

Food for Thought—Moses and the Burning Bush

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We hear the story of Moses and the burning bush from childhood forward--from Sunday School and VBS, and the narrative may be so familiar to us that we barely notice the episode. But there is much to be learned from it if we stop and ponder it, just as Moses himself stopped and investigated the bush.

One interesting thing about this event is its setting. We find Moses at a point in his life at which he has been living in obscurity tending sheep for 40 years. And, while he seems to have had a good home and family life with Jethro, he is a man with few possessions (he doesn't even own the sheep—the scripture makes it clear that they are Jethro's sheep).

On this day, he is not only living as an obscure person, but is also in a very remote place— an area which the King James wording describes as the “backside of the desert” and the NIV renders as the “far side of the wilderness.” He is in the vicinity of Mount Horeb, and “Horeb” means “desolate.” He could not be farther away from cities, trade routes, seats of government—the places where we tend to think of things happening.

Yet this is the spot where God will do something momentous. He is about to call Moses to the work of freeing the Israelites here (and a few later this place will be where God issues the 10 commandments). God, as He so often does, does what one wouldn't expect--He has chosen a setting that is both geographically obscure and personally humble. Moses had years before wanted to help his people, and at that time he was in a position of influence and power...and he had no idea--until he tried it and floundered--that he was not up to the task on his own.

He is now an ordinary man. He is also a man who has probably learned much patience—looking after sheep for 40 years in a harsh environment. It has probably been good practice for the 40 years he will spend leading the Israelites in the same part of the world for a coming 40 years.

God initiates the encounter—by causing a bush to burst into flame (experts say that bushes sometimes do spontaneously ignite in this desert area) but with a supernatural fire that does not burn up and consume the bush.

And the next move is Moses's. And it shows us some special things about Moses. First, Moses is faithfully on the job. If he weren't at work this day, he wouldn't have been there to see the odd sight. Second, Moses notices it. Not everyone would. But Moses, like Mary (the mother of Jesus) is a noticer.

Moses also makes a conscious decision to go investigate, to get closer, to see better. Every day God is inviting us to do that—to get closer, to see better, to know

more. I think the scripture mentions this detail--that Moses noticed the bush and made a conscious decision to draw near it--because this is an important characteristic. Many people would not notice and not draw near.

We may think with astonishment “Who wouldn’t notice a supernaturally burning bush?” After thinking about it, I’d say “more people than we’d think.” Many people might notice a bush on fire but not let their gaze linger long enough to notice that the bush is not being consumed, not long enough to notice that there’s something very unusual about this fire. A personality Type A person, for example, might be so intently overfocused on his job that he would pay attention only to things strictly connected with his sheep and his work. If the fire is isolated and not threatening the sheep, he may never give it a second glance. Or a shepherd more of the hedonist variety (or perhaps the depressed hedonist variety) could be thinking of little except getting to the end of the day and on to the evening’s pleasures, however small they may be, and he thus would miss something great. If Moses tended to spend much of his thought life ruminating on his past failures and losses, that too could’ve kept him from noticing the sight or from making the effort to “turn aside” and draw near. Finally, some people, if they had noticed how very odd the burning bush was, might’ve been afraid to investigate something so uncanny. Moses noticed that there was something different here, and he had a desire to draw near and learn more, and fear didn’t stop him.

What Moses sees as he draws near is indeed worth anything and everything to see, for he is seeing God; he is seeing Christ. There are a number of times in the Old Testament when a theophany occurs—a moment when God makes Himself visible in a way that a mortal can see (and yet not die from seeing). Exodus says that “the angel of the Lord” is appearing to Moses in the midst of the fire and thorns, but this cannot be a regular, created angel, for a few verses later he is telling Moses that his name is I AM and that he is the God of his fathers. This is not just “an” angel. It is the LORD, and I am thinking it is Jesus who is the person of the Godhead who appears in this and other Old Testament theophanies, for he is the Lord who came into to the world as the incarnate divine Word, the one who dwelt among us, the member of the Godhead whom man could behold without perishing. And this is no generic bush. The Hebrew makes it clear that it is specifically a thorn bush. Thorns are a symbol of the fall, for sin changed creation such that it became a place whose soil brought forth thorns. So the appearance of thorns in this theophany is not by chance. It is like a picture of the Lord’s eternal self-sacrificial role, like John seeing the “Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world” in his Revelation. As David Guzik describes it, what we see here is a picture like that of the cross, “where Jesus, crowned with thorns, endured the fires of judgment and yet was not consumed by them.” Moses is seeing a visible presence of the Lord in a form that addresses the entire conflict with, and victory over, sin and death. And thus the sight of the burning bush is not just for Moses—for he would not know yet that Jesus would come and would bear the sins of the world and wear the crown of thorns in his work to defeat sin and death—it is also a sight also meant for us, who do know. And all of that is very wonderful indeed.