

I was at a wedding reception just before Lent, and the DJ announced: “All married people, please stand next to the one person that has made your life worth living.” The bartender was almost crushed to death.

I just realized this week that it’s been months since I ordered the book, HOW TO SCAM PEOPLE ONLINE. It still hasn’t arrived!

And finally, a cleaning tip. If you have a red wine stain on your carpet, get some white wine and drink it until you don’t care anymore.

I’m going to switch gears a bit today and zero in on our first reading from Exodus, one of the great iconic texts of the entire bible. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, reflects on Moses’ experience before the burning bush with humor and keen insight. He poses the question: how long would Moses had to have looked at the bush ‘to get it,’ that is, to realize that the bush was ablaze, but was not being consumed? Certainly a quick glance would not have been sufficient. From his own observations of kindling wood burning in a fireplace, Kushner claims it takes between 7-10 minutes for the wood to turn into ashes. From this, he concludes that Moses had to have looked at the burning bush for more than a few minutes in order to get what was happening. He teasingly suggests that as miracles go, this was not one of the greatest performances of the Creator of the universe, not a miracle to write home about. If God really wanted to impress Moses, God could have made the sun stand still or separated the waters of the sea. Kushner playfully suggests that this experience was more a test of Moses’ ability to pay attention than a major miracle. God wanted to be assured that He was dealing with someone who could pay attention to something for at least 7-10 minutes! Rabbi Kushner’s humorous deconstruction of this passage makes a very serious point: unless we can pay attention to our experiences for more than a moment, we’re likely to miss the ordinary miracles that take place in our lives. (reported in THE ENDURING HEART, Wilkie Au, p. 101, from an amalgamation of Kushner’s works)

So it’s important that this is a story that happens to a very ordinary person in a very ordinary place. Because we are people like that. To ordinary Moses, the voice of God comes, and speaks, and calls. I see four lessons (sorry, not three!) that we might find to illuminate our own stories.

Moses is out at Horeb, alone. The name HOREB means ‘wasteland,’ a lonely, desolate place. Just the sort of place for a man on the run. Moses struck and killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a helpless Hebrew slave. He had to run out to Midian to hide. There we find Moses alone in a desolate wasteland of a place. He is not in a temple or church, where we often expect to be met by God. In fact, Moses is not looking for or expecting a meeting with God. Moses is no priest or prophet.

LESSON ONE: Sometimes God comes to us when and where we might least expect it. There are people here today who could tell a story of what it’s like to be on the run, hiding out, crouching in some lonely place, a place that’s sought because it’s lonely. And yet, that supposedly lonely place was the very place where God found you, caught you, called you.

A bush bursts into flame. But it is not consumed. Then, in the flame, there is a voice. How would we have responded to such an unexpected sight?

Moses turns toward the flame, fascinated, curious at what he sees there. God has created us as curious creatures. We want to know why. Something intrudes into our lives, something that we have not seen before, something that is not within our normal frame of reference, and we turn toward it.

LESSON TWO: Sometimes God comes to, and calls forth, the curious among us, those who dare to enter into dialogue with the divine. Some of you may be here today, in church, because you are curious. Your friends may describe you as ‘very spiritual.’ You are fascinated by things that others may find on the fringe, outside of normal consciousness, things that don’t easily fit into our accustomed frames of reference.

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While some people, seeing something strange say, “That’s weird. I can’t explain it so I don’t want to deal with it.” You say, “that’s weird, that is wonderful. Let me turn toward it and enjoy it.” God can work with that. Keep your curiosity. Like Moses, turn toward the flame and see what you can see.

Most of our lives are not high excitement. They are mostly rather flat and uneventful. But sometimes, I think God pulls back the curtain between eternity and us, sometimes there is a hint, a kind of flirtatious, fleeting peek that God gives us to His own being – a glimpse of God. A burning bush, a glimmer of light on a spring morn, a bright sunset, a flowering tree in full glorious bloom, the face of a sleeping child, the touch of someone we love, a word, a line of music. Go ahead, relish, enjoy, delight in, turn toward the flames and see. I love the way Elizabeth Barret Browning put this in her little poem: “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.” Or keep looking at their phone!

LESSON THREE: Just as God chose an ordinary bush in the desert as a means of self-revelation, so God seems to choose ordinary, everyday objects and experiences in the world to confront, call, speak to us, show forth, say, “I am!”

After this story, perhaps we will pay better attention to once seemingly ordinary people, places, and things. Who, what might be that lowly bush that bursts into flame, that becomes the very voice of God calling us by name? We need to keep cultivating curiosity about such lowly things that have, in the hands of a revealing God, the capacity to be signs.

Once seeing, hearing, Moses is now filled with fear, afraid to look at God, yet he stays and speaks, speaks face-to-face with no one less than God Almighty. It is God who has spoken to him, called him by name, broken forth in this spectacular, attention-getting manner in the bush that is inflamed but not consumed.

LESSON FOUR: All of this was God’s initiative. This entire encounter was God’s idea. This is not something that Moses sought, or a matter for which he prepared. Moses was not out desiring a closer relationship with God. Moses wanted no special, risky task to do for God. The call, the choice of Moses, great messenger of God to Pharaoh, all of this was God’s idea.

God has heard the cries of an oppressed people. God is now on the move, beginning to overturn present power arrangements, preparing to make a big move against big Pharaoh. And guess who is going to help God? God will take those gifts and abilities that Moses has, along with some of Moses’ weaknesses and utilize them for good in the world.

Later, when Pharaoh will want to know, ‘Moses, who sent somebody like you to come , and harass, and command me?’ Moses will reply quite honestly, “This is all the Lord’s directing and doing.”

So Moses must take off his shoes. The ground on which he stands is holy. It is holy because an exchange has taken place here between God and humanity, God-with-us, God calling a human being to divine service. Here, on this holy ground, God Almighty reached down and grabbed one ordinary human life for extraordinary purposes. Moses’ story is about to be caught up, commandeered, as part of God’s story.

I’m saying all of this, along with these 4 lessons, because I think Moses’ story is OUR story. Some of you have had God come to you at some ‘Horeb,’ in that place you thought was lonely. God came to you when and where you least expected. God came to, called for the curiosity in you, so that you dared to enter into dialogue with the divine. You weren’t out looking for God. To your surprise, God was looking for you!

God chose an ordinary, everyday experience or person to speak your name, to call you forth, to enlist you in God’s service. Your spouse, of all people. Your mom or dad. Your hormonal teenager who often drives you crazy. Your best friend at school. Someone at the office you don’t even know that well. Fr. John saying you need to get off your ASS-umption that other people can take care of it, and get your BAA gift in. (WHO SAID THAT?!) Or maybe you were having a quiet moment when you thought you were all alone, just enjoying a beautiful day. Or in the outstretched hand of someone in great need. You heard your name called. You, like Moses, had to say, “I may not be the best person in the world for the job, but I think I am the person you are calling to do the job.” And all this was God’s idea, not yours.

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Later, if someone asked you, “What is a person like you doing in a place like this?” all you could answer was, “God called my name.”

And if, by chance, this story doesn't fit you, this story of Moses doesn't relate to some experience of vocation that you have had, just wait. IT WILL. Because God calls us all to do something for Him, regardless of our ability, sin, or age. Amen. (all of this adapted from PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2002, p. 38-39)

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