

There's No Need to Trim Back a Burning Bush **Exodus 3:1—15; Matthew 16:21—28**

There's a name for the type of bushes or shrubs that we sometimes plant in the mulch and water among the flower beds around our homes. And that name is *Ornamental*. And among those ornamental bushes and shrubs there is one, in particular, that's known for being drought-resistant and for growing very quickly. Typically available at the retail cost of \$21 to \$24, the *Burning Bush* offers a burst of seasonal color that's easy on the eyes—and on my way into worship today I spotted a few of these ornamental plants around the landscapes of Spokane. Very nice.

By the same token, the symbol of the Christian 'cross' is available for purchase in various jewelry stores, and for the most part, depending upon the material, a cross necklace will run anywhere between \$25 and \$500. Or, if we're so inclined, we can pay between \$100 and \$1500 for a tattoo version of the cross. And I suppose among the reasons people like us would want to adorn ourselves and our properties with what once-upon-a-time had signified utter humiliation and horrific death, some might not hesitate to talk about faith in Jesus while... others, you know, simply like *the look*.

Now, I'm mentioning these two or three *ornamental* displays because I'm wondering if the '*Burning Bush*' and the '*Cross of Christ*' can become so easily domesticated and trimmed down that we miss something. In Matthew 16:23, Jesus tells Peter that he has set his mind on "**human things**" and not on "**divine things**"—and that's essentially what I'm talking about. That is, even when it comes to such 'things' as the Revelation of YAHWEH to Moses or the Revelation of the Crucified Jesus, could it be that we need to have our minds re-set?

This is a bad analogy, but every now and again the copier in our church office won't print. Holly and I will be sending it bulletins and newsletters and other documents. And usually, when it fails to print things out, we resort to shutting off the whole contraption. We deprive the technology of its power and we re-set. Similarly, when my laptop computer has a glitch that I cannot figure out, my go-to remedy is a 'Forced Quit' to all of the open programs. And again, I usually shy away from the comparison between what happens in our minds with what happens with our computer software. But listen to *this* shut-down in verse 25: ***“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”***

Somehow, through the centuries, and through our own day-to-day lives, it seems as if we forget the paradox of that statement. And when we forget, our tendency isn't to stop going to church or to stop singing or to stop praying or to stop listening to sermons. Our tendency is to do all the typical religious things, but to never totally shut-down and re-set. Consider what's being described on Mount Horeb in today's Exodus passage—and consider what Jesus anticipates will happen to him on Golgotha in Jerusalem. These are meant to be revelatory moments—on-going revelatory moments—which we render instead as merely ornamental. As decoration. As something that enhances our own egos. The burning bush is trimmed back when the guys we've hired to fertilize our lawns offer the extra service. The cross dangles around the neck of the waitress at the restaurant and we give her a bigger tip because she's a Christian and we're Christians too. And the problem, you see, is we forget. We forget to occasionally shut-down and to re-set for the possibility that God may want to deliver a message—something radically new, something transformative, something challenging, something divine.

An ‘ear-worm’ supposedly is a song or a tune that initially seems innocent and innocuous, but after a while we can’t get it out of our heads. And whether we want to or not, we find ourselves humming *‘It’s a Small World After All’* long after the trip to Disney World is over. I myself enjoy a little John Denver from the 1970’s; and when I happen to hear *‘Sunshine on my shoulders’* or *‘You fill up my senses...’* it’s hard for me to move on to Dolly Parton. And yet, when I finally do listen to *‘Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, I’m begging you, don’t take my man,’* I have a whole different range of emotions and perspectives to explore. And what about the Spirit of the Living God? Do we just have one tune stuck in our heads? I’ve met persons of faith who have nothing but *God’s Judgement* on their minds; and it’s an ear-worm all day and all night. In the more contemporary church, however, someone will be stuck on the sweet and the saccharine: *‘God is so good, God is so good, God is so good; he’s so good to me.’* And after a while, come on! Doesn’t the Living God have anything else to sing to us besides how good we have it?

Simon Peter, in today’s reading, wants to trim back the revelation. Think about it. He’s just made this incredible declaration of faith (that we discussed last week). At great risk, he’s announced the identity of Jesus as *Messiah*, making him (Petros) a chip off the old ancient bedrock. And yet, as Jesus goes on to explain how Messiah must ***“undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed,”*** it’s too much. Peter doesn’t even want to try to get his head around it, which is what makes him ***“a stumbling block...”*** So how about us? I’m convinced there’s a revelatory message, peculiar to us, that overflows the ornamental symbols with which we surround ourselves. But maybe in order to hear and to envision it, we’re going to have to shut-down and have our minds entirely re-set.

As your interim pastor I have a special interest in this—primarily because I wouldn't want you to invite a new pastor to simply guide you in more of the same ear-worm stuff—just the same ornamental things you've done for years because it's safe. And secondarily, as much as I can appreciate the message of '*God loves you just the way you are*'—the Bible repeatedly plays other tunes, with other voices, as if to say, '*God is loving you into the person—into the people—you're going to be.*' And if that sounds like a mouthful, there's always Moses. Moses is at a loss for words when he observes the bush burning from a distance. But he doesn't just stay at a distance. He becomes curious and he takes a few steps until the voice, emanating from the bush says, ***“Come no closer!”*** and ***“Remove your sandals from your feet...”*** Now, did God love Moses while he was taking in the mountain scenery? Yes, of course. Just like God loves each of us as we enjoy the aesthetics of faith. But we know deep down there's more to be curious about.

A few years back, I visited an elderly man who owned a collection of Nazi helmets. And he was so proud of his collection and he was so hostile to the Bible I was carrying at my side, I wondered if I should just excuse myself. Instead, as I sat on his ottoman and watched a little bit of a Clint Eastwood movie, I took an interest in the ornamental things he had gathered around him. One of the helmets was a pith helmet, worn by a soldier in Northern Africa, and it still had the stains of sweat inside the brim. He wanted me to try it on, and I didn't. But as the weeks went by, visit after visit, I could sense a slight crack in his demeanor. I held in my hand a collection of words, written mostly by Jews and mostly for Jews, whom the Nazi's had sworn to hate and to kill. And yet, one day, as I dared to read them aloud, he looked up at the swastikas, filling his dusty shelves and said, “You know, every person who wore those is dead now.”

Deep down we know. Everybody knows. Every ornamental thing—every bush, every necklace, every tattoo—has the capacity to re-set our minds. And for sure, we can become obstinate and refuse the re-set. But why? Why surround ourselves with more and more of the ornaments of faith without actually following where they might lead? Helen Keller was deaf, dumb and blind. And then, along comes Miss Anne Sullivan, her teacher, who signs the letters, *W-A-T-E-R*, at the precise moments when this wild girl is filling her mug from a water pump. Rather than help herself to this drink of water, however, Helen Keller drops the mug and stands, transfixed by a misty revelation. Suddenly she has insight into this ordinary thing—and if you’re asking what this insight is, I’m going to say it’s the insight that she has been made for Holy Relationship. According the writings of Anne Sullivan, Helen immediately signed the word for ‘*WATER*’ back to her. And then she signed *TEACHER*. And then she went around the yard and signed *BABY* for her baby sister. And *DOOR*. And then Helen Keller signed verbs—actions—like *COME* and *GO*. And what I’d like to suggest is that we have things right here and in the world—things like *water* and *baptismal font* and *table* and *church*—all of which are inviting us to *come* closer and telling us to *go* further

Do me a favor: take a moment to consider all the knick-knacks, all the little odds-and-ends, all the decorative mantelpieces, all the jewelry, all the wall-hangings, all the items of kitsch ... Are any of them saying more than you’ve been willing to hear? Are any of them showing something more than you’re willing to see? When Moses is comfortable, tending his sheep, God invites him to see and to hear all the people suffering in Egypt. And when Jesus might have basked in the fame of the title Peter bestows on him, Messiah sees himself suffering for us and with us.

There may be something—something divine—that you and I aren't seeing or aren't hearing.

We're not seeing or hearing it *yet*.

Not yet. But maybe soon.

In the new church development that Sheryl and I served in Pennsylvania, we worshipped in an Elementary School until the congregation pledged and raised enough money for us to build a building. And once we built the building, the landscaping wasn't yet finished. I joined a few other guys one weekend to work on it; and I was wearing this poncho because it was a chilly day. One of our church members didn't recognize me, and coming closer, he said, "*Ah, I thought you were some Mexican, one of the Mexican workers.*" I remember laughing at the time. But later that month, we learned of a pastor who come from Guatemala to help start a church for all the Hispanic immigrants who were applying for legal citizenship. I went to meet with him and to pray with him, and it was very awkward because he didn't speak a lick of English. His nine-year-old daughter, however, sat in our meeting and served as a translator. And before Sheryl and I departed our predominantly white, middle-class church, with its landscaped new building and grounds, that pastor and that daughter and that entire congregation of Hispanic followers of Jesus came to send us off to this side of the country. And I remember thinking—thank God for that poncho!

And, if I'm not mistaken, it was that pastor from Guatemala, who gave me what's hanging around my neck right now!