

## **What does God have to do to get your attention?**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C. March 11, 2007. (Text: Exodus 3:1-15)*

Let me ask you a question. What does God have to do to get your attention? Think about that for a minute while I remind you about the life of Moses.

Important as he came to be in history, Moses seems to have started off as a pretty mixed-up character. Born a Hebrew slave, he was adopted by Egyptian royalty, given an Egyptian name, and raised in the king's palace – though everybody knew his origins. If you wonder what his life there must have been like, try imagining a little black African slave baby being brought up as the adopted son of a rich South Carolina plantation owner's daughter in about the year 1825. That might give you some idea.

When he was a grown man, Moses murdered an Egyptian overseer because he saw him beating a Hebrew slave. Then – fearing for his life – he fled east from Egypt to the nearby land of Midian. After a while, he got his life together in that foreign country, found himself a wife, had a little family, and settled down to be a shepherd for his father-in-law. At the time we pick up the story today, Moses seems to have no ambition beyond finding fresh green grass for a flock of hungry sheep. He certainly isn't pictured as being what we'd call "religious."

We see him walking along with the sheep in the wilderness near the foot of a mountain that later comes to be known as Sinai. Suddenly he notices something bizarre: off in the distance – not in the direction he's taking the sheep – there's a single bush, and it's on fire. It's entirely aflame, but the leaves and branches are not changing, not crumpling and turning black and falling to the ground. And he says to himself, *"I've got to go over there and look at this thing, and see why the bush isn't being burned up."* The Bible says that when the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to Moses out of the burning bush.

O.K., now let's get back to the question I started with: What does God have to do to get your attention? Don't tell me that God always has your attention. You don't believe that, and neither do I. Like Moses, you and I spend 99% of our lives occupied with the ordinary business of just being human – dealing with our spouses and children, looking after our houses, doing something to make a living, volunteering somewhere, trying to be good citizens, and worrying about our problems (which range from health issues to the stock market to our granddaughter's break-up with her boyfriend). And we want to have some fun, too. We get to church on Sunday as often as we can, but even that doesn't mean that God really "has our attention." At church we're often on autopilot, going through the liturgy, doing the expected thing. We're in a kind of "religious zone," but most Sundays it would be an overstatement to say that God really has our attention. —Unless something unusual happens.

God got Moses' attention by showing him something completely impossible, a thing beyond his ken, a sight that utterly amazed him – a desert shrub enveloped in a raging fire, yet not being destroyed by that fire. And the experience caused him to leave his flock and walk over to the burning bush. When he got to the bush, God spoke to him out of the midst of the flames.

Maybe you've had your very own "burning bush," like Moses did —a face-to-face confrontation with something supernatural or at least incomprehensible to you. Or maybe God has had to use another means to get your attention: like a late-night trip to the emergency room, or a car wreck, or being fired from your job. Sometimes we have to have a traumatic experience or a jolt of bad news to knock us out of our daily routines and petty concerns and put us in the position to recognize that God wants to have a word with us.

Occasionally we're so self-absorbed and dense that we don't get it even when God shows us a burning bush or we have a life-changing episode. That's when somebody more tuned-in to the realm of the spirit than we are has to take us by the shoulders and shake us and say, "Hey! Wake up and pay attention. God is trying to tell you something."

I don't think God speaks to us unless he has our attention. God is not like a typical human parent. My mother, bless her heart, talked all the time. She didn't seem to notice that no one was listening. We'd be driving down a highway in the car and she'd read all the billboards aloud, or the writing on the sides of trucks, or comment on the gardening habits of people whose houses we passed. Or she would launch, unprompted, into a tale about one of her bridge club buddies whom I'd never met. I tuned out. I loved her, but Mom's talking often seemed like the roar of traffic on a distant freeway—always there in the background. (My great fear is that I'm becoming exactly like her. I probably deserve it.) —In any case, God isn't like us. God isn't going to speak unless he has our attention.

When he has our attention, what God says is likely to be surprising. Once he had Moses' full attention and had identified himself in such a way that Moses could have no doubt that he was in the presence of God, the Lord told him that he, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, had "come down to deliver them" out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up to a wonderful land, flowing with milk and honey, which he would give them. —"Well," Moses must have thought, "That's awesome and exciting information, for sure. But what does it have to do with me?" He was a contented shepherd in Midian, with a wife and kids to take care of, and a nice father-in-law who might pretty soon make him a partner in the family business. Then it came, "*So, Moses, it's time for you to go back. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt.*"

Moses said, "Wait a minute. You said that *you* had 'come down' to deliver the Hebrews. You said that *you* were going to do it! How come *you* delivering the Hebrews now involves *me*? What makes you think that *I* could do anything like that?"

And God replied, "*I will be with you.*" Those are five very important words. "I will be with you."

I think you're familiar with the rest of the story. Moses tried to wiggle out of his commission, complaining that he was not good at public speaking, etc., etc., etc. But God never let him off the hook. He had been called, and he was being sent. And we know he fulfilled his calling. God gave him everything he ever needed in order to accomplish the work God wanted him to do. But Moses would never have accomplished anything beyond being partner in a Midianite sheep ranch if God hadn't finally gotten his attention.

*What does God have to do to get your attention?* Once God has your attention, expect that he's about to give you a commission, a job to do. You see, God does his mighty work of deliverance, his work of healing, his work of making all things new, through human agents—you and me.

God said to Moses, "*I have come down to deliver my people from slavery. So, come, I am sending you to Pharaoh, to set my people free.*" God said, "*I am doing this, and you're my agent. I will be with you.*" "I will be with you." That's all we need to know. That's the guarantee that we can take on the task, no matter what it is.

If you feel like you're just the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a poor Midianite shepherd, equipped for nothing special, then you're probably ready to be a modern Moses. If he can get your attention, God can use you for his awesome purposes. Those whom he calls, he empowers. He equips. He sustains.

Just keep your eyes open, and don't walk past the burning bush.