

March 1, 2010

Sermon for St. Marin's in the Field's Episcopal Church

Columbia, South Carolina; March 7, 2010

May God's Word be spoken, heard, and done, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's great to be home. And it's humbling to be able to speak to you from this pulpit. I used to stand up here early in the morning on the Sundays when my dad was the vestry in charge, and I would pretend to be a priest – or a similarly impressive personage...like the Bishop.

Well, I don't pretend to be either today. I'm just a regular college student who's wrestled with this passage in Exodus for about a month now trying to figure out something to say that hasn't already been said about Moses coming upon the burning bush and God speaking from it. All I've got is a question.

Do you need a burning bush?

But seriously, do you need a burning bush?

Think, for a moment, what would you do if you saw one? You are driving down Forrest Drive and lo and behold, there, right before you get to McAlister's, are burning bushes! Would you call the fire department? I probably would. Would you keep driving and trust that someone already had? Would you stop and try to put out the fire?

Those responses make sense. The fiery McAlister's bush is dangerous. And almost certainly not a sign from God. I seriously doubt that God much cares for such *passé* communication these days.

Indeed, I am confident enough in that fact to say to you, "Read my lips: the era of flaming foliage is over."

That is not to say, however, that we are anywhere close to approaching the end of the era of *burning bushes*. So long as there is a single human being on this earth who is willing to heed God's call, there will be, there have *got* to be, burning bushes.

What, then, might a twenty-first century burning bush look like?

It might be a question one of your children asks you. It might be the loss of a loved one. It might be seeing, I mean actually *seeing*, for the first time, the homeless woman who stands at the stoplight with her cardboard sign reading "Can you spare some change?" It might be a hymn we sing in church today. It might be the retirement in disgust of a respected senator because

Congress is broken. Or it might be an earthquake or tsunami somewhere far away from Columbia.

It might not involve smoke and fire. It might not involve the booming of celestial voices or the parting of clouds or the calming of tempests upon the seas.

Our burning bushes today are much more likely to be simple, mundane things.

The important aspect of the burning bush in Exodus is not the visual imagery of flames and terror, but is, rather, that the burning bush was a tool, a vehicle, an instrument, used by God to call Moses to do God's work in the world.

God's work in the world. Ah, yes, now the other shoe drops.

It is wholly insufficient to merely see the burning bush. You don't get to send God a one line email:

To: God

Subject: Your Earlier Note

Message: Receipt Acknowledged

No sir. Calling doesn't work like that. Burning bushes don't work like that. The metaphorical bush, whatever it may be, is only the introduction. It is the first instrument you hear in a complex fugue. It is the first step in your newly begun dance with God.

Because, and here's the news, **you've got to do God's work in the world.**

For Moses, that was bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. That is our work, too.

What? What did I just say? We are supposed to bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Now, you must be thinking, that makes no sense. Moses did that. Did he forget some? Are we called to rescue the stragglers? Surely not.

I am not referring to any particular geographical Egypt – not the Egypt bounded by Sudan in the South and the Mediterranean in the North, Libya to the West and the Red Sea to the East. Rather I am referring to the Egypt that is a center of oppression, a bastion of slavery, a land of starvation, an epicenter of injustice.

Such an Egypt has no fixed borders. Such an Egypt does not always have a pedantic, arbitrary Pharaoh. Such an Egypt may not have a horde of chariots.

We should not be focused on finding, always, the great Pharaohs to smite or overthrow. But, rather, we need to focus on finding the Egypts of the twenty-first century. We ought to focus on finding the Israelites of our age.

Who are God's people in Egypt today? And where is their Moses?

I can't answer that question for you personally – but I was in an Egypt for nine weeks this past summer. And I can tell you a little of what an Egypt might look like in the modern, distinctly non-Biblical, world.

I worked in the southwestern corner of Uganda, in East Africa, delivering prenatal care to women in four rural villages, giving ultrasounds, dispensing medicine, and handing out insecticide treated bed nets to prevent malaria.

Our team from Duke spent a lot of time in field clinics. One of the nurses who worked with us, Jackie, and I became pretty good friends. I always posted up by her station and did her record keeping. She was bound and determined to train me in midwifery. I kept having to gently emphasize that I was actually a history major, not a doctor-in-training.

Sister – they call nurses “sister” in Uganda – Sister Jackie and I talked at length between some of the hundred or so patients we saw each day. Sister Jackie grew up in a home without a father. She was the eldest and most successful child in her family, and supported her several younger siblings and her mother. As someone who had been through college and then specialized nursing school she was one of the most educated people in her community – and she was a woman.

I learned quickly that not only did nothing happen in the field without her consent, but really nothing happened in the hospital in town without it either. Her calling was safely brining children into God's world. Not all of us can do that – surely I can't - but somewhere along the way, Sister Jackie saw her burning bush and became a Moses.

In Uganda the average number of live births per women is 6.7. That's the *average*. I met many women who were on their eleventh pregnancy, or twelfth or fifteenth. Why have so many children? Because so many children die before reaching the age of 5. What is more sad than the death of a child?

I was in communities where the nearest potable water was two hours away. I was in a country that couldn't count its people, much less tax them effectively or spend that revenue on education or roads or hospitals. Almost a third of the Ugandan budget for fiscal year 2009-2010 was derived from foreign aid.

The place is ravaged by HIV/AIDS. In some districts, the most dangerous thing a young girl can do is to get *married*.

The nation was plagued by a stale political class, moribund universities, and a press that can only be described as tabloid-esque. A bill working its way through the Ugandan parliament calls for the execution of homosexuals – and has the votes to pass.

I have been to Egypt. One of many Egypts in our world.

But one need not fly to Africa to find Egypt. Here, in South Carolina, we fail children too. We provide to our poorest children in the poorest counties, in the most rural areas, the oldest schools – with leaking roofs, broken heating and air, shattered windows.

These kids have only 2.8% of the state's teaching force, but 11.4% of their teachers hold substandard certificates or out-of-field permits. Rural teacher salaries are the lowest in the state. Rural teacher turnover rates are the highest.

By the time these students reach the 8th grade, between 50% and 60% of them score below Basic levels on the state's standardized tests. High school graduation rates in these districts range from 32% to 48%, all well below the state average.

So-- no, Egypts are not a developing world phenomenon alone.

Much remains for us, who are the Church, to do in the world. God presents us with many Moses moments. You know exactly the types of moments I'm talking about.

I don't have all the answers and I still have much to learn, but I know this: bushes are burning every day.

Find your burning bush.

Find your Egypt.

Find your call.

Be Moses.

Amen.