

Imago Dei, Part 4: The Burning Bush
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

Countryside Community Church (UCC)

January 29, 2017

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-14

The other day a friend sent me a cartoon depicting a man standing naked before a demon at the gates of hell. The demon was explaining that they prefer to call the place, “Alternative Heaven.” Whoever has the power tends to define reality – or at least try to.

This tendency to skew the facts in ways that make them less embarrassing or more beneficial to the one skewing them is hardly new and hardly limited to presidential administrations. There was a time when Christianity itself went from being powerless and persecuted in the Roman Empire to powerful and promoted. When this happened in the early Fourth Century, Christian politicians skewed certain aspects of classic Christian theology and belief in ways that made it easier to “do unto others” what had been done unto them: namely, condemn and persecute their opposition.

The doctrine of Original Sin is a case in point. Before the Fourth Century, no significant strand of Christianity held a belief that we are all so permanently stained by the sin of Adam and Eve that God would find need to punish them in hell unless they were baptized into the Christian faith. Before then, the dominant view was that Christ’s death and resurrection showed the extent to which God loves all of humanity, not just those who believe in Jesus. The only benefit to believing in Jesus was that you would believe in, and therefore trust, God’s love for you. That’s a pretty significant benefit, but it’s not the same as threatening someone with eternal torture in hell and then offering them a Get Out Of Hell Free card. Yet, this “alternative Christian” vision caught on with those who sought to expand the Empire, which had become Christian.

This belief that all were destined to hell except Christians received new energy seven centuries later during the Crusades. It was a lot easier to fight Muslims if you believed that their religion was of the devil, and that their leaders were leading people straight to hell. “Alternative Christianity” went mainstream, and a belief that started as horrific fiction in the eyes of many became holy (alternative) fact.

Thus far in our series we have found that the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and even the Great Flood, clearly show that we are *marked* by Original Sin, but that we are *defined* by Original Grace. Because our lives are defined by God’s Grace, not human sin, there is no need to look to Jesus for salvation from an afterlife in hell. We look to Jesus to find salvation from hell in this life – the hell we create for each other, not God. And in Jesus we discover that the Kingdom of Heaven has already come to earth and is available to us now – not in its fullness, but to such an extent that it may actually be called a Kingdom – a Kingdom that we create with God together.

It's easy to be a skeptic about heaven's presence in our world, isn't it? With all the political infighting, economic insecurity, epidemic levels of greed, and threats to earth's ecosystems, it's easy to get so transfixed by the negative aspects of modern life that all we see around us are the stormy seas.

Writing in the New York Times last week, Nicholas Kristof encouraged those who have fallen into despair not to be overwhelmed, because some of the most important stories of the day are actually good news stories, not bad news ones. You might even call them Kingdom of Heaven stories, though they aren't often found in the news. For example, consider the case of those who live in extreme poverty (officially defined as living on less than \$1.90 per person per day, adjusted for inflation). Do you suppose that extreme poverty: (a) rises by 5,000, because of climate change, food shortages and endemic corruption; or (b) stays about the same; or (c) drops by 250,000 people each day?

Polls show that 9 out of 10 Americans believe that global poverty has worsened or stayed the same. But according to World Bank figures, every day an average of a quarter-million people graduate from extreme poverty. These numbers really start adding up over time. In the 1980s, more than 40% of all humans were living in extreme poverty. Now, fewer than 10% are. By 2030 that percentage is projected to drop to 3-4 percent, making an end to extreme poverty actually achievable in our day.

This kind of miracle would not have been possible without the hard work of millions of people who felt a call to help alleviate poverty in our world, through aid organizations, micro-financers, philanthropists and inventors, as well as millions of entrepreneurs whose focus may not have been alleviating poverty but felt a call to do something that brought them alive in this world, which created an economic engine that raised the financial tide for hundreds of millions. While experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth cannot be equated with material or financial well-being, it is hard for any of us to experience much heaven if we have no idea where our next meal is coming from. For 250,000 today, this concern is less present now than it was yesterday. And tomorrow there will be 250,000 more.

Or take the case of Rev. Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief, the humanitarian arm of a network of 1,200 evangelical churches. Yesterday, when President Trump signed an executive order banning refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries for forty days and banning Syrian refugees indefinitely, Rev. Arbeiter's organization joined a number of more theologically progressive organizations in speaking out against the action. He and 12,000 of his fellow evangelicals released a statement that said, in part, that World Relief opposes "any measure that would discriminate against the most vulnerable people in the world based on ethnicity, country of origin, religion, gender or gender identity. Our commitment is to serve vulnerable people without regard to those factors, or any others." As little as five years ago it would have been unthinkable to imagine an evangelical organization standing up both for Muslims and for those of different "gender identity" all in the same statement!

The fact of the matter is that just when the world seems to be teetering on the brink of tumult and terror, that's when to pay extra close attention to where the Kingdom of Heaven may still be found and what God is calling you to do to nurture, protect, and expand it further. Because just when you think God is farthest away, that's when you can count on discovering that God is

a lot closer than you have imagined, inviting you, like Noah, into a course of action that may not save the whole world at once, but is capable of lifting you and those you love above the floodwaters and setting you on a journey to a new tomorrow.

The story of Moses and the burning bush is a story about how one typically hears God's call in a time of crisis, wrestles with it, and responds faithfully to it. It's not so much a story of Moses, therefore, but a story about Moses, you, and me. Like the other stories we've been exploring, its purpose isn't to tell us what happened "long ago in a land far away," but what happens over and over, up to our present day.

What's Burning?

According to the story, God calls to Moses out of a bush that burned yet was not consumed. That's a sight few of us are likely ever to see. I doubt Moses saw it either. Yet Moses seeing a burning bush is not an "alternative fact" as they are being bantered around these days. An ancient reader would not have been concerned with what Moses saw or didn't see. An ancient reader would be trying to parse why the writer of the story chose a burning bush as a metaphor for Moses's calling, knowing full well that the metaphor would not only apply to Moses but to the reader.

Here's one thing I find helpful about the burning bush metaphor: It burns brightly, but not at the expense of the stalk and branches. God's call always ignites something within us that seems to burn no matter how awake or tired we are, and no matter how much our spirits have been dampened.

Have you ever experienced times in your life when what you were doing corresponded so well to who you are and what you love that the doing of it seemed to give you more energy than it took away? Few if any people who embark on a calling from God do so because they have literally heard God tell them what to do. But most if not all who embark on God's calling *become* burning bushes through their labors, giving off spiritual energy and illumination without depleting their physical or mental energy in doing so. Typically people experience a sense of call when their particular desires and passions intersect with the world's deep needs in some way, at a particular time and place, and it has the effect of pouring gasoline on fire. Just a few drops are enough to illuminate a path before you that you didn't see before; a path that calls out to you as your own.

Who, Me?

Now, you would think that most people readily get on their path and start running when they feel a sense of call such as I have described. The truth is, most people do not. The depth of feeling and expectation that God's call evokes is enough to scare most of us half to death. Do we really want to touch those powerful emotions? Do we really want to put ourselves out there in such a way that we would be disappointed, or even crushed, if the results didn't pan out as we expected them to? What about people who don't understand what we are doing, or even oppose us?

Perhaps the most serious block to moving in the direction to which we feel God calling us is the perception that we just plain aren't up to the task. We're not skilled enough to do the work, prescient enough to know where we're headed, wise enough to recognize when we've taken a wrong turn, or confident enough to know when we've taken a right one.

In our story, God calls to Moses saying, "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 ... 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." (Exodus 3:7-10)

How does Moses respond to this wonderful news that after centuries of slavery God was freeing Moses's people and bringing them to a land flowing with milk and honey – and using Moses as an instrument of God's liberating miracle?

Surely for Moses the idea of liberating his people from such hard oppression would have ignited just about every ounce of passion he had within him. You may remember that Moses had once murdered an Egyptian overlord who was beating an Israelite slave. Yet, Moses just can't bring himself to believe that he's up for the task. Moses responds, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Frankly, Moses has every reason to object to God's call, based on his own abilities. The fact of the matter is that it is hard for any of us to feel like our skills, talents, and other resources are sufficient to fulfill our calling – mostly because they aren't!

So this second aspect of Moses's call story is highly instructive to any of us who sense God's call. Most of us recoil, challenging it, questioning it, objecting to it. Then we take our own negative reaction as a sign that the call is not real. But the Moses story reminds us that this is a perfectly natural response to a deeply authentic call of the Holy Spirit. It's just what we humans do who are marked by sin.

God's Assurance

We are marked by sin, but *defined* by grace. God's grace. In Moses's case, God responded to his objection by stating something that should be completely obvious but never seems so obvious when we are the ones sensing God's call. God reminds Moses, "I will be with you."

Oh, ya.

It stands to reason that if God is doing the *calling*, God also does the *enabling*. God is not so imbecilic as to call a person onto a certain path, knowing full well that the person can't travel that path alone, with the resources presently at hand, only to abandon that person once they've set their foot on that path! While we can never really know where the path will lead us once we embark on it, the one thing we can be sure of is that we will find the resources necessary to walk it if we keep our eyes open and our hearts resolutely oriented toward the One who calls us.

The fourth chapter of Exodus provides a more expanded version of Moses's objections, which include his fear that the Egyptians won't believe him, and the fact that he speaks with a stutter. In each case, God provides Moses assurance after assurance after assurance that all may not be well but everything will be fine.

In this respect the story shows us the third sign of an authentic call from God. When our call scares us and we object, God always offers us assurance in some way that we are capable of recognizing, normally multiple times in multiple ways since it's easy for any of us to misread God's signs, or interpret ordinary coincidence as a sign from God. That's why, as in our story, God offers many forms of assurance.

Burned But Not Consumed

Thus far we have found that the story of Moses and the Burning Bush teaches us three things about what to expect when the Holy Spirit comes calling:

- (1) A course of action is revealed that arouses our deep passions while meeting the world's deep needs.
- (2) We typically object at first.
- (3) God provides multiple assurances to our objections, promising to be with us and to help provide the resources necessary to carry out our calling.

The story of Moses and the Burning Bush also suggests one more aspect of calling. Namely:

- (4) Though God promises to be with you, your path will not always be easy.

Think about Moses's path. He had to convince his own people of his calling, confront Pharaoh with a demand that no leader in his right mind would acquiesce to, lead his people out of Egypt with Pharaoh's warriors hot on his heels, lead his people for forty years in the wilderness, often dealing with their complaining and backsliding ... and he would never actually enter the Promised Land with his people, but would die on Mt. Nebo gazing into it.

Here again is where I find the metaphor of the burning bush to be a powerful one regarding God's call to our lives. Not only does following our calling provide us the energy and vision to make it through the hardships the world will throw our way, but following our calling turns us into burning bushes ourselves in the midst of conflict. Meaning, our struggles to follow God's call will certainly burn us, but we will never be consumed. Even if they kill the body, they cannot touch our burning soul.

In this respect, Jesus shows us most fully at the Cross and Empty Tomb what it means to follow God's call and become a bush that is burned but not consumed. As William Barclay once observed, "Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble."

Those who follow in his path and respond to the Spirit's call discover themselves becoming burning bushes in our world – fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble – and constantly reminding the world that the Kingdom of Heaven is far closer than they imagine.