

A sermon preached by

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August 30, 2020

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

TEXT: Exodus 3: 1-15

### THE BUSH IS STILL BURNING

A book has been sitting on my bookshelf for a couple of years. But the other day – wearied by the two-week political melodrama blasting from our TVs – I decided to pick the book up and read it. Jon Meacham is a presidential historian, a political independent who has voted for both Republican and Democratic leaders. And his book is called The Soul of America – a fascinating journey through the character and the practices of our 45 American presidents.

Meacham’s chapters about Lincoln are riveting. As we all know Abe Lincoln was not perfect. He was a chronic depressive and a very homely man. And his heart was ambivalent when it came to slavery. Yes, he was the great Emancipator – and yet at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, he was not convinced that Negroes were equal to whites, and at first, he thought that sending the freed slaves back to Africa was the best solution to the race issue.

But, one year later, in the midst of the blood soaked wilderness of Gettysburg, with eternal fire in his words, this holy, humble man captures the vision to which God has called him – a vision of a nation where all the suffering of God’s oppressed people – all the suffering of the soldiers who lost their lives in the Civil War – would be vindicated by justice and freedom for all. Calling us to our better angels, Lincoln speaks words that are as relevant today as they were in 1863:

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and dedicated, can long endure. The task of this generation is to ensure that these dead have not died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (p. 32)*

For me, Abraham Lincoln and his captivating vision are reminiscent of another great leader – a flawed sinner/saint who was drawn reluctantly by God to be a great emancipator of his people. When we meet Moses this morning, he is middle-aged, set in his ways – exiled in the wilderness far from his people in Egypt. No longer enjoying the privileges of being Pharaoh’s grandson, Moses is working as a sheep herder for his father-in-law in back-water Midian. And he is still bruised by a crime of passion in his youth – that day when he murdered a man who was beating a Hebrew slave.

And so, this morning, we find Moses plodding through a predictable day. All of a sudden, the extraordinary breaks through the ordinary. A common desert bush bursts into flames – but, strangely, the fire does not consume the bush. Even for dull, bored Moses this is too much to resist. His curiosity gets the best of him and he turns aside from the normalcy of his day and

moves closer to the mystery – to the fire – to the miracle of newness. God speaks out of the bush, and a startled Moses replies: “Here I am.”

Immediately God commands him:

“Take off your sandals, Moses, for you are standing on Holy Ground –this bleak, rocky desert is holy ground – this normal, predictable day is holy time – this bedraggled burning bush is holy fire. And, you Moses, are my beloved holy child.”

I wonder: what are the holy moments in your daily walk - moments when God manages to get your attention? A rose red sunrise breaking through a stormy sky? The touch of a lover, bringing you alive? A picture of a dead child cracking open your closed heart? A politician’s vision reviving your hope? An organ fugue soothing your weary soul? A client’s thank you, affirming your professional gifts? The hug of a friend, melting your loneliness? A gorgeous meal, delighting your tongue? A voice of mystery, calling you to new life? What are the unexpected moments in your life, when God is begging to get your attention?

Because Moses chooses to pay attention – to notice the extraordinary in the ordinary - God speaks to Moses. And God gives Moses, first a vision, and then a call:

“You see, Moses, my people and your people, the Hebrew people are suffering in Egypt. They are oppressed and weary, and many have died while serving the powers and principalities of empire. I need you, Moses. You are to be my power and my promise for these people, your people. I am sending you to Pharaoh as a great emancipator: “You will be the one to say: ‘Let my people go’.

“Who, me?” says Moses. “I am a murderer, a lowly shepherd. I have no power and no ability to save anyone. God, you’ve got to be kidding!”

To which God responds with a burning promise that will never die, “Moses, Moses! Don’t worry, I will be with you.”

But, Moses is still confused. And so, once again he talks back: “God, the Egyptians will not listen to me. Who should I say sent me?”

And then comes the most enigmatic speech of God in Scripture. God’s answer to the question: “Who are you?” is this:

I am.

I am who I am.

I will be who I will be.

I am present and I will remain present (Buber).

I will be what tomorrow demands.

In other words, with timelessness and mystery, God refuses to be defined. Instead, God says, “I am enough. No matter what the present or the future brings, I am enough. I am enough for you. I am enough for your people. I am enough for the work and the healing and the growth of the whole creation.”

Of course, years later, God’s word, God’s name, becomes flesh in the person of Jesus. And in trying to make the mystery concrete, Jesus says, “I Am. I am the Bread of Life. I Am the Living Water. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Light of the World. I am the Resurrection. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” All of which is summed up by the writer of Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

And so, God’s mysterious answer leads to Moses’ call. The whole point of this burning bush story is to call Moses:

- to call Moses out of the present into the future
- to shake Moses up and shake Moses loose
- to send Moses forth as the liberator of his people.

The one who proclaims: “I AM WHO I AM” now proclaims to Moses, “YOU ARE WHO YOU ARE.” The one who promises, “I AM ENOUGH,” now assures Moses, “YOU ARE ENOUGH.”

We know, of course, that Moses finally says, “Yes.” He goes home to Egypt and leads the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom. For forty years he wanders through the wilderness, and he pushes, drags, cajoles the people to the Promised Land, to the land of milk and honey. Moses does what God wants him to do, because he finally believes God. Moses believes that God is enough. And he believes that he, Moses, is enough. Why? Because God is ALWAYS with him.

There is a simple old Hasidic teaching. Rabbi Zuysa says, “In the coming world, they will not ask me ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zuysa?’ (The Spirituality of Imperfection, p.2)

My friends, we are not being called to be Moses, because we are not Moses. We are being called to be ourselves and to serve in our own unique ways. Because, you see, each one of us enough.

I wish we were gathered together in this lovely sanctuary, so that I could invite you to stand and to take off your shoes. I would invite you to feel the marble floor beneath your feet. And I would remind you that you are standing on holy ground - a firm foundation grounded in the solid presence of God in the life of this beloved community of faith.

In this place, God’s bush is still burning – in the light streaming through our lovely windows, in the marriage vows and baptismal vows still echoing off these walls, in the tears of grief and thanksgiving still flowing in the memory of those who have laid loved ones to rest in this sanctuary. The bush is still burning in the voices of children laughing and singing, in the stirring words preached and prayed in this sacred space for the last 75 years. Yes, indeed, this community of faith is holy ground and we know that there are angels all around.

Friends, you are not Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. You are not the megachurch down the street. You are not the basilica with soaring mosaics and Latin chants. You are Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church – a privileged people, a precious people, a passionate people. And you have been called to worship and serve in your unique way.

As you prepare to call a new pastor in two weeks, as you ream hopeful dreams about your future, please know that you are enough – you are more than enough to meet the ahead of you. And please remember, the great I AM is with you – now and always and forever.

May it be so. Amen.