
The Bush Was Blazing, Yet It Was Not Consumed

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday of Lent

*The angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush;
he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.*

Exodus 3.2

"What is the best fire you have ever made?"

That was the question I asked last week to a group of good friends. We were gathered, as we are each week, for Bible Study; and we were about to study the story of Moses and burning bush.

What is the best fire you have ever made, or seen, or enjoyed --or even been scared of? Over my life, and including last week, I have heard many answers to that question. When they were exhausted and wet and freezing out in the woods, some folks have been saved by fire. When their own house burned to the ground, some folks have been threatened by fire. Some of us know people who died by fire. And yet, some folks have shared their deepest and most intimate moments, with people they love, near a beautiful fire.

Fire is all this. It is a mystery that glows with warmth and light; it is an energy that burns and devours.

It makes all the sense in the world that God appeared to Moses in a fire. God appeared to one of the greatest religious leaders of all time in a fire. Whether we have actually known fire or not, whether we are a great religious leader or not, this story, told for us in Exodus chapter three, still carries power for every Christian.

Note, first of all, the patient wonder of Moses. Moses is in the wilderness. In fact, he is beyond the wilderness, at a mountain. The Bible states very simply only that Moses saw that the bush was blazing but that it was not consumed. Consider this: that gazing had to have required patience. How would any of us know -at first glance- whether the bush was being consumed or not? When we see a fire, we see first, the flame, don't we? We cannot tell the effect of the flame until after some time has passed. I do not believe Moses could have determined that the bush was not consumed, until after some time had passed.

In other words, his experience of the burning bush required some time. He had to pay attention to the fire for a while before he could realize that the bush was not being consumed.

That is a principle for all of us in our contemplation of God. We rarely experience God immediately in anything. Instead, our healthy experiences of God take time. They require us to stop, to sit for a while, to notice what is burning and what is not.

Then, we have the powerful realization itself. The bush was not consumed. This is the most dramatic proof of God that humanity knows. The power, the fire, the grace, the love of God proves itself by never running out.

Rudolf Otto, the great German theologian of a hundred years ago, is famous for providing this definition of God. He spoke it in Latin. God is *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. God is the mystery which is tremendous and fascinating. We want to be close to that mystery, so close that there is nothing between us and it. We take off our shoes so that we can be close to its reality.

We know the tremendous and fascinating mystery of fire, too. We sense it when we keep staring into that midnight campfire. Even when we know all the details and chemical processes and reactions of fire, even when we know about oxidation and spark, there is still something unknown in the event of fire which fascinates us. We are drawn to the flame of God.

In fact, the more we learn about God, the more we want to learn. Our knowledge of God never completely describes God. Our knowledge of God never consumes God.

It is the same way with love. Divine love, a love which we call agape, is also a love which we are called to give to each other! One of the proofs of this agape love is that the more we love another person, the more love we find to offer.

Divine love is not what folks call a zero-sum game. Try it. Try loving someone so much that you give out of love. It's impossible. The truth about agape love is that the more love you give, the more love you have to give. Love burns, but it is never consumed. How sweetly does the ardor of love burn, but it is never consumed.

Finally, we have the words. Moses' experience of the living God was beyond words; it was mystifying and powerful. But it also used words. Moses, like any human being, did need words, in order to understand and to guide. And so he asks, "Who are you? What is your name?"

Actually, Moses did not say this at first. He had first heard his own name spoken from within that fiery mystery. He had first been told that this God was indeed the God of his own family, the God who cared about the powerless and those who were miserable. "I know their sufferings," said this God to Moses. And God told Moses that God would send him - Moses - to deliver that people out of the hand of Pharaoh.

That was when Moses started to stutter. "Who am I to do this?" he would ask over and over again. "I am not powerful. I have no sign. I cannot speak well. The people will not believe me. Tell me again; who shall I say is calling?"

Do you remember that song again? That song written by Leonard Cohen?

Who by fire? Who by water?

Who in the sunshine? Who in the night time?

Who by high ordeal? Who by common trial?

Who in your merry, merry month of May?

Who by very slow decay?

Who shall I say is calling?

That's what Moses was asking. Who shall I say is calling? Who shall I say sent me?

"I Am Who I Am."

"Tell them 'I Am' sent you."

Yes, they are words that God uses, but they are words just as mystifying as fire. *I am who I am*. The translation of those words has been unclear ever since they were spoken. It could be *I Am What I Am*. It could be *I Am Becoming What I Am Becoming*.

That's the translation I like the best. *I am becoming who I am becoming*. That is the translation that has action and movement in it. The God of the Bible is not simply a "being," objectified and unmovable. Somebody once said it this way:

God is not a noun; God is a verb. Like fire. Is fire a noun or a verb?

If God shows up in fire, God is a God of movement and event. But the movement of God is not finally destructive. Yes, the movement of God does destroy things; it purges what is wrong. It wipes out what is not needed.

But ultimately, the movement of God is toward life and health, deliverance and salvation. This is the God who will always lead oppressed people out of slavery and into a promised land of milk and honey. This is the God who will make the people move, too, even leading us at night with a pillar of fire.

It is a God of fire who says "I am becoming who I am becoming." I will burn, but I will not consume. I will love, and that love will never end.

AMEN.

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