, where the flames were already some 20 feet high.

The school is historically an American Baptist institution, but witnessing the behavior and antics of my fellow students there, I feared the student body were all in danger of losing their salvation.

But soon my salvific panic passed, and as I looked around that night, in the darkness, lit only by the encircled fire, I was overcome. I looked around at all the faces and bodies that laughed and hollered and danced, and something settled down in my bones.

The flames gave light to the fact that these people would help me see who I was, and who I was called to be. That these are the men and women who would shape me into who I am today.

That some of them would journey alongside me in life. And that this place, this ground, would become sacred space for me, if it wasn't already.

And in that moment of burning clarity, I simply wanted to take off my shoes and stand there.

Now Moses wasn't on his way to any homecoming bonfire when it happened to him. In fact, one might argue he wasn't really going anywhere. Having escaped the clutches of the Pharaoh by the skin of his teeth after murdering an Egyptian, he high-tailed out of the kingdom and made his way over to Midian, on the east shore of the Gulf of Aqaba.

There he married the local priest's daughter, Zipporah, and started a family. Years later, while shepherding a flock of sheep near Mt. Horeb, something spectacular happened. So spectacular, it's remained in the cultural imagination ever since.

Moses sees a bush set afire, yet the flames are not burning up the bush. When he squints his eyes, and makes his way near, a divine voice speaks from the bramble, "Moses, Moses." And Moses replies, "Here am I."

The 1611 King James Version follows with God saying to Moses, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

It's worth noting that this is the first time the word "holy" is used in the Bible. But the bush isn't what's holy. The ground is holy, because God's presence has been made known there, in that place.

And so Moses slips off his Birkenstocks and just stands there, diverting his eyes to his feet, which were now being strangely warmed by the heat of the flames. He refuses to look up again, for who can look on God's face and live?

God then tells him the purpose of this glowing theophany: Moses is to go back to Egypt and free the Israelites from their bondage. For the Lord has heard the cries of his people.

Moses wonders aloud if he's really the one qualified to do this. "Who am I," he says to God, "that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

And God replies saying, "I will be with you." A few verses later God tells Moses the Divine name, "I Am Who I Am," and says, "Tell the Israelites that I Am has sent you." God tells Moses that the Divine Name is not so much a noun, as it is a verb, a movement, an action.

What follows from this is the story of the Exodus, which becomes the foundational story of the Hebrew people.

Yet what does any of this mean for us?

As you walk out of our chapel into the narthex, chances are good you don't even see it. But it's there, right above your head, carved eternal into the stone. The image of the burning bush.

Inscribed beneath it is a little Latin phrase, *Nec Tamen Consumeatur*. In English it means, "Yet not consumed." The shrub which blazed but was not burnt.

The image and phrase are officially the symbol of the Church of Scotland. The early Scottish reformers held fast to the imagery as a prophetic witness. It signified that though the church may suffer, though her members may be burned, they will not be consumed by the world. Come what may, God's providence over them, whether in this life or the next, will prevail.

Prior to that, the medieval church had determined its own significance to the burning bush, suggesting that it served as a prophetic picture of Jesus' Mother, Mary, who just as the bush burned but remained whole, she gave birth to the Son of God but remained pure.

Yet in our chapel, carved up there above those doors, perhaps the symbol is a reminder of more than one thing. First, it reminds us to be open to seeing God out there in the world we are about to enter. It says, "Don't dim your eyes, or stuff your ears, or close your hearts to the surprises of God out there."

Which is easier said than done. Who among us doesn't struggle to see the divine in all the sordid places of our lives? When the diagnosis is bad. When the loved one is gone. When the relationship sours. When the pain is crippling, or when offered in front of the seats of power dismissed as irrelevant, or considered too far in the past to matter.

How difficult it is to perceive the holy in the wilderness of our stories. To hear a sacred word spoken to us in the middle of our mess.

And to be sure, even our complacency is problematic. Our humdrum living can be a danger unto itself, for it settles us into believing that this is all there is. That what we see now is all there can ever be.

The stonework tells us, “Keep your eyes, and ears, and hearts on the lookout, for the divine imagination which will surprise you yet.”

The symbol also reminds us that to see God, to experience God in this way, to hear God’s call, is sometimes dangerous. You can get burned by it, blinded even. Consider St. Paul’s encounter, or the life Moses after it.

Reflect on what the stone carving’s placement means for weddings in the chapel. The very last religious image that greets the newly married couple as they exit is this flaming shrub. A marriage has a sweltering quality.

While marital fire refines and renews, vulnerabilities are also made known and exposed. It’s costly to enter into that kind of Covenant. You can get burned in a marriage, you know? Spouses can burn each other.

But if married long enough, spouses can also learn to walk through life’s many fires together. So too with God.

It’s why preachers get nervous before we crawl into pulpits. We know the responsibility and hazard that comes with handling raw holiness. Author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Being a priest seemed only slightly less dicey to me than being chief engineer at a nuclear plant. In both cases, one needed to know how to approach great power without losing great danger and getting fried in the process.”¹

It’s why after a sermon where we’ve said things with prophetic declaration, some clergy simply want to crawl into a hole somewhere and wait it out.

Yet God’s promise is that we will not be consumed either. That we will not be overtaken by whatever heat or flames or fire come upon us. God promises to be with us, with all of us, in the scorched places of our lives.

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The other place we find the burning bush on our campus is currently on

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, (New York: HarperOne, 2006) p.31.

display in the Ministries Center.

The piece, part of a woodcut series on Exodus, showcases the burning bush in the style of German expressionism. It was created by Peter Lipman-Wulf. In fact, BMPC purchased several pieces from this series after the Fine Arts Council hosted him here in 1992.

Lipman-Wulf knew the story and significance of the burning bush quite well. Born into an educated and socially well-connected Jewish-turned-Lutheran family of Berlin in 1905, he was eventually named the master stone carver and official state sculptor of the city.

But he was forced from his position by the Nazis in the mid-1930s. Unable to convince his parents to flee with him, he escaped first to France, then Switzerland, and later to the United States. His parents were murdered, and their bodies burned at Auschwitz.

He knew what it meant to be close to the flames, and to avert one's eyes for fear of what one might see. Yet he also knew the story of liberation that will always have the last word.

The Burning Bush is a reminder that God gets the last word. The second to last word may be a number of other words; disease, depression, violence, sexual assault, anxiety, divorce, terror, loss, even death.

But the last word, the last word always belongs to God. And that word is life; the liberating life revealed to us in Christ.

In the words of that wonderful Kentucky farmer-poet, Wendell Berry,
*What stood will stand, though all be fallen,
The good return that time has stolen.
Though creatures groan in misery,
Their flesh prefigures liberty
To end travail and bring to birth
Their new perfection in new earth.*²

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It burned, yet it was not consumed.

² Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*, (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1998) p.13.

I suspect all of us have had burning bush experiences. Or maybe like me, you've had a burning outhouse experience. Of course, that isn't the only one I've had, or even the most apropos. But it's the one I'm willing to share. The one that doesn't burn me to tell it; That doesn't feel too private because of its sacredness or revealing nature.

The burning bush proclaims many things. But it's also an invitation. Which is fitting, since my role here on staff is one of invitation. While I work to invite you into deeper generosity, it's about more than money. (Though to be sure, I will always accept cash, checks, and credit cards.)

What I'm really inviting you to do is to be generous with your lives. To see God at work in all kinds of surprising places, and then to join in yourselves. I'm inviting you to trust that when the fires and trials come, you will not be consumed.

You will be held; by a God who loves you, who startles you with truth, who shakes you from complacency, who longs to be with you.

May God's holy fire burn in you, as you exit those doors and enter the world. May it illuminate your senses, light your path, scald your contentment, and fuel your hope. And in God's liberating light, may you have life. Amen.