

The Third Sunday of Lent 2019

In our yard we have two shrubs, which although green through spring and summer, turn a vibrant shade of crimson in the fall. It is known as the “burning bush” and I bet you’ve seen them. Their autumn color is eye-catching. When I see the leaves of these shrubs turn red, I think of the Moses story in today’s first reading. He was drawn to a burning bush and I wonder, was it a bush which leaves seemed on fire, or was it really burning – perhaps struck by lightning? Well, we don’t really know, and furthermore, these details are secondary to the story.

Moses was a runaway criminal who relied on his father-in-law for a job as a shepherd on a mountain named Horeb, “desolate.” As he draws near the burning bush, Moses hears a voice calling out to him, and realizes it is the voice of God, who is directing Moses to return to Egypt, where he will lead the people of God to freedom in a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Today’s passage skips over a few verses in which Moses takes issue with God, claiming incompetence. But God will none of that and tells Moses he is standing on holy earth. Something remarkable is happening.

Moses would indeed respond to God’s call; we know the rest of the story. God would wrap Moses with the mantle of the prophet, unafraid to confront the Pharaoh himself; bold enough to lead the tribe through the sea, not knowing what they would face in the wilderness, but confident this God is worthy of trust.

What perhaps sealed Moses’ trust was the answer God gives to his question, “What is your name” – God’s reply: I am who am.

Moses is caught up in the mystery of who God IS, with a burning faith like the bush that first drew his attention.

The word “Lent” comes from an old word meaning “lengthen” – referring to the lengthening of daylight, the start of spring and therefore new beginnings, the whole thrust and spirit of Lent. It was once a more arduous process extending for years, as new converts to the faith went through a lengthy discernment, coming to terms with conversion and the change of heart and deepening of the spirit that accompanies discipleship.

Lent has always been about “reform.” Hyphenate that word: re-form. It is about being re-formed in God’s redeeming grace, letting our lives be re-shaped, restored, renewed, re-envisioned - it has less to do with penance and more to do with growing more fully into that person imbued with God’s grace and goodness.

Subsequently, Lent may occasion our return to a deeper and more contemplative prayer life. It could occasion our striving to be kinder, more compassionate, more patient. It might challenge us to rediscover our prophetic voice and rekindle our longing for a just world. Or we may find ourselves simply seeking wholeness – or healing, taking on our fears, embracing our brokenness, acknowledging that the I AM of God finds echo in the I Am we speak to ourselves.

Sister Mary McGlone, in commenting on this gospel story writes: “God continues to act among us, seeking people willing to wonder, to fall in love, and then to act. Whether we are drawn to God through the name that is an ever-mysterious form of the verb “to be” or through the wonders of creation, God tries to attract us with a universe full of burning bushes and a multitude of names....Though we may claim incompetence, that happens to be the first quality God is seeking. When we admit that much, God can do the rest.” (National Catholic Reporter, issue of March 8-21, 2019)

Whatever it is that Lent stirs within us, it is essential that we not set deadlines. We do not have to be or become or do or finish. whatever it may be, within the next four weeks. The journey of Moses and the people was long and took them far; the promised land was not just around the corner. And the fig tree gets yet another opportunity to bear fruit.