

“TURNING ASIDE TO SEE A PILLAR OF FIRE”

March 7, 2010

Third Lent (Year C)

Text: Exodus 3: 1-15

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“When the Lord saw that he had turned aside, God called out to him out of the bush, “Moses!”, “Moses.” (Exodus, Chapter 3),

Born a slave in Dorchester County, Maryland in 1822, fearing sale, this future, great conductor of the Underground Railroad, that great transportation miracle which gave thousands freedom, received two names of safe houses from a white neighbor and fled north towards Philadelphia.

The journey was terrifying; she navigated using the North Star, or the “drinkin’ gourd,” a code name for the Big Dipper.

But stars of the night did not lead her to freedom. No! She recalled that she felt led by “an invisible pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night.” She would later relate, “If the children of Israel and old Moses saw it—I could see it too.”

There were other echoes of the old Moses who led the Exodus; she described her feeling upon reaching freedom—not as happy—but as solemn and lonely. “I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me into the land of freedom; I was a stranger in a strange land.”

This future liberator knew a uniquely American “habit of the heart” as an American lady; such is the American theology and philosophy of

estrangement that captivated William Bradford, George Whitefield, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

This is what the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University’s Michael Walzer describes as the biblical and American theology of **covenant**.

Here, this magnificent moral construct appears in the words of a slave woman!

What did she do? She trekked the following year back into the south for the first time—into heart of darkness—to free her sister and her sister’s children; she returned again to free her brother; then, she went for her husband--only to discover he had taken up with another man.

At first she was “going to cause him all the trouble she could” but then experienced what she said was another kind of freedom; she said, “If he could do without her I could do without him,” and she promptly freed--not only her husband and his mistress--but two others on the trip.

O yes, she knew that Moses and burning bush story and its central question: Are you going to go on your way? Or, are you going to stop—and pay attention to the fire? Can you really see, beneath a star lit night, “the pillar of fire by night?”

She could use that “burning bush” story too; from her earliest days as a conductor she placed it in spirituals to communicate to escaping slaves in the middle of an Underground Railroad operation.

Once at the meeting point, she would sing one verse to announce her arrival and another to signify that the

coast was clear. But she reserved one verse of one specific spiritual to warn that there was *danger* in the area and he slave master's henchman were afoot.

Moses go down in Egypt
Tell ole Pharo' let my people go;
Hadn't ben for Adam's fall
Shouldn't hab to died at all.

Of course who was the Adam who fell? Was it not the guy with the whip! And who was the ONE who died to set all free? For the slaves, Jesus WAS Moses.

Harriett Tubman, the Moses of her people, made as many as thirteen expeditions into "Egypt land," guiding seventy slaves to freedom and giving instructions to dozens more.

She became infamous across the south, her name plastered on posters, and rewards offered for her capture totaled 40ty-thousand dollars. Frederick Douglas said of her, "I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people." The abolitionist John Brown described her as "the bravest person he ever met on the continent."

But it is not in the capacity of Moses the liberator that I speak of Ms. Tubman this morning--but as the ultimate example of the woman or man of faith who "turns aside to see the burning bush."

Do we see not only the North Star, but the pillar of fire? Do we hear not only the inner agony of estrangement and call to covenant--but the voice calling, "Moses, Moses." Do we perceive, not only the codes of operation, but "hadn't been for Adams fall, shouldn't hab to die at all?"

Moses was trying to be ordinary, fit in with life, take it easy, be a good freedman in the land of the North after escaping from Egypt. God had other plans. His only job was watching the flocks.

Our only job? School? Work? Schedules? Family? Career? Ladder of Success? Retirement? There is a great old spiritual: "Lord I done, done; Lord, I done done; Lord, I done done; I done done what you told me to do!" We did and we want to rest.

And then we see a bush ablaze with fire! Yet the bush itself is whole and untouched. Awesome sight. Strange. Impossible. Will Moses just walk by? Of course not. Right? I mean you would expect Moses to be curious. Would you not "turn aside?"

Oh! If we are honest, Moses would have had a litany of reasons to walk on.

So could we. We are terribly busy. We need to get someplace, anyplace. No time to stop. We will be back later.

Rationality can keep us from turning aside. We are Episcopalians right? We always do what is reasonable and in good order. We really don't believe in visions do we?

But Moses did "turn aside." When God saw Moses turn aside to see, he called him.

Could it be that, if we turned aside more often, God would speak more often?

Could it be that if we turned aside, we could see "the pillar if fire" by night and the "burning of the soul" by day? We could envision something much, much bigger than ourselves and our "where we need to be next," and "I'll be back later?"

Could it be that if we turned aside, we could hear the music warning us of "Adam's sin," the henchman's steps; we could hear the old spiritual challenging us with the truth that our "old lives have to die" and we need to be born again into true liberty! "If not for Adam's sin, he would not need to die at all!"

In her poem *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning uttered the infamous words which speak to "turning aside:"

"Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries."

But, then, I recall a time of "the fire in the sitting." It was February of 1960, 50 years ago last month, a different age before the fire.

As Taylor Branch would recall it in his aptly named trilogy, **Pillar of Fire**, perhaps the best history of the Civil Rights movement in print, the movement's initiation and beginning was NOT Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement but another "pillar of fire" event on the evening of Monday, February 1.

Four freshman boys at North Carolina A and T in Greensboro, NC, had heard of what four other students in Nashville had done a few hours before. They were in the student lounge, studying-tending the flocks, just studying.

One of them looks up from his book. "We might as well go now." Another replied. "You really mean it?"

And the bush was burning but it was not consumed.

"Sure, I mean it."

And, the four of them went down to the downtown Woolworth's store and slipped into seats at the sacrosanct whites only counter.

Refused service, they sat there. All afternoon they sat there. After the infamous picture of the food and drink poured on their heads (but burning coals for their enemies heads?), they sat there.

Telephones buzzing between campuses, word flashed out. Soon, student leaders were arranging it so that students could sit down in shifts so as not to miss classes. Nineteen students sat with four freshman, white and blacks, female and male; more food and drink and abuse poured on their heads.

But the bush was burning and not consumed.

On Wednesday, the number swelled to 85; in weeks and months, it was a contagion, burning the nation as the "sit ins" became "freedom rides," finally becoming God's very work of a cleansing, purifying, burning atonement for Adam's original, America's national sin: slavery and American apartheid.

But that student led sit-in, the work of "turning aside to see the burning bush" was more than that; it was God's very work of the national salvation; it was the work of God through a youthful Mosaic spirit to redeem the soul of a nation; such work continues today--as we refuse to turn aside from the burning bush, calling us to the renewed work of new Underground Railroads to freedom!

Sisters and brothers of All Saints' Church--in this 50th Anniversary year, our "Jubilee Year," we ponder the biblical call of Jubilee in Leviticus

chapter 25: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land!" In this Jubilee spirit we trust that "every bush is afire with God!"

Will we, the people of All Saint's Church, within the "fires of Jubilee," **turn aside** to see the bush burning, but not consumed? But not only that!

Will we then, in the spirit of Moses--and the Moses of her people, Harriett Tubmann--go down into Egypt, see the suffering of His and Her people, and warn against the slave trader?

Will we finally, in the spirit of the first of Jubilee...for goodness' sake, stop tending the flocks (!)...

...to follow the Pillar of Fire by night!

Amen!