

The Third Sunday in Lent, 7 March 2010  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Our readings today began with one of the most captivating moments in the story of Exodus. It is at once very physical, 'down-to-earth' and mysterious. I am certain we all have mental images of Moses' encounter with the bush that burned but was not consumed. Whether our mental images come from our own imaginations, from assorted movies, or from other people's descriptions, we have notions of this encounter.

Lent is all about journeying toward God, toward truth, toward a purer better life. Journeying, often alone. And one thing this piece of Moses' story tells us is that we may encounter strange things when we go on such a journey – mysterious things, perhaps dangerous things.

Our identification with Moses in this remarkable encounter is facilitated by its placement in the midst of a fairly prosaic story, a life not unlike any of ours. Most of us do not see ourselves as the unique savior of God's chosen people – or anything like a Prince of the House of Egypt – or as a murderer fleeing punishment. These and other aspects of Moses' early story are sufficiently dramatic to make good movie sequences, but not much identification.

However, once Moses has escaped the tortured slavery of Egypt, he finds himself in Midian, in a very different life. The continuing narrative places Moses in a context of normal family life. He did not go up Mount Horeb to meet God or anything exotic or holy. He was simply tending his father-in-law's flock.

Books and movies about the Exodus tend to include the incidents at the beginning of Moses' life in Midian: meeting the beautiful young women, coming into conflict with the other men, quickly being folded into a new family, in a new place, different culture and tradition. This is an important part of any portrait of the man who is chosen to be Israel's leader in their escape from slavery.

A stranger in a strange land, Moses finds a home. This is a great gift, as anyone knows who has ever picked up roots and moved far away either by necessity or by choice. It is a gift to find oneself at home. So this dramatic, mysterious incident on the mountain happens to someone who has a life, a family, a home. But now that home is challenged. God seems to be saying, "You have it; you have enjoyed it; but that was a stage, not the end, time to move on." The new home and family gave him stability, the time to mature and learn from his wise father-in-law. But now he has work to do; he must go back to confront the evil that he has escaped, but the rest of his people have not.

Moses is a useful figure to think about in Lent, because his life has a repeated pattern of going into the wilderness.

- As an infant no longer able to be hidden, he is placed among the rushes at the edge of the Nile – and finds a home in the royal household.

- When he has murdered the overseer, he runs off into the desert and finds a new home and family in Midian.
- Here he is finding food for the family livestock in the wilderness.
- Later he will lead the Children of Israel out into the Sinai Desert to worship God and get ready for their new home.
- While out there he will again go up a mountain alone, this time knowing he is going to converse with God.
- And in the end he will go off alone up Mount Nebo to die.

One could profitably spend all of Lent meditating on Moses' successive journeys into the wilderness, exploring the experiences and opportunities, finding inspiration for one's own current and future journeys.

Today we are given this particular journey and encounter. Moses went away from the rest of the family to find appropriate grazing for the flock. So the context is ordinary daily work – work which can take us away by ourselves. Most likely Moses was not thinking deep spiritual thoughts. He was probably concentrating on not losing any of the animals, either to the dangers of the mountain itself or to whatever predators might come after them. He was keeping them together and looking for the best grazing place, and drinking water. There was plenty to occupy his mind. And into the midst of this ordinariness came something remarkable. “What’s that? There is fire in that bush.” [Nothing unusual in that in a hot and arid part of the world.] “but however much flame there is, the bush remains. It does not burn up. That is certainly remarkable. I had better take a closer look.”

So in the midst of ordinary busy-ness, Moses' attention is captured – and once his attention turns to the odd occurrence, he is able to hear God speaking to him. God calls him by name and gets him to stand still, with his shoes off, as if in a temple. This may be a lonely mountainside, but it is holy, because here Moses encounters God.

And the voice reminds Moses of the suffering he left behind. This suffering matters. Their cries have been heard at the heart of the universe. It is time for Moses to go back to help them.

And as so often happens when we have a wilderness epiphany, a call to do something – it does not make sense to Moses. After all, he has a happy settled life with Jethro's clan, no need to go back where he is under sentence of death!

Moses in fact will come up with a multitude of excuses for why he should not uproot his life and embark on this dangerous quest. But none of his excuses will suffice. He has a role to play, and he has the strength of God to rely upon.

As the reality of this remarkable encounter penetrates Moses' consciousness, he begins to imagine trying to tell anyone about it. "How can I speak about you? What name shall I give you?" By this point, the religion of the Israelites has not been organized or codified. Moses grew up among the Egyptians who had a vast pantheon, including deities of all sorts of shapes and sizes, each with its own name. And now he was living with the Midian priest Jethro practicing yet another tradition of worship and speaking about things divine. So Moses says, "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?" God 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.'" God 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."

This seems to be one of those frequent less-than-helpful answers we receive in our encounters with God. Moses would surely have liked a simple answer, a name like Osiris or Sekhmet, something easy to grasp. But instead he is given a name which is still puzzling people millennia later and a title that he already knew, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Moses is told that this is the God who has been speaking to people through the generations since Abraham, the God who has been consistently worshiped by his descendants. And he is given a name that does not suggest an animal or a statue or any tangible image.

The name itself is a mystery, 'Yahweh' as near as we can reconstruct. Since we only have consonants from the earliest period, we only know yodh he waw he, YHWH – something to do with the verb 'to be'. Sometimes translated, I AM, sometimes I AM WHO I AM. We could say "Being" or "Me". This is not some specific God of one particular place or people or animal or function. This is the God of all being, the source of everything.

Like most of God's confusing answers, this one must have forced Moses to do some serious thinking. His human mind could not fully understand what it meant that this voice told him that it was somehow Being Itself, any more than he ever understood how you could have a fire without burning anything.

So what Moses discovered in this wilderness moment was that God spoke to him in this midst of his ordinary activities.

- His attention was captured and he heard God.
- He discovered that his wonderful life was about to be disrupted, that the home he had found was to be surrendered, because he had a new calling.

- Moses caught a glimpse of the mysterious heart of God: loving people, caring about their suffering, and beyond all human understanding.
- Moses found that he could ask questions, but that the answers might not be ones he would like or even fully understand.

This part of Moses' story suggests many things about our own wilderness times. I think he has some good advice for us:

- Never be too busy to stop and listen.
- Be prepared to experience wonder.
- Embrace mystery.
- Remember that the love of God has been with us always and will be with us always, no matter what.
- Never be afraid to ask questions and wrestle with the answers.
- There may be a new task or a new adventure that we never expected.
- God is waiting for us in the wilderness. Amen.