

“Live It As You Go”

Romans 12:1-2

People in our faith tradition have different ways of expressing life-altering encounters with God, and we draw from scripture for help in talking about them. Many talk about their “Damascus-road-experience”. There is also the phrase, a “come-to-Jesus” meeting. Looking to the Old Testament, I have often heard people refer to “burning-bush” encounters.

“Damascus road” and “burning bush” are used quite often, and it’s no accident that both center upon intense light. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” God’s presence is no ordinary thing.

Our theme verses for the week of emphasis for the Alma Hunt Offering for Virginia Missions come from Romans 12: *Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering...readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.*

Taking those theme verses to heart, it is impossible to place our everyday lives before God, recognizing what God wants from us, unless we have those Damascus Road experiences...those “come-to-Jesus” meetings...those burning bush encounters. And whatever we call them, we know they are not once-for-all in nature. They come over and over and over again in various ways throughout our lives.

Don’t you think the Apostle Paul had other Damascus road encounters with Jesus? It’s just they weren’t on the road to Damascus. Don’t you think Moses came across other burning bushes in his lifetime, but in other shapes and forms? And don’t we have “come-to-Jesus” from time to time in our own lives?

This morning, as we are called to “Live It as You Go”, I want to highlight that burning bush Moses came upon. He wasn’t at Vacation Bible School or attending a conference at Eagle Eyrie. Moses wasn’t on any Who’s Who listing; he was at the top of the Most Wanted list.

Remember, Moses had murdered an Egyptian and then buried him in the sand. When his secret got out, he fled to Midian, married Zipporah, Jethro’s daughter, and settled down.

This morning, I’d like to speak of the burning bush experience as it played out over an extended period of time...a sort of “living-it-as-you-go” experience. I’d like to draw parallels between Moses’ experience and my experience, and yours as well.

I’d like to divide this into three parts:

1. Moses takes note of the burning bush: *“I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt” (Exodus 3:3).*

2. The burning bush speaks to Moses, and Moses responds, and God responds back: *“...God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am’...Then the Lord said... ‘Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people...out of Egypt’ (Exodus 3:4,10).*

I want to then skip over the section that is normally focused upon...the excuse section...
“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh” (3:11)? ...

“Who shall I say has sent me” (3:13)? ...

“They won’t believe me” (4:1)...

“...Lord, I am not eloquent” (4:10).

3. ...and move on to what could be called “crises in the wilderness” ...to the “juggling-of-the-hot-potato” part of the story; to those times when food was lacking, faith was lacking, and the spirit of cooperation was lacking. Throughout the Exodus, Moses would cry out to the Lord, “What shall I do?”

First, Moses took note of the burning bush: “*I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt*” (Exodus 3:3).

I can remember what I interpret to be my very first “burning bush” experience; a time when I was going about my business, expecting nothing out of the ordinary, looking up, and finding myself encountered by the movement and presence of God like I’d never experienced before.

I was seven years old, and at home in Stanley, Virginia. It was evening on a school night, and in the living room I remember coming upon my mother and Betty Lou and Leonard. Betty Lou was in my second grade class at school; her brother, Leonard was a year behind and in my Mom’s class. That was the connection. I don’t recall their parents being present; they must have been waiting outside in the car. I don’t recall my father or my sister being in the room. Just Mom, Betty Lou and Leonard; and in I walked. How all this could have come together and me not have a clue, I do not know. I was seven.

These youngsters were residents of Tanner’s Ridge; high up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. When anyone in Page County thought of Tanner’s Ridge, the sentiment was: “rough place, rough people; do-not-disturb”.

Betty Lou and Leonard were not rough...just different. They dressed differently. They spoke differently. Many children came to school from the mountains and the hollows around Stanley; even a second grader could tell they were among the poorest of the poor.

And there was Mom, in our living room, with a stack of clothes that this brother and sister were holding up as if to fit themselves. Mom would say, “That looks like it’s going to fit. That’s a nice dress. Here’s a nice shirt.” And then, they were gone, along with the clothes.

And all I can remember my Mom saying to me was, “*Not a word of this to anyone.*” And I knew what she meant. It would be embarrassing for these youngsters if the word got out that they had come to Mrs. Blevins’ house to pick up some clothes. I soon thereafter saw Betty Lou in class wearing some of the outfits she had been given that night, and I would try hard not to stare. I think the more I tried, the more it was obvious. And we never, ever talked...in private or otherwise...about the blue light special event in our living room. I was so afraid of spilling the beans, I wouldn’t even tell Mom when I saw Betty Lou in a familiar outfit.

And here’s the burning bush part of that encounter. It wasn’t seeing Mom help with the clothes. It was this. Mom was a public school teacher. I knew what public school teachers did. They arrived at work in the morning; they taught reading, writing and arithmetic; they gave out homework assignments; they gave tests; they graded tests. That’s what public school teachers did. And yet, here was my Mom on a dark winter’s night in 1960 doing something I didn’t think public school teachers ever did. She was taking the needs she saw among children during the school day and discreetly applying the love of Jesus. “*Not a word to anyone, David.*”

Betty Lou and Leonard...in our living room...picking out clothes they needed....collected by a public school teacher...and not a word was said. What I had been taught about in church I saw bearing fruit in the midst of a work-a-day world in my own home. That, brothers and sisters, was quite the burning bush for me.

If a burning bush experience is one where God appears in such a way that you can’t help but turn aside and notice, I ask you: “What was your first burning bush experience?”

As it turns out, I didn't turn aside that day and have a conversation with God out of the burning bush as did Moses. That would come later...much later for me.

Moses was watching the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro when he turned aside. And God spoke. *"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."* *"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt...I have heard their cries...I know their sufferings...and I have come down to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to...a land flowing with milk and honey."*

But the Lord was only getting started. In verse 10 we read: *"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."*

Question number one this morning was, **"What was your first burning bush experience?"**

Question number two is this, **"When was the first time a burning bush engaged you in dialogue to call you out of the safe place you were to a place you had never been before?"**

I can remember my first such encounter...thirteen years later. I was twenty years old and half way through my stay as a student at the University of Virginia. The burning bush, was another person who called me aside and said, *"David, would you consider working in the projects here in Charlottesville this year?"* No one had ever called me aside...one-on-one...and asked me to do such a thing.

The "projects" was an area of low rent, public housing off of Cherry Avenue about two miles from where I lived. It wasn't about going to Egypt; it wasn't about facing Pharaoh and taking anyone out of anywhere. It was about taking a portion of one afternoon a week and knocking on some unfamiliar doors and introducing myself to a population of people this sheltered white boy had never rubbed elbows with and building relationships with individuals who might as well have lived in Egypt.

My "call" went without a hitch for quite a while. It's easy being faithful to hitchless calls. It really was easy returning week after week to the smiling faces of children and the thankful expressions of parents. Everyone knew who it was when the green, '71 Vega pulled up in the parking lot. As a matter of fact, I began to feel rather full of myself, to use the phrase.

And now I come to question number three this morning. **"When was the first time, as a result of a burning bush encounter, you had to juggle that hot potato, moving out in faith only to fall flat on your face?"** "Oh Lord, what shall I do?"

I decided to invite some youngsters from the projects on an overnight excursion without first asking their parents if it would be OK. Hey, I was only twenty. I thought to myself, *"They love me. They trust me. I'll get around to those details next week."* Well, before I was able to get around to those details, those details got around to me. Knocking on an apartment door one afternoon, I found a mother in tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked. ***"You're what's wrong,"*** she replied.

She went on, *"You invited those youngsters out. And they're going to have to spend the night away from home and sleep in a strange place. And my boy doesn't have any P.J.'s to wear."*

It was an experience of utter humiliation. I don't know who took the worse beating that day; me or the parent. And I think back now to the words my mother had spoken that night after Betty Lou and Leonard had left. *"Not a word of this to anyone, David."* She told me that to insure that this expression of Christian love would result in nothing less than its intended purpose...and that was to glorify God while being of service.

Doing something significant for Jesus requires a run-in from time to time with a burning bush.

Doing something significant for Jesus requires that we not just stare at the bush; we have to enter into a dialogue, and that bush directs us to places we would not go on our own.

Doing something significant for Jesus requires that we have the will to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off from time to time; and to pick others up and dust them off from time to time; and then to keep on going by the grace of God.