

14th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 17A
Sermon 9.3.23

Exodus 3:1-15

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.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "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.

Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (688)

There's a thought among the rabbis that the bush was always burning, it's just that Moses noticed it.

Rabbinic literature is a centuries long argument between rabbis down the ages. They're arguing about the meaning of Torah, arguing the way two tennis players lob a ball back and forth over the net. It's as much play as it is opposition, and in the dialectic is the discovery and the arrival at new meaning.

So, there's this argument that it's not that God turned on the bush when Moses came along, like a light switched on by motion-sensor. It's that the bush was always burning, *is* always burning, burning though never consumed; and it's that Moses was one to notice it. The miracle here: it's less about how a fire can burn though never consume its fuel, it's less about how *being* can remain ablaze without ever consuming the world in which it finds expression, it's more about Moses noticing such a thing. The miracle here is one of attention. Moses rightly paid attention.

I'm reading *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, by Jenny Odell. A writer, she's also an artist and one of her pieces is called [*The Bureau of Suspended Objects*](#). This consists of objects she found, things discarded at the San Francisco dump, which she then researched as to their provenance. In what factory was this discarded object made? In what town or city, in what country and by whom, to the degree that such things can be found out in a global economy of mass production and consumption. What corporation commissioned the making of this thing, and to what purpose and likely intended for what sort of person or community of people, and why might it then have been discarded? A license plate, a pig figurine, a cardboard box, a pair of swim goggles, all items that are far from precious, but are now engaged with an attention to detail and set in a gallery for close examination and maybe even appreciation.

The piece is a statement about attention. The consumer of the art piece, now paying attention to things otherwise but assumed, which is weirdly to ignore, is made also to notice how very inattentive we tend to be.

(Is that what the receiver of art is called: a consumer? God, I hope not.)

I've decided to resist any such thing by which I might be cast a consumer.

A being whose purpose is to consume: Lord, deliver me from that. Because aren't we people of a God who reveals Godself as a being ablaze though never to consume?)

Anyway, one part of Odell's book is her considering the work of care and cultivation, the work of sustaining, the work of mothering if you will. She writes, "...we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative. Our very idea of productivity is

premised on the idea of producing something new, whereas we do not tend to see maintenance and care as productive in the same way.”

I like that insight.

And it’s true about us even when it comes to this story, this theophany—God revealing Godself in a burning bush. It’s common to think this is a miracle of novelty, something never done before and never done since. A burning bush! It’s just as true, or perhaps more true, that this is a miracle of sustenance, of sustaining—God who is perfect sustaining.

I like that.

Not that I need to persuade you about the value of such sustaining. I mean, here you are, in this old church. Nothing novel about this. This is all about sustaining being.

Moses is grown now. Born into both worlds, enslaved and enslaver, he was the son of an Israelite woman at a time when an edict had gone out that all sons of enslaved Israelites must be murdered by their midwives before they could take their first breath. This, so to keep the number of the enslaved to around the same number as enslavers—which stands to reason. You want enough slaves to keep the economy growing, but not so many that they outnumber you. Because then you risk rebellion.

But when Moses was born, the one attending the birth didn’t have it in her. This also stands to reason. You’ve been trained to labor for life, whatever you need to do to make sure mother and infant both live to see a new day. And now you’re supposed to lean into death? That’s not just a new skillset. That’s a whole new frame of mind—and it takes a lot to change a mind.

So, the midwife couldn’t do it, and Moses lived, and his mother hid him for the three months an infant is still easy to hide. Their cries are like the mew of cats, soft, strange and easy to muffle. Their needs are just to be close to some nurturing body, strapped to them even. I remember taking Tobias to a movie when he was a few days old: *The Bourne Supremacy*. Nice play on words, don’t you think? No one even noticed he was there.

But when Moses’ mother could no longer hide him, she made a basket of reeds and bitumen, and cast him into the Nile where he might (she likely hoped) float his way to freedom, float his way to justice.

It didn’t happen quite like that. Moses was found by Pharaoh’s daughter, and came to be nursed by Moses’ natural mother who, as a slave who’d clearly recently given birth though whose child was gone, was perfect to serve as a wet-nurse.

In this way, Moses was born into both worlds, enslaver and enslaved.

His first attempt to make right of the two was out of balance. As a young man, he witnessed a master beating one of the enslaved. So, he murdered the master. This, of course, we might understand, might even sympathize with, but we shouldn't endorse. Whatever: it made it so he had to run. He ended up in faraway Midian, eventually to marry Zipporah, the daughter of a priest whose flocks Moses came to keep.

Which is where we find him today—in the wilderness of Mount Horeb not far from Midian. He was keeping Jethro's flock and he came upon a flame of fire out of a bush. He looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it wasn't consumed. So, Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

Which is interesting because the story doesn't have it so Moses sees *why* the bush remains ablaze though is never consumed—neither why nor how. It's never explicit as to these things, it's only *implicit*. And this is the implication: that God is being sustained, which is to say neither ever exhausted nor ever exhausting. God is being in whom there are no winners and no losers but only every sustained being. In this theophany, which is a showing of God, a demonstration of God's nature and true way, what is clearly implied, it seems to me, is that God is being in perfect balance.

Which we see further implied in what God wants from Moses in response to this showing: justice. God wants justice for the people, which justice shall be realized not in some bloody uprising, more murdering, but shall be realized in an uprising of simply leaving, an exodus, an exiting from a dynamic which simultaneously denies the worthiness of the very thing though on which the whole dynamic depends. Slaves are worthless non-beings: slaves are foundational to the whole structure of society, the cornerstone of all upbuilding. But how can it be both?

So, the bush is there burning, though never to be consumed, and when the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am," which is to say in Hebrew *hineni*, which is better rendered in the one word: "Ready," to which God gave Moses this direction to go to Pharaoh, to which Moses asked, "Why would Pharaoh listen to me? Who should I say sent me?"

Who, indeed.

Here we have God naming Godself. For the first time in the story that we're one book into now, God reveals God's name. In Genesis, this God is referred as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob; the God of the Patriarchs, one of whom, Jacob, would come to be called Israel, so this God was therefore the God of Israel. But now we have it, the actual name, which tradition would have us understand as indicative of some essence. A name isn't just a

referent in the world of the Bible, it's a calling forth of some essential, irreducible truth about the thing named.

So, what would it be? The name of this God. Something mighty. Something undeniably powerful! Named after war. Named after a storm. Named earthquake or ocean depth.

YHWH.

YHWH—which, if it has you asking, “How are you supposed to even pronounce that?” you're asking the right question. A bunch of our breathiest letters, Y-H-W-H, it's a name that's nearly nothing. A name that is the sound of breath. A name, indeed, that is breath. This is a God of breath, a God of being. I AM that I AM—and so the evidence of whom is all around us, even within us, pulsing, coming and going, arriving and filling, leaving and emptying.

Downright existential. Downright modern. Really, if you think this feels like a more modern notion of God, something more of the existential age, something more of the sort of God the likes of Kierkegaard evoked and Nietzsche denied and you hardly ever hear about in megachurches, for example, because it's simply too nearly nothing, then you're not wrong. Or at least I agree with you. This ancient theophany reveals something enduring about an eternal God who keeps showing up in time. Breath and being are ever-relevant, and everywhere so, and among all people and across time, but they seem true for now in a way that feels urgent.

Simple being. Enduring being. Weeds coming up through pavement. Life not captured for social media consumption but simply let to be.

Do you ever wish this busy world would just for a moment stop?

Do you ever wish the buzzing of life, life on-line, life in traffic, life consuming goods and services, life ever in need of your comments and opining and hot takes, this life of novelty and your personal brand, would just stop, would just be still?

Just attend. Just show up and attend.

Just pay attention to a thing most worthy of this costly payment. Your attention!

Jesus has begun to show his disciples where their journey with him is leading. The cross: a most unexpected end to the trip they'd thought they were on.

Peter even denies that this would need to be the case. He thinks Jesus could somehow manage to slip that knot, or maybe to fight back against the people who will come for him.

Jesus knows this is to set his mind on human things, self-preservation at any and all cost. Jesus knows this is indeed of a satanic spirit, the sort of spirit that would have us save our skins by accusing others, by casting blame elsewhere. “Whataboutism,” is what it came to be called in

Soviet Russia, and what we've seen sneak into our politics here. "What about him? He did the same thing I'm accused of. What about her? She did something even worse!"

But this isn't how the world will be saved; this is not how the world will have been saved. It will have been saved in self-giving love, a self-sacrificing gathering in of the other, of all others, until there is but peace, sustaining peace. Jesus will be leaving this dynamic, an exodus of the world busy with consuming dominance and destruction, an exodus into a world of sustaining and mutual care, which the disciples might follow him out of and then into, which we might follow him out of and into as well. "Get behind me," he said, which we might do, to follow him into a place of sustenance and peace—the world turned inside out. Slaves let to rest. Masters freed from the cruelty of their own whip. The wealth of the world let out for sustenance rather than dominance. A good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The being-ness of all things hallowed as houses of the Lord who is being—every part and particle pulsing with YHWH's presence and persistence.

Attend to this. Really, listen to the pulse of reality in its wholeness and in its each and every part. Notice the moon, the wind. Countenance the worried beauty of your neighbor, the impatient press of the person behind you in line. Watch the slow care of the old person making her way across this stage of life. Bless the wild imaginings of the child who can't help but to pay attention to everything all the time all around until sleep finally overtakes. Lift up the anxious unknowing of the young person who's facing life in a world more full of unknowns than has been the case for about a century. My tomato plant has grown more every time I glance in its direction. "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God..." Attend.

Pay your precious attention to what is worthy of it, which is everything, the all in all. And notice God's notice of you; recognize God's recognizing you—lovely, wonderful, forgiven and embraced. Countenance God's sustaining countenance of you—lovely, wonderful.

Pay attention to this, and you will live.

Thanks be to God.