

Kirk of St James
Sunday September 3, 2017
Sermon "Burning But Not Consumed"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

As some of you know before I went on vacation I went to Ontario for five days. I spent time at National Office and then in St. Catherine's where there was a planning team meeting for Canada Youth. Canada Youth is a national conference for youth, young adults, and leaders in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, that happens every second year. There are on average about 500 participants who attend from across the country, and around the world. Chad and I are responsible for leading what they call big recreation. We are in charge of planning, preparing and leading all the big recreation activities that will happen at the next conference. While working on the conference schedule was interesting I found the development of our theme for the event even more so.

Our theme this year comes from Timothy. We have settled on the title, "Stirred not Shaken, Faith Activated." While the conversation of theme was happening one of the biggest questions for us is around next year's general assembly. We don't know what votes and decisions will be made next June. What I do know is that within our denomination we are hearing a lot of fear and anxiety. As we were choosing our theme this was forefront in our mind because Canada Youth is the first major event after General Assembly. Out of this conversation around anxiety arose the idea that we can be stirred in our minds and in our hearts, but we are not shaken. At our core we are Christians who believe in the power of the risen Lord, and that is where we find our hope. It is in this truth that we put down our anchor.

I have been thinking about this idea a lot in the days since our meeting, and when the passage of Moses and the burning bush came up it seemed timely. The biblical account of Moses and the burning bush is one that most of us have likely heard countless times since childhood, so much so that it is easy to pass it by without much thought. But, if we could take a minute this morning I would like us to cast our minds and our imaginations back once more to that incredible moment on the plains of Midian.

Moses had an unconventional life right from the beginning. Rescued from a basket in a river, raised as a prince in a palace, and driven into exile by a violent act committed by his own hands Moses' early life is eventful. After he kills an Egyptian he flees and finds himself at the well of Jethro, who was the priest of Midian. Moses goes on to marry one of Jethro's daughters, and settles into the life of a shepherd. For forty years Moses tends the flocks of his father-in-law. He protects the herds; he moves them from plain to plain ensuring they are well fed and cared for. For forty years he builds a life and routine around his new identity. After forty years of routine and familiarity, it would be difficult to imagine life any other way. However, one day with no particular significance or, sense of warning Moses finds something that changes his life. He comes across a bush that is burning with no obvious cause, and this seeker and discoverer turns aside to look. It is when Moses stops to look that God speaks--it is only when Moses responds that he encounters God face to face.

While the life of Moses had many incredible moments, it is this meeting with the living God that changes the trajectory of his entire life, and becomes its defining moment. Moses hears the call of God in his life and responds even though it does not make sense and even though he doubts his own abilities. On that hallowed ground God meets humanity face to face. In this moment simple and every day things become significant--a bush and a patch of earth become holy ground. I have to admit I was having a tough time defining what the most significant part of this account was, and while I bounced ideas off Chad he asked "well was it the fire?" No, it was not the fire, it was the fact that the fire did not consume. It was that detail that made Moses stop and truly look. How is it that fire which has the ability to totally consume, eat up and destroy, not singe a single branch on a common everyday shrub?

While perhaps that detail does not seem all that exciting, it is important. In fact this simple observation is an important part of our Presbyterian identity. If you were to walk into almost any Presbyterian Church in Canada, you would most likely see a burning bush depicted somewhere in the sanctuary. Whether it was on the pulpit falls, a banner, or etched in stained glass, the burning bush is the symbol of our denomination. In 2013 we officially adopted the

symbol of the burning bush along with the phrase "nec tamen consumebatur" or, "Yet it was not consumed." Why is this symbol and phrase so important?

The symbol of the burning bush can be traced back to 1583 and a small gathering of Huguenot ministers and elders who had gathered in France. While it is not clear who proposed or designed the seal many point to reformer John Calvin and remarks he made in his commentary on the book of Acts as being influential. As one historian wrote "Commenting specifically upon Acts 7:30, which references Moses' encounter with God in the wilderness of Sinai, Calvin had observed that the burning bush constitutes an especially appropriate metaphor or image of the church militant throughout the ages. The church is continually subject to, in Calvin's words, the "fire of persecution," yet—in keeping with Christ's promise (cf. Matt. 16:18)—it is ever kept "from being consumed to ashes," sustained not by its own strength but by the presence of God in its midst."

This idea would have appealed to French reformers because the reformed faith was illegal in France and they had been subject to severe treatment and persecution. The idea of enduring suffering and the sustaining power of God was an important message to share among their members. Over time the symbol of the burning bush began to be adopted by others. One Church historian noted that "In 1691 the Church of Scotland used it and "as Presbyterianism spread throughout the world from the seventeenth century onward—especially via Scottish emigrants—it typically carried with it some version of that symbol embraced by the Scottish Kirk. Today, the burning bush figures into the official crests of Presbyterian Churches in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Canada, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania), and southern Africa (South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe)." As its' use has spread the meaning behind it appears to have remained largely the same. To this day if you look it up on the official Kirk of Scotland website it states "the burning bush is representative of the people of God: the Church which suffers in any age or place but against which not even the gates of Hell can prevail."

Going back to Moses this moment of call changes his life. This exchange also reveals part of who YHWH is in our lives. A God who meets us on earthly ground and makes it holy. A God who not only cares about his creation but, also hears the cries of his people. This God is not deaf. He is the Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and one day his son will not only walk this earth but also die and rise again. A God who is faithful to his creation from its beginning until the very end. The Alpha and Omega. A God who breaks the boundaries we try to place around him, and defies the limits of the possible to make things limitless. That day on the plains of Midian Moses was called and that call continues to us today. God's call has never ended.

The burning bush that is not consumed, faith that grows and does not die, suffering that does not end in sorrow but, eventually is raised in hope, faith lives stirred to new life but not shaken. We believe in a living God who has the power to move mountains, and the good sense to let us work to achieve it. As a denomination, as a church here in Charlottetown and as individuals we each have a role to play in the continuing story of God's creation. Moses had a huge call that took years to achieve, it was filled with doubts and mistakes, but he worked at it nonetheless. Mother Theresa once said "I can't perform huge miracles but, I can perform many small ones." We have that same power as we live out God's call in our lives. In moments when we doubt, or, we fear we look to the burning bush to remind us of who we are, and who God is. It is strength in suffering, it is endurance in faith, it is eternal and undying, it gives life but, does not consume.

The hardest part for Moses was not believing in the miracle of the burning bush but, that he could have a role to play in this story. His doubt and fear almost kept him from embarking on God's call in his life. Dame Helen Mirren has a wonderful line about fear. She says "don't be afraid of fear." What she means by that is don't let fear rule you. Don't let your doubts keep you from doing what you know to be true. Don't let fear crowd out the possibilities in your life. Answer God's call trusting in the power of the one who burns but does not consume, and whose love will never let you go.