

“And The Fire Didn’t Go Out”

- I. And the fire didn’t go out. Moses saw that the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. No matter how long it burned, the fire did not go out. Imagine how very surprised Moses must have been on the side of the mountain, quietly and peacefully tending Jethro’s sheep and minding his own business. Moses was a shepherd who had had to flee Egypt years before for striking and killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave. Once Moses had been wealthy, privileged, a member of the house of pharaoh. These were but distant memories for Moses; that was all over now. Moses had fled as a common criminal to the land of Midian where he had met Zipporah and started a family. In the many years that had passed, Moses’ life became calm and settled. But then, Moses met God, and the fire wouldn’t go out.

- II. We call the kind of experience Moses had on that mountain a theophany, a visible encounter with God. In a theophany, God comes to us in a very clear, often dramatic way. God gets our attention by breaking into what might be just an average day or night, and turning our lives upside down. The Apostle Paul had a theophany, Mother Theresa had a theophany, and I am sure some of us here this morning have had theophanies as well. In the particular theophany that Moses experienced on the mountain, he was called to return to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery. He tried repeatedly to get out of the assignment, claiming inadequacy. God didn’t buy it. Instead God sent him help and promised to guide him each step of the way.

- III. During my process of discernment to the priesthood, I was often asked to identify a Biblical character who I thought in some significant way personified my spiritual journey. I invariably chose Moses. Moses had stepped in to help his people early in life; I was called as an adolescent to the ministry. Moses had re-directed his life into an entirely different direction; I had pursued counseling and university teaching rather than the ministry. Moses received God’s call well into his life; I received a renewed call to the ministry in mid-life. I have identified with Moses as I have come to comprehend the life-changing effect of encountering God and taking the steps that he calls us to take. Encountering God transforms us.

One cannot come close to God without being changed. We are touched by God’s power. In answer to Moses’ question God’s names God’s self, I Am Who I Am. This name is consistent with God’s nature as constant and complete energy. Moses was energized when he encountered God at the burning bush.

Within the past year I also had an encounter with God that energized me and my ministry. Last May I participated in an 8-day CREDO Conference. CREDO is an intense retreat provided by the Episcopal Church Pension Fund to each priest once in her or his lifetime.

I was one of 26 priests who gathered with seven faculty at a retreat center in Florida to examine our ministries together. There were plenary sessions, small group meetings, and individual consultations with faculty about our spiritual, vocational, physical, and financial health. The entire eight days were threaded through with worship and individual time for prayer, reflection, and future planning. CREDO was a rich spiritual experience and an opportunity to take a hard look at where I was in my ordained ministry.

I had in fact gone to CREDO with a beginning case of fizzling passion. It's not unusual for clergy after six or seven years in ordained ministry to start feeling a bit burned out. There are a variety of causes for this, but chief among them is the experience of becoming hazy about one's original call to the priesthood. As many priests will tell you, it is very easy to get caught up in tasks that are far removed from what God originally called us to do. One of the goals of CREDO is to help priests recall their original passions about ministry and look at how they are or are not honoring their original call. Faculty members guide one through this process in individual consultations.

Several days after arriving, I met with the faculty member, a priest, responsible for the vocational area. Together we traced my stages of priestly ministry. I told him that I had had a call to the ministry as a young adult in a rather rigid church and that I had not pursued that call. That I wandered, spiritually speaking, for some time and years later re-experienced that call while working as a support group facilitator with HIV+ persons and their families at the Damien Center, an Episcopal outreach ministry in Indianapolis. I had walked through the progressive illnesses and deaths of countless group members and had been deeply transformed in that experience. As I retold my story, I was aware of the passion I have had for working with marginalized people, with people struggling with spiritual healing and reconciliation with God and with others, with people struggling with personal and family crises, those who are terminally ill, and those who are dealing with social isolation and loneliness. And I wondered with the priest whether my passion in ministry was being fully honored. I also recounted the role of a priest in Indianapolis who had led me to the Episcopal Church and who had encouraged me to have the courage to re-open the possibility of entering the ordained ministry. I felt deep sadness when I remembered that 18 years ago that same priest, Fr. Earl, had fallen off a ladder, sustained a severe head injury, and never regained consciousness. I had not been able to thank him for his spiritual guidance or say to even good-bye to him.

The priest with whom I met at CREDO asked me to remind him of a gift when we finished. I thought he'd meant my particular gifts in ministry, but I was wrong. He meant this gift of this stole had been a close friend of Fr. Earl's. After Fr. Earl's death, the executors of his estate had sent this stole (which I have now here with me) to him. For 18 years he had faithfully kept it in a drawer, knowing, he said, that the stole was not his to wear. He sent this stole to me when he returned home from CREDO. I believe this stole was a gift from God to remind me that I must stay connected with my passion for ministry. A totally unexpected gift from God. The experience shot through me. I had begun that day praying under a large cross beside the conference center lake, asking God to help me see the face of Christ in a new way. God had answered my prayer. This experience became a critical juncture for my entire week of CREDO and since.

- IV. The Church of the Ascension. Today we come together acknowledging that there is a fire that won't go out here at the Church of the Ascension. There is a passion here that draws on God's unending energy. God fuels this passion every time we are together. Sometimes God comes to us through a burning bush, at other times in the still small voice of the Spirit. Sometimes God calls to us in a piece of music, a Scripture reading, or even, believe it or not, a sermon. Each of us can hear God's call whether we have been here as a charter member for fifty years or are visiting Ascension for the very first time this morning. God may call us to continue to do what we are already doing with perhaps greater passion and joy. God may call us to something new — a teaching ministry, or work with youth, for example. But if we are open to hearing that call and to recognizing God's presence with us, God will provide each of us clarity about the ministries he is calling us to and give us the resources to undertake that. God can and does speak to each and every one of us here this morning.

We can sense the excitement we have about the future here. Our excitement is warranted. In my first week here I have been struck by the talent and commitment in this parish. There is no stopping us in ministry as long as we draw our clarity and our effort from God's endless energy. We are being called together to a new time in Ascension's life. Like Moses, we will remember where we have come from and how we have grown in these last 50 years. We will also need to remember that God is always calling us to move forward. I Am Who I Am, God tells Moses, I am the God of the present moment. Let's grab ahold of this moment and step together into the future that God has provided for us. Thanks be to God.

