

SERMON 4.23.2023 The Transforming Fire of God's Presence Janet Loman

Exodus 3:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

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

Luke 24:13-35 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

SERMON DRAFT. "The Transforming Fire of God's Presence" Janet Loman
4.23.2023 Exodus 3:1-6 Luke 24:13-35

When we read the Book of Exodus and think on the life of Moses today, we can see the man in his completeness, as the great prophet he was; however, in Exodus Chapter 3, Moses' greatness is hidden, undeveloped, and not yet shown.

We are at the beginning of his transformation,
for Moses has not yet had an encounter with God.

He is a good man, and for 40 years has been living as son-in-law to Jethro,
the priest of Midian; yet he still considers himself a foreigner in a foreign
land. He feels strangely displaced as he spends his time with the sheep,
searching for better pasture and contemplating the stars in the night sky. In the
silence he comes to understand himself and to accept his simple life.
And then, one day he leads the flock to the far side of the wilderness
and arrives at Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God,
where an angel of the LORD appears to him in the flames of a burning
bush. Moses is curious and moves nearer to the strange sight. He notices
that although there are flames, the flames do not burn up the bush. And God, seeing
that Moses has moved closer to him, calls from the bush: Moses! Moses!
And thus begins his transformation, for Moses responds quietly, "Here I am."

When he realizes he is standing on Holy Ground and in the presence of God,
Moses is afraid. But he listens to God's plan for the Israelites:
Moses is to lead them out of the tyranny of slavery into a land of milk and honey, to
become treasured possessions and servants to their own loving God;
who will dwell among them.

Although Moses is endowed with tremendous intellectual capacity
and an elite Egyptian education, he is not prepared for what God has in mind
as he emerges from the simple shepherd life;
to be commissioned and become the giver of God's Law, the Ten Commandments: the
greatest moral code ever given to mankind.
In the later chapters of Exodus, he goes on to emancipate the Israelites from
slavery, and becomes a great leader and a teacher of the ages.
How could he ever have imagined this to be his future,
except for the leading of God?

Whatever Moses had understood about sacredness from the quiet of the wilderness
and being under the stars was nothing in comparison to what he discovered,
kneeling before the burning bush.
He discovered the holy presence of God.

Sacredness and reverence before God

are not things we can create within our own human experience.

God must intervene.

Moses, the great man of God, was transformed by this experience;

for God gave Moses a vivid, intimate, experience of himself,

as a burning fire speaking out of a bush. //

The two men on the road to Emmaus on Easter are also unsure of their future role as disciples of Jesus. They are discouraged, and demoralized,

for they do not understand how the events that have just taken place can be so far from their hopes and dreams of a new society,

free from oppression and fear.

Jesus - who WAS he REALLY, after all that has happened?

Their eyes were held from recognizing him;

their hearts, you see, needed more instruction. Christ, being alive,

found the hearts of his disciples dead, as he appeared -

yet did not appear to their eyes.

He was seen, but he wasn't recognized.

Jesus realized he must open the Scriptures for the Emmaus disciples

to show them that unless he suffered and died, he could not be the Messiah.

Jesus begins with Moses and the Prophets of the Old Testament

because God's promises for a Messiah began there,

initiated by God's presence in the fiery bush.

Every thread and theme leads to, and centers in, the crucified and risen Christ.

The Lord's absence (in the human sense) is not an absence,

for God is always with us. Have faith, and the one you cannot see is with you.

Those two disciples, even when the Lord was talking to them, did not have faith,

because they didn't believe he had risen.

Nor did they have any hope that he could rise again.

They had lost faith, lost hope.

They were walking along dead, with Life itself. Life was walking along with them but in their hearts life had not yet been restored. (St. Augustine)

JOSE AND KARINA

Last Sunday, total desperation met us in the Wal-Mart parking lot after church. After shopping, we had walked to our car and unloaded everything; and as I walked to the driver's side,

I saw a young and very pregnant woman sitting on the curb directly in front of our car.

She was so very tired and distressed that we beckoned her to come sit in our car.

We offered her bananas and distilled water we had purchased in the store. A young man appeared and quickly showed us their immigration papers and let us know they had come legally to the U.S.

They knew no English, and we know very little Spanish, but Steve and I managed to communicate in single words and sign language.

They had traveled for 8 months, first by bus or train along the Pacific coast of South America until their money was spent. They walked the last 200 miles to Juarez, Mexico, entered the U.S. Immigration Service Detention Center, and stayed there for 5 days to be legally processed, given only bread and juice during that time.

Everything they owned was taken away and they were issued sets of simple clothing.

They were to report to the Immigration Service in Philadelphia by May 23 to connect with their sponsor family, who had been family friends in Peru. His friend's boss had already agreed to hire Jose.

Karina, 8.5 months pregnant, had been admitted to the hospital and cared for by kind doctors and nurses at the immigration center.

They found Karina to be anemic, but miraculously the baby was healthy, despite their ordeal and Karina's lack of proper food and prenatal vitamins. We drove to a restaurant and Steve stayed with them while I went to the pharmacy to buy the vitamins.

I texted one of our young adults for advice and help.

She so completely understood their plight as immigrants

that she immediately began gathering baby clothing and supplies,
and other necessities for them.

We called two couples, bilingual friends in Las Cruces, and
asked them to help us communicate with Jose and Karina.

Their hearts were also moved to help them. They assisted with hotel expenses, new
clothing, luggage, a Spanish Bible and prayer books, rosaries;

and offered beautiful prayers of love and encouragement with them
in their language.

This young couple now has 3 sets of American grandparents in NM,

and we are trying to convince them that their new son's name should also include
the names of the honorary grandpas: Stephen, David, and Richard!

Over 3 days, we heard stories of their harrowing experience,
and the reasons that forced them to seek a better life.

They were literally running for their lives.

As new government regimes took control in Venezuela and then Peru,
their family homes and land were taken from them. Eventually,
they were threatened with violence or worse
if they did not agree to work for them.

I asked Jose if they had ever, on the arduous journey,
thought of turning back, and he emphatically said, "No."

He never lost faith that God would deliver them to safety.

And he also knew he would be returning to death.

During all this, they were so filled with gratitude

that it was sometimes embarrassing and painful for them to accept more;
but we told them that God was creating something new for them,
as had been told through Isaiah.

Jose responded that they were taught to be satisfied with whatever God provided
each day, and this was so much!

Our Las Cruces community of friends were overwhelmingly grateful

for the opportunity to minister to them.

Today, with the young couple safely in Philadelphia,
we stand in awe of the sovereignty and providence of God,
this divine plan for their future. This was not coincidence,
but an intricate movement of God, working for the good.

If we say we believe in the sovereignty and providence of God,
how can we ever deny it when it is manifested -
when it is shown - in instances such as this?

We witnessed their intense hope in God's promise to live a new life.
There is no other explanation.

The young couple, full of faith and promise,
never doubted that God would rescue them,
and they travelled with that understanding,
even while witnessing terrorism, murder,
and other unspeakable acts.

- God came to Moses by fire on Mt. Horeb
and called him to lead the Israelites out of slavery
and into the freedom of the Promised Land.
- The risen Jesus came as travel companion to the disciples walking to Emmaus
and proclaimed salvation history, causing the men's hearts to burn
with the fire of God's presence and promise;
and as they recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread,
they went out to proclaim that Jesus had indeed risen
and was still advocating for all his beloved children,
each and every one of them.
- The Holy Spirit brought Jose and Karina to us in the parking lot last Sunday,
and we will never be the same. Our hearts are still burning!
Who would have ever thought that Wal-Mart's parking lot is holy ground?

Our eyes were opened as they told us of their fear. . .

and they testified that only their faith in God kept them safe, and sane;
and that God had strengthened them for their journey.

After the last prayer we had together, a few hours before they boarded the bus, Karina told us that during the entire journey, she never shed one tear because she knew she must stay strong.

And then, finally feeling peace and safety with new friends,
she quietly began to cry.

We and all our friends who became involved in the welfare of Jose and Karina are enormously grateful, humbled, and honored to have been called to help these young people. We have reflected together,
and recognize that this was not a coincidence, but a divine act of God, calling us to service on his behalf.

Some of you in this congregation have worked in the immigration process, have volunteered at the El Caldito Soup Kitchen,
and know of these dire situations as well.

Certainly, God has blessed all of you who have been fortunate to have an intimate glimpse of the transforming power of our God, who in absolute sovereignty and providence planned and provided for the good of the Israelites,
as well as Jose and Karina today,
to bring them to a land of milk and honey;
for Jesus came to save the lost, the broken,
and the disenfranchised;
and God calls us to act in the name of Jesus,
to continue the same acts of unconditional love and mercy for our neighbor.
Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, forgive us for looking only to ourselves and our own comfort, forgetting or even refusing to see the pain and suffering of others.

Help us to seek your face in the eyes of the hungry, lost, and forsaken.

With your own life you have shown us how to bow in humility and give all we have - heart, mind, strength and resources -- to our neighbors,
whom you undeniably love and cherish.

We are all your beloved,

and we praise you for your power to save and redeem and make us whole.

Amen.

Closing Hymn #702 "Christ Be Beside Me"

BUNESSAN

BENEDICTION

Go into the world to love and serve your neighbor,

glorifying God in all you say and do,

in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, this day and always.