

Sermon (9/3/17, Exodus 3: 1-15):

Have you ever been terrified? I mean heart pounding, lying-awake-at-night-and-searching-the-ceiling-for-answers terrified? Or maybe the better question is when was the last time you were terrified?

Unfortunately, there seems to be no shortage of it these days.

The people in Texas, for example. There's a lot of terror going on down there, especially along the Gulf Coast. 'What now?' Is the desperate, terror induced question being asked by many. 'What's next? Is there any hope?'

Or maybe terrified is a good description for the way you felt the last time you went to the Dentist? Or maybe it's a good descriptor for what one feels when hearing the word 'cancer' spill from the lips of their Doctor.

The birth of my son was a difficult and terrifying moment. Just the opposite of the kind of feeling you would expect. To this day, my mind can vividly picture that moment when the Doctor handed his limp body to the nurse who handed him off to Doctors rushing in from the side doors. The trauma of his birth left him breathless and motionless. There was no sound coming from his lips, no movement of his limbs – nothing. I felt terrified like I had never felt before and, consequently, I felt joy like I had never felt before when I heard his first cry after they revived him.

When were you last asked or, maybe, told to do something that felt terrifying? An assignment given to you by your boss, teacher, or professor? A presentation you had to make in front of a group of people? Your first day on a new job? Sitting at a lawyer's table, signing a plethora of papers for your first mortgage? The first day at a new school where you knew absolutely no one? The day you dropped your child off at College and then had to drive away even as every parental instinct in you screamed, 'Don't leave him there on his own!'

I'm guessing that Moses had to be terrified in today's story. To use the term 'radical' to describe the shift his life would take on that mountain is an understatement.

As you might recall, what first sent Moses to Midian was a murder he had committed when he defended a Hebrew slave from being beaten by an

Egyptian guard. Fearing the repercussions of that crime, Moses ran, eventually settling in Midian where he entered the house of the priest of Midian named Jethro. He then married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and named his first-born son Gershom. He became a shepherd and on the day when this story takes place, Moses was quite happy and content with that vocation. In fact, that's exactly what he was doing - minding his sheep as well as his own business. He was not discontent with the career path he had chosen. He was not looking for a new job and a new vocation or a new and bigger home. He was not on the prowl for another step up on the success ladder. He was not a prophet or a priest nor did he have any inclination of ever becoming one.

Yet, out there in the valley of Horeb, while watching his sheep graze, a small fire catches his eye. Later in life, maybe there were times when Moses wished he had chosen a different rock to sit on, way out of the line of sight of that little fire. That didn't happen, though. Moses saw the fire and he noticed there was something very strange about it... as it burned the bush was not consumed. Even though the flames lapped the air with fury, the bush that seemed to be fueling it remained oddly untouched – its small leaves shimmered their greenery and its branches did not crumble into ashes. Was it an optical illusion? A hallucination? The heat can do strange things. Eventually, curiosity got the best of him. Moses climbed the mountain for a closer look. (Que the tension building background music)

I have a feeling that no matter what Moses did on that day-averted his eyes, moved to a rock where the bush was out of view, took a nap even-he would have been unable to resist the draw of this strange sight. The pull of this unconsuming fire reminds us of the irresistible nature of God. Try though we might, when God gets under our skin there is no cream, lotion, or prescription in the world that can rid us of that itch. It needs to be scratched. It needs to be investigated. Resist though we might, it will eventually get the best of us. Better people than you and I have tried and failed. God doesn't take 'no' for an answer. Eventually, Moses would have gone as eventually we all do and here's a *really* terrifying thought – everyone of us here is being similarly called. We wouldn't be here at 9:30

AM in the morning if we weren't!

As Moses moved closer to that burning bush, the oddness of the sight only intensified. His eyes were not playing tricks on him. The fire was real – bright, furious, and hot. The bush within the flames seemed bizarrely unfazed by what would normally be a death sentence. There it was, just happily hanging out dead center in those flames.

Now bushes spontaneously combusting in the wilderness heat is not so unusual, I've been told, but bushes that burn without being consumed - now that's something that just doesn't happen! I mean, even for Moses, who didn't know the kind of things we know today, even he recognized this was a type of Twilight Zone experience. Okay, he didn't know what the Twilight Zone was either. He did know, however, that fires don't burn without, at least, some type of fuel to feed on. And, he also sure as heck knew that bushes, at least in this world, don't hang out in the middle of bonfires unscathed.

Remember those terrifying feelings I was asking you to tap into earlier? Well, I think this had to be that for Moses. Even before anything else happened this had to be one terrifying moment for Moses. Was he going nuts? Was the world coming apart at the seams? Was the apocalypse knocking on earth's door? This kind of stuff just didn't happen! It defied logic. It breached the boundaries of all that was earthly possible. It was also a hint of what was to come. You see, not only is God irresistible but God was, is, and always will be superbly unconventional. This is the God who breaches the impossible again and again. Choosing elderly Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of God's chosen people. Choosing peasants like Mary and Joseph to be Jesus' parents. Feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Telling parables about how the last to be hired to work in the vineyard for an hour or two are paid the same amount as the ones who worked the entire day. Turning blind eyes into ones that see and calling out those who see as the ones who are most blind. Choosing a bunch of illiterate, often thick-headed fishermen to be Jesus' disciples and, eventually, agents of a church that would rattle the very foundations of the world forever.

It's what this God does. He gets under the skin of the most unlikely people, he lights a fire in them the likes of which has never been witnessed before in all the earth, and then he sends them out to do and accomplish things never thought possible, even by them! Lo and behold, before we know it, redeeming grace spreads like a wildfire.

Okay, so there's a lot more to this story than just a burning bush. In fact, so far I've gotten to the 3rd verse of this passage-only 12 more to go. I haven't even talked about God's voice emanating from the flames and God's call to Moses to rescue God's suffering people in Egypt and Moses' strong resistance to the idea that he is in anyway equipped for such a formidable task. I guess all of that will have to wait for another sermon. (You thought I was going to keep going, right?) I suppose I'm one of those who gets easily sidetracked by shiny things or, in this case, fires that burn but don't consume.

It does make you wonder, though. What are the irresistible burning bushes that are nagging for our attention? To what do we find ourselves being drawn again and again, even as we make every effort to turn away and ignore it? What are the impossibilities that God is calling us to seek and do that seem as feasible and as realistic as, well, as starting a fire with nothing? (Now, wouldn't that make for an interesting Boy Scout Badge?!)

I think the truth is that there are few, if, indeed, any that go into this God's call thing fully convinced and fully confident they have what it takes. I think it's probably quite rare if not non-existent for someone *not* to have their doubts about the feasibility of what God is asking of us. Yet, God does ask, God does call, God does light fires that do not consume, and God does shake the very foundations of the world with people like Moses who started out filled with terror! In fact, not only people like Moses but even people like you and me.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.