

Beware the Burning Bush!

One of my favorite pithy quotations comes from Elie Wiesel.

He said, "Whenever an angel says "Be not afraid!" you'd better start worrying. A big assignment is on the way."

Strange creatures in my bedroom at night strikes me as a perfectly reasonable basis for fear. If the Bible is a reliable source, we should be afraid by their appearance, not just the content of their message, however demanding it may be.

So, to his sage line about angels and assignments, I would like to add my own pithy bit of advice. Feel free to use it: Beware of the burning bush!

That's my advice.

If you don't want your life to be disquieted and disrupted, *run away from the burning bush!*

When my brother's step-son joined the navy, he gave him a pithy bit of advice from his days in the Marine Corps, "Don't be first, don't be last, and whatever you do, DO NOT VOLUNTEER FOR ANYTHING!"

Think of how different Moses's life would have turned out had he simply heeded that well-worn advice: When you see a burning bush in the wilderness, run the other way!

I cannot imagine Moses was looking for more excitement in his life.

You know his story, some of its magic and some of its tragic: Pharaoh tried to stamp out the Hebrews by murdering their first-borns at birth, but the midwives Shiphrah and Puah refused to carry out his dastardly deeds. To save her child's life, Moses' mother then put him in a basket and floated him down the river with his sister nearby to keep watch.

Pharaoh's daughter found him.

Moses's sister sprang to action, offering to find a nursemaid to assist the Egyptian princess in raising this newfound baby. When the dust settled, Moses was safe from Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's own daughter was paying Moses's mother to raise her own child!

Later, Moses was taken to be educated in the household of the very man who sought to kill him. As a Hebrew male, he would have had a telltale mark of the covenant on his body, and yet he was raised in the Egyptian palace.

He was a "made man," to steal a line from the old gangsters, but what an uneasy way to have it made, always looking over your shoulder.

But when Moses came across an Egyptian overseer abusing a Hebrew slave, Moses killed the Egyptian in a fit of rage.

Knowing swift justice would be demanded, Moses went on the lam, hiding in Midian. In the hillbilly world of Midian, the Bible makes a long story short in this case: Moses got married and went to work for his father-in-law herding sheep.

That seems reasonable, right?

Generally speaking, a wanted man should not seek high profile assignments.

Generally speaking, a man who has already cheated death should avoid the supernatural.

It would have been wise for Moses to heed the advice, "Beware of the burning bush!"

If I had been him, I would have run like there was a pack of rabid wolves chasing me.

Continuing our theme of generally accepted wisdom, when something that is not supposed to have flames shooting out of it does, it is best to leave it alone.

Perhaps God knew that the sort of person who was needed for this job was the sort who would walk right up to a shrub with sparks spitting out of it to get a better look.

But, the sort of person that would walk right up to this pyrotechnic pyracantha is also the sort of person that has no compunction whatsoever about replying to the almighty, "Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm going to sit this one out."

Five times they go back and forth, God and Moses; point, counterpoint.

Maybe the writer of Exodus tells us this story in this way so that we'll have a little foreshadowing of what is to come between God and Moses. Back and forth go Moses and God all through the years. The relationship between God and Moses seems at times to be marked with argument, whining and obstructionism.

It is a close, pushy, difficult relationship.

But before we witness this merry-go-round, before we learn of God's faithfulness to God's sometimes feckless followers, Moses asks for God's *name*.

Naming is important in the Bible!

Generally, what is *significant* is named.

It's a trick question: if God answers, then Moses will know the nature of the deity with whom he is arguing.

In the ancient culture of Egyptian magic, to be able to name a deity is to exact control over it, to have the power to coerce. In seeking God's name, wily Moses is seeking to know God's very essence and thus to be able to claim control of their relationship.

The ancient culture was full of deities and idols, talismans upon which the people placed their deepest hopes and into whom they confided their deepest fears.

They could be transported here and there and when good fortune followed, it seemed the deities were strong and favored their owners.

And when bad fortune followed, the deities were weak or disfavored their owners.

To know the name of your god was to be able to control it.

God answers, "I am."

I am alive.

I am real.

I am not dead stone, but the living God, the holy one of Israel, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

That is the common translation, but I like a different translation.

It's a murky phrase, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, and there is disagreement about how to translate it.

It can be also be translated correctly, "I will be with you."¹

What an extraordinary promise to counter all of our arguing and bickering with God about a calling.

"I am who I am" can also be, "I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

Once Moses approached that burning bush, he couldn't *not* be called anymore, and what a calling: To wander in the wilderness with a mercurial, tempestuous, unpredictable pack of God's people.

Forgive my double-negative, but he could ignore it...

He could turn his back on it...

He could walk away...

But he couldn't *not be called*.

That's true for all of us.

There's a very real tendency amongst us humans to think of the notion of being called to service as something reserved for other people.

But when it comes to calling, we're all fair game.

We're here.

¹ For more, see Everett Fox, [The Five Books of Moses](#).

We have come to the burning bush.

You see, that's the irony of faith! If you don't want to hear what the burning bush has to say, stay away from it!

There was a pulpit I preached from once a number of years ago, I no longer remember where it was, somewhere the Presbytery asked me to preach in the backwater of North Carolina. I walked into the tiny Presbyterian church in the middle of nowhere, a hamlet an hour and half from anywhere, to preach my sermon to a congregation of four very, very elderly cousins who comprised the congregation and the session of this church. When I walked up to put my my sermon notes on the pulpit, before the service, I noticed that the pulpit looked a bit odd. Usually, pulpits have descending doves, or a cross, or the names of old, dead ministers.

But this pulpit had a carving of a burning bush! Here I had come with a suitcase sermon for a congregation I'd never met and would never see again about to stand up in a pulpit with a burning bush on it, and somehow proclaim the word of the Lord.

They wanted inspiration, and God sent them a straight-out-of-seminary twenty-four-year-old, who couldn't begin to understand what was going on with them.

"Holy Smokes," I thought, "What was the Presbytery thinking! I'm not up to this! Send someone else, Lord."

Every one of us is capable of a mercurial, tempestuous, unpredictable argument with God.

It's probably frequently going on within us!

We know what God wants, but sometimes we just don't really want to *do* it.

Nonetheless, you're here.

I'm going to resist putting this in the plural, because this word is directly for you:

Conventional wisdom says that if you want the easy way, you should avoid places where expectations are a way of life, and yet, here you are.

You have come to the burning bush, even knowing what all God will ask.

That flies in the face of "Don't be first, don't be last, and DO NOT VOLUNTEER!"

Matthew takes great pains to set Jesus up as the new Moses. There are five great teaching discourses in Matthew, just like the five books of Moses at the start of the Bible. When Jesus gets up to give his great sermon on the law, just like Moses he stands on a mountaintop and preaches about God's way for us.

In the passage we read this morning, Jesus, the new Moses, tells anyone listening that we have to take up our crosses and follow him.

What could *possibly* be enough to convince us that this is a reasonable course of action?

“I will be with you.”

“When they ask who sent me, what shall I say?”

Tell them, “I will be with you howsoever I will be with you.”

You have every reason to avoid places that require commitment, but you’re here.

Maybe you’re here because tending your father-in-law’s sheep has gotten a bit boring. Or maybe you’re here because the fishing in the sea of Galilee isn’t quite what it used to be.

Or maybe you’re here because you heard Jesus was coming by and so you’ve climbed a tree to get a look.

Whatever the reason, there is a burning bush, and God is speaking to you.

What’s the word to you today?

And perhaps more importantly, *what are you going to do about it?*

When confronted with a calling, the church and the individual, just like Moses, have to reach conclusions about what to do.

In some ways, God has given us a clear path. The instructions are clear: We are a voice for deep hospitality and inclusion. We are place of nurture for God’s children of every age, a companion to walk with youth through adolescence, and the elderly through aging, and everything in between. To be here is to be called to this way of life.

It’s a little dangerous to talk about calling because we might start to get some ideas about how to do God’s work in the world.

In, fact, this morning I feel called to perplex you with a question: What is God calling you to do?

Whatever it is, *do it.*

The call of Moses was God’s response to the cries of God’s people.

As absurd as it surely seems, to the pain of the world, God’s response was to send someone to make God’s case. (I read somewhere that for God to send Moses was akin to a supreme court justice being accused of murder and saying, “I’ll let the first-year clerk handle my defense.”²)

“But Lord, I can’t speak for you...

I’m not articulate...

I have a stutter.”

“I will be with you howsoever I will be with you.”

² Carlyle Marney, [Priests to Each Other](#)

“But Lord, I’m afraid of those people...

They’re not like me...

I won’t know what to say.”

“I will be with you howsoever I will be with you.”

“But Lord, I could spend that money ten other ways...

I’m sure I’m not saving enough for a rainy day.”

“I will be with you howsoever I will be with you.”

“Lord, my sermon’s not good enough...

I’m not ready to speak for you!”

“I will be with you howsoever I will be with you.”

Oh, it’s *easier* to say, “Don’t be first, don’t be last, and DO NOT VOLUNTEER!”

There’s just one problem with that wisdom: The only way to get to where Jesus says, “Come unto me and rest,” is to start where he says,

“Take up your cross, and follow me.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.