



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

The Burning Bush
Exodus 3:1-12

One of my best friends in seminary was Howell Martin, who tells of the life-changing experience that God used to lead him into the ministry. It begins with his college years where he received a scholarship to play baseball for West Texas State University. He was the starting catcher. During Howell's senior year, West Texas had on its schedule the University of Tulsa. At the time Tulsa boasted of a young pitcher named Steve Rogers. Many of you may remember Steve Rogers who was a six time National League all-star pitcher for the Montreal Expos.

At one point in the game with Tulsa, with Steve Rogers on the mound, West Texas State had a 2 – 0 lead. During the fifth inning of this game Howell had his life changing experience. With two outs in the inning Tulsa filled the bases. Howell was behind the plate and he let a curve ball get by him. The runner on third raced home. In his haste to retrieve the ball and get it to the pitcher covering home, Howell threw the ball over the pitcher's head. Before the third baseman could retrieve overthrown the ball, the runner who started on second base had rounded third and was heading home. The third baseman threw the ball to the pitcher who was still covering home. And again the ball went over his head and Howell missed the back up. By the time Howell could get to the ball back to the pitcher, still covering home, the runner who started the play on first base had rounded third and scored. The bases cleared and the final score was 3 – 2. Tulsa won. Steve Rogers, the winning pitcher, went on to the major leagues, and my friend Howell, a promising catcher with a promising bat, ended up going to seminary.

Hear now the word as I read about another life-changing experience. This time the main character is Moses. I will be reading from Exodus 3:1-12.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey -- the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending 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?"

And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

The context of the Scripture reading took place forty years after Moses killed the Egyptian and fled from Egypt. He was a prince turned shepherd. In Midian he led his flock to the western border of the wilderness. Farther to the west, a three day's journey, lay Egypt. Possibly Moses was

remembering his past in Egypt. Maybe he had thoughts of his brethren who were still under Egyptian bondage. Then suddenly he saw a dry bush that was on fire. There was nothing unusual about a dry bush burning up in the desert, but this bush was not consumed by the blaze. When Moses turned to investigate this oddity, the voice of God spoke. The voice called Moses by name and Moses responded, "Here am I."

Where were you when God called your name? What were the circumstances surrounding the moment in your life, or should I say the moments in your life when you said in some way, "God, I realize that you have been present in my life bringing me to the point to perform some type of service, and now I understand you have called me to serve Jesus Christ. Help me to be open to that purpose in my life."

One lesson we learn from Moses' life is God is at work in our lives even when we do not recognize the fact. God was at work preparing Moses for his service from day one, and in our Scripture we are privileged to read about the moment when God came to Moses and said, "Moses, I have been with you all your life. I have been there through thick and thin. I was there to protect you when you were an infant. I was the one who brought you into the house of Pharaoh. I was there with you in the wilderness, and now I have brought you to this place where you will serve me, and here at this burning bush I will reveal what I have called you to do."

Brothers and sisters, God has been at work in our lives for a long time. But the question is, have we ever come to the point when we will recognize the fact that God has a purpose for our lives? He had a reason for making me and for making you. And I have a suspicion that there are many here who at least have some knowledge of the fact that God has called you to his service. You may not be clear about the entire plan of God, but you know that he has called you. Now where were you when he called? Where were you when you understood that Jesus Christ was Lord and had come to you in a burning bush?

One dark starless night, Peter Marshall, one of the greatest Presbyterian preachers of the last century, came across his burning bush. On that night he took a shortcut across a Scottish moor on his way home. He knew somewhere along the way there was a deep deserted limestone quarry, but he thought he could avoid that danger. There was only the sound of the wind through the heather-stained moorland, the noisy clamor of wild fowl as his footsteps disturbed them, and the occasional far-off bleating of a sheep. Suddenly he heard someone call out of the darkness, "Peter!" There was great urgency in the voice. He stopped and said, "Yes, who is it? What do you want? For a second he listened, but there was no response, only the sound of the wind. The moor seemed completely deserted. He walked on a few paces. Then he heard it again, more urgently, "Peter!" He stopped dead still, trying to peer into the impenetrable darkness, as he stumbled and fell to his knees. Putting out his hand to catch himself, he found nothing in front of him. As he cautiously investigated, feeling around in a semicircle he found himself to be on the brink of the abandoned stone quarry. Just one step more would have sent him plummeting over the edge to his death.

There was no doubt in his mind about the source of the voice that saved his life. He understood God must have some great purpose for his life, to have intervened so specifically. And for Peter Marshall that dark moor became to him a burning bush – the place where God spoke to him. After that night Peter Marshall felt the strong call of God, a call that eventually led him to the United States where he became a Presbyterian minister and eventually the chaplain of the United States Senate.

At the foot of Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb, Moses heard the voice of God. At the burning bush the Lord God told Moses news that he had waited 40 years to hear: **"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of the land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."** What good news accompanied by a

promise from God. God told Moses that his people, the ones who Moses watched under great affliction forty years ago, whom Moses had tried to help once, these people were about to be freed from their bondage. I can hear Moses saying: "That great Lord! It's about time somebody did something for those slaves in Egypt."

But then came the news that Moses did not welcome. The voice said, **"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel out of Egypt."**

Though Moses had spent the last 40 years learning about God through nature, and through his father-in-law who was a priest Midian, he was not ready to go back to Egypt. Moses responded to this call saying, "Who am I?" Moses could not understand why he had been chosen. He had tried 40 years ago to help his people and it was a total failure. If God wanted him to deliver the people, why did he not come to Moses when he was a prince in Egypt, when he had some political clout with Pharaoh?

"Why me?" cried Moses, "No one knows me anymore. Why me? I am only one man and Pharaoh has a whole nation behind him. Why me? I am a simple shepherd. What do I know about the politics involved in getting the people out of Egypt? Why me? I can think of a hundred reasons why I am the wrong person for the job!"

Have you heard God call your name from a burning bush? Maybe you did not hear a voice as Moses and Peter Marshall did, but have you heard the call? When we see a hungry child, can you hear the voice from the bush? When someone loses their job, can you hear God's voice from the bush? When you hear about an elderly woman living by herself, no longer able to get around and now lives a lonely life, do you hear the voice of God from the bush? When you hear about a people suffering from injustice, do you hear the voice from the bush? When you encounter someone who has not hope, do you hear the voice from the bush?

I have heard the call and I ask, "Why me? How can somebody like me make any difference at all? The problems in this world, or for that matter in our city, are so great and I am so small."

Why me? A question we all ask. Maybe we too feel the frustration. I know there are hungry people in the world, but why ask me? What can I do? I am only one person; I will never make a difference.

I know our world is in trouble. One nation exploits another, while another nation harbors terrorists and stockpiles weapons. What can I do? I am only one person; I will never make a difference.

I know there are people right here in Nacogdoches who are homeless, people who have leaky roofs, people who cannot care for themselves, but what can I do? I am only one person and I have a hard time just keeping a roof over my own family.

There are families in our neighborhood who do not attend church. Their only knowledge of church is of the judgmental, condemning church of their youth, and today they rebel against Christ, but are longing for a home, for a place that actually loves sinners and desires to be a family to them. And we ask, what can I do? I wouldn't know what to say.

There is a sense of inadequacy, yet as God told Moses from his burning bush, God also tells us from ours, "**I shall be with you.**"

Moses was right and we are right feeling inadequate when faced with all the problems that are all around us. But as the Apostle Paul understood so well, in our weakness God is made strong. On his own, Moses would have never succeeded in bringing Israel out of Egypt, but with God working through him, Moses led the people out of Egypt into the wilderness onto Mt. Sinai where God made the Hebrews into a nation. For 80 years God was with Moses preparing him for this task and in the end God was not going to desert Moses but God saw Moses through.

Today God prepares us to do his work. At times we might not recognize God at work in our lives. For 80 years Moses did not realize that he was being prepared for the greatest event in Hebrew history. When we meet God at our burning bush we must trust that God will make us ready to serve him. And as with Moses, God promises to be with us. Jesus told his disciples and also tells us, “Go, make disciples, baptize in my name, and remember I am with you always.”