

REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT ~ 20 March 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Litledale

“The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, God’s boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good.” These words were written by Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si’* (#84). In today’s readings from the Liturgy of the Word on the third Sunday of Lent, we are invited by the biblical writers to parts of the universe which were remembered by them as “a caress of God.”



Icon with Moses before the Burning Bush, early 13th century, Byzantine

In the first reading from Exodus, we meet Moses, and we share his memory of God’s call to him. Moses was a poor shepherd, working for his father-in-law Jethro. In the course of his everyday work, he leads the flock to the Horeb, the mountain of God. It is not the mountain which he remembers but the burning bush from which God calls him. God tells him to remove his sandals for the place on which he is standing is holy ground. Moses was frightened and hid his face – he gave God all the reasons why he was the wrong person to lead the people. He says that he does not even know this God’s name. God reminds Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6) – Moses’ ancestors. And God then tells Moses why this is so important, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry” (Ex 3:7). The name God gives is somewhat mysterious, “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14) – the “I am.” We know that Moses eventually loses his argument with God and does lead the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, into the Promised Land.

It is worth noting that God chooses to communicate with Moses through the burning bush. In making the covenant with Abraham, God had come as a flaming torch. A pillar of fire will mark God’s presence with the people as they journey through the wilderness. But this first communication between God and Moses happens on holy ground before the flaming bush. The bush is one of Earth’s creatures, surviving in the wilderness, intimately connected to the land – what God calls “holy ground”. This is the first time the word “holy” is used in the Bible – and it is used to describe the place where the ordinary bush grows! It is from this ordinary bush that God chooses to be present, to speak with Moses, to remind Moses of God’s presence with all the ancestors, God’s presence promised to the people suffering now, and God’s promise to be with the people into their future “for all generations” (Ex 3:15).

The sacredness of this moment is marked by ordinary ground and an ordinary bush. Two reflections from Hildegard of Bingen speak to



Burning Bush ~ McAuley Convent

God's presence as fire not only in the bush but in all being, "All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, emerging from God like the rays of the sun," and "I am the fiery life of the essence of God; I am the flame above the beauty in the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life." We remember the first lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins' famous



Moses and the Burning Bush
Keith Haring

poem, *God's Grandeur*, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

Rabbi Nahum, in teaching on this passage from the Torah, says that the important aspect of the story is not that the bush is burning but that Moses notices. Elizabeth Barrett Browning says the same thing in her lovely poem, *Aurora Leigh*, "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

leader, God's presence among the people of Israel gives them hope in their suffering and pain. What is the burning bush in your life? Where is the holy ground where you take off your shoes in awe of its holiness? Where do you and God meet in the ordinary everydayness of your life?

The second caress of God comes in the memories called forth by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians as he recalls the story of Moses and the exodus into their time. Here Paul uses the images of the cloud, the sea, food, and drink to describe that pivotal moment in their sense of their new identity as a people of God, chosen by God despite their own flaws and failings – a source of comfort for all of us!



Paul also uses the image of the rock to help us better understand the person of Jesus the Christ. This same image is used of God in the Old Testament who is frequently referred to as the "Rock of Israel." God is also imaged as a living rock, and, even more, a rock that gives birth, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut 32.18). Jesus, quoting the Old Testament (Ps 118.22), refers to himself as a stone, "He looked at them and said, 'What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?'" (Lk 20.17). Later in the New Testament, Jesus is also called a living stone, and we, in following him, become living stones, "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house ((1 Peter 2:4-5). Find a rock or stone to hold in your hand. Imagine the life within its very being, foreign to how we usually imagine life. How does this stone have its own identity



and its own integrity, its own holiness? What does this stone say to you about God as a living stone, about Jesus the Christ a living stone? How are you a living stone?

In the Gospel reading from Luke, we find a third caress of God in the fig tree, used by Jesus to further describe God's presence among us. Fig trees are foreign to most of us since they grow in warmer countries. However, they are mentioned sixty-six times in the Bible, including the description of the Promised Land, "The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs,

flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey (Deut 8:7-8). There are roughly 700 varieties of fig trees. Figs can grow on trees, shrubs, vines, and even epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants). A lot of rainforests contain fig trees, and their fruit is used to feed thousands of types of animals, including monkeys, birds, and even bats. Almost every fig tree is pollinated by its own fig wasp, an interesting example of co-evolution. Some types of fig trees have very deep roots, with some of them having roots that go down to 120 metres (400 feet) below the ground.

Fig trees speak to us about diversity, community, rootedness, and lifegiving energy. There is little wonder then that a fig tree that does not bear fruit causes grave concern. The owner of the vineyard in Jesus' parable wants the unfertile fig tree to be cut down. But the gardener intervenes, asks that it be nurtured with digging and manure to give it the opportunity to grow and bear fruit. I love that Jesus speaks about God as the gardener who uses manure to bring new life and hope!

The context for the parable of the fig tree is a lesson for us about repentance, about turning from ways of fear to hope, from ways of self-centeredness to self-giving, from ways of taking to sharing. Henri Nouwen describes repentance as a three-fold conversion movement. We need to move from being a bystander to being a participant, from being a judge to being a repentant sinner, and from speaking about love to actually letting ourselves be loved. There is a simple but profound prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes which helps describe this essence of repentance and of the willingness of God the gardener always to nurture us:

Surely. I would never betray you, never deny you. Surely?
 Beloved, give me the faith to doubt my righteousness.
 Give me the assurance to question, to examine myself honestly, to ask.
 Give me the confidence to wonder how I might betray your perfect love, to see.
 Give me grace to confess how my promises are broken, my heart broken.
 Give me the peace to be troubled by my smugness, and repent.
 Open my eyes to see that you see, you know,
 and knowing, you keep right on eating with me.

Our final reflection of yet another caress of God in our universe is this moment in the year's cycle

. On Friday night past, we saw the beautiful Worm Moon, the last full moon before the equinox. Today, March 20, is the first day of spring or autumn (depending on your hemisphere) – the moment when every place, every creature, and every person on Earth experiences the same amount of dark and light. After that moment, the days will lengthen in the northern hemisphere

and shorten in the southern hemisphere. In six months, we will have the second moment of equal day and night with the next equinox on September 22. On April 16, we will see the Full Pink Moon, the one signaling the coming of Easter which is the first Sunday after that full moon.

As we continue our Lenten journey, strengthened by knowing that all creation shares this journey with us and continually reflects “sparks from the radiance of God’s brilliance,” we conclude with this prayer-poem from the Scottish minister, Roddy Hamilton:

May the dust of the wilderness hold our footprints
Lovingly

shaped as they are by your hurt
for dust remembers

May the journey into wilderness unfold
honestly
for honesty is the gift
your soul recognises as you

May your time in this wilderness
be shaped by space
rather than minutes
so there is time enough for all of you

May the stones in this wilderness
cry out your name loudly
that your spirit recognises the voice
that has been calling you always

And may you know this wilderness
has been expecting you
and you find between the stones
a promise growing



Worm Moon, 18 March 2022

