

Holy Ground

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 30, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church**

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

*But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.*

(Exodus 3:1–15, NRSVue)

The most extraordinary night sky I have ever seen was on a night I was alone about 30 years ago. I was on personal retreat at a small Episcopal center high atop the Cumberland Plateau in Sewanee, Tennessee. I was facing a decision in my early ministry – whether to stay where I was in New Jersey or to move south, to Georgia. And when I ventured out late that night, high above the tiny lights of Chattanooga in the distance, the view was spectacular: stars I never knew existed were visible ... constellations told the great mythic tales of long ago. For a little while, I lost my anxieties in the majesty and beauty above me.

There are moments in our lives when the ordinary world seems suddenly unwilling to remain ordinary. We stand beneath a night sky crowded with stars, or beside the ocean, or in the quiet of an old sanctuary, and the world seems so much deeper than it did five minutes before. Late light falls across a field and for a few minutes the grass appears almost luminous. Music reaches some hidden chamber of the heart and opens a door we didn't know was there. Something *shines through*, and for a moment, life feels charged with a mystery that had apparently been there all along.

We human beings have always gone looking for such moments, and maybe especially in our own spiritually restless time. We travel to mountaintops and monasteries, walk labyrinths and pilgrimage roads, sign up for retreats promising silence, clarity, healing, renewal. We listen to music intended to calm the mind, light candles, practice meditation, and hope that somewhere amid the noise of ordinary life we might encounter something that feels unmistakably sacred. And there is something deeply good and right – *God-given* – about that longing. We were *made* to hunger for transcendence, for the moment when the surface of things opens and we glimpse a *depth* we cannot make for ourselves.

But you know, in our scripture text today, Moses is not looking for a spiritual experience. He is looking after *sheep*! By the time we meet him here, he is a long way from Egypt and a long way from the life into which he was born. He had seen an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, struck the Egyptian dead, and fled for his life into Midian. The prince of Pharaoh's household has become a shepherd in another man's household, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro on the far side of the wilderness. Whatever Moses once imagined his life might become, this is where the years have carried him: sheep, dust, distance, the long quiet routines of exile.

And then, somewhere near Horeb, something catches his eye. A bush is burning, but the fire is doing no damage. Flame moves through the branches, and still the branches remain. Moses says, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

Turn aside. Moses *could* have noticed the fire and kept walking. We do that all the time. We become remarkably accomplished at seeing without really seeing, because there is somewhere to go, something to finish, another demand already tugging at the sleeve. But Moses interrupts his own movement. He leaves the path he was already following and goes closer.

The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas understood something about that kind of attention. In his poem "The Bright Field," he remembers a field suddenly illuminated by sunlight, a brief radiance appearing within the ordinary landscape, and then reflects on how easily a whole life can be spent rushing past such moments while our attention is fixed somewhere else. Near the poem's end, he invokes Moses and the burning bush:

*... Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle*

*of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

There is much wisdom in that. Perhaps one of the beginning disciplines of the spiritual life is simply learning to *turn aside* – to become *interruptible* enough that the world can surprise us again. To notice beauty before we've explained it away, mystery before we have reduced it to usefulness, another human face before we've sorted it into whatever category seems most convenient.

Now, if the book of Exodus ended right there, we might already have a beautiful sermon! But Exodus does *not* end there. Because Moses turns aside to see the fire, and the God in the fire will soon teach him *what else* there is to see:

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And when Moses answered, God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Try to imagine the scene: Moses is standing barefoot in the wilderness, sand and stone beneath his feet, sheep somewhere behind him. Before him, fire living strangely among the branches, and from the fire comes the voice of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses hides his face because he is afraid to look upon God. The place where he had been doing an ordinary day's work has become charged with a holiness he could neither predict nor control.

Surely, if what we want from religion is a spiritual high, Moses has reached the summit! *Here* is the experience people cross oceans to find! Here is *transcendence*. Here is *mystery*. Here is a story Moses could spend the rest of his life telling – about the morning when the wilderness caught fire and heaven spoke his name.

And then *God* begins talking – about *slaves*: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt," God says. "I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings." And right there, the furniture in the room of our religious imagination gets moved! Moses' attention has been caught by brightness. *God's* attention has been caught by *suffering*. Moses turns aside because he wants to know what's happening to the bush. And now the God in the fire turns Moses' face toward *Egypt*, as if to say, *Now, let me show you what I have been seeing all along.*

There are bodies bent beneath forced labor. There are people whose lives have been reduced to production for Pharaoh. There are families living inside a system powerful enough to call bondage ordinary and ruthless enough to make human suffering disappear beneath bricks, quotas, monuments, and the demands of empire. Their cries have risen from Egypt, and before Moses ever comes close to the fire, *God* has already heard them. Israel groaned beneath slavery, and "God heard their groaning." God remembered the covenant. God looked upon the

Israelites. God took notice of them. By the time the bush begins to burn, the Holy One has already been paying attention.

And that *must* change what “holy ground” *means*! Yes, the ground is holy because *God* is there. But the God who *is* there refuses to become an object of private spiritual fascination. The Holy One will not allow Moses to gaze indefinitely into the fire while human beings cry out under Pharaoh. The encounter awakens Moses to mystery, and then turns his attention outward toward the world as *God* has been seeing it.

That challenges something deeply rooted in the way many of us have learned to think about spirituality. We can easily imagine spiritual experience as something meant principally to enrich *us*. We seek peace, insight, connection, a little distance from the noise. We hope worship will lift us up, prayer will settle us down, a retreat will restore us, a sacred place will give us some experience of God that we can carry home.

Now sometimes we *need* exactly that kind of restoration. There are seasons when we’re exhausted and the merciful thing God gives us is rest. But spirituality can also bend inward upon itself, becoming preoccupied with the weather of its own soul: *How centered do I feel? How spiritually alive? How deeply was I moved?* We can become *connoisseurs* of transcendence, collecting moments of brightness while remaining strangely untouched by the lives unfolding just outside the frame.

Exodus gives us a far richer measure of spiritual experience: not simply how deeply it moves us, *but what becomes visible to us because of it*. The burning bush catches his attention, but the God he encounters there re-educates his attention. Moses begins by noticing fire. He leaves knowing that the cries of enslaved people have reached the heart of God.

And you see, that’s where spiritual experience becomes *calling*. “I have come down to deliver them,” God says. Imagine the relief Moses might have felt at those words. God has *seen*. God has *heard*. *God will act*! Wonderful! But then comes the next line: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh.” The brightness is not the destination. It is the *summons*. Moses has removed his sandals before mystery and discovered that mystery has a claim upon his life. The God who says “I have seen” now asks Moses to see. The God who says “I have heard” asks Moses to carry those cries back into Pharaoh’s court. The God who says “I have come down to deliver” intends, astonishingly, to do some of that delivering through the frightened shepherd standing barefoot beside the bush!

It’s one of the deepest patterns in Scripture. Encounter with the living God does not make the wounded world less important. It makes the world harder to ignore.

And it leads to what may be the great spiritual questions for us, now: *What has become so familiar that we no longer really see it? What suffering has become part of the scenery?* We live amid more images of human pain than any generation before us could possibly absorb. War and hunger, refugees and prisoners, ruined cities and frightened children arrive on screens small

enough to hold in one hand, and sometimes the sheer abundance of suffering dulls the very attention it ought to awaken. Pain becomes another headline, another image, another thing to move past with the movement of a thumb. And suffering closer to home can disappear just as easily: someone grows quieter, someone stops showing up, someone's anger conceals a grief we have never bothered to hear. There are forms of injustice we accept because they were already built into the landscape when we arrived.

But then comes this God from the fire: *I have seen. I have heard. I know.* The God of Exodus is not spiritually aloof from the world. Divine holiness is not indifference raised to infinity. God's holiness burns with *attention*. God sees *people* whom Pharaoh can only see as labor. God hears *cries* that empire has learned to treat as background noise. God knows *suffering* from which respectable society keeps a comfortable distance. And when Moses turns aside toward that God, his own attention begins to change.

But of course, Moses *also* immediately understands the difficulty. "*Who am I* that *I* should go to Pharaoh?" That may be one of the sanest questions anyone in Scripture ever asks! Moses *knows* Pharaoh. He knows the machinery of Egypt. He knows his *own* history there, including the body he left buried in the sand and the warrant that once hung over his head. He has no army, no office, no obvious leverage. He has a shepherd's staff in his hand and sheep waiting somewhere behind him.

But God does not answer Moses with a speech about believing in himself and discovering his inner potential. God says, "*I will be with you.*" And that promise is bound up with the mysterious name God soon gives him: "*I AM WHO I AM,*" or perhaps, as the Hebrew can also suggest, "*I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.*" Moses will not receive a definition of God he can master. He will receive a *presence* he must *trust*. The identity of this God will become visible in what happens next – in liberation and wilderness, bread and water, failure and mercy, a faithfulness that keeps moving with the people. *I will be with you.* That is what Moses carries from holy ground.

Surely the church should be a community where this kind of attention is learned – where prayer does more than soothe us, because it *opens* our ears; where worship draws us toward God deeply enough that we begin to notice what *God* notices; where wonder does not become an escape from the world but gives us eyes strong enough to look at it truthfully and hearts free enough to respond.

Moses turned aside to see the fire, and God taught him what else must be seen. So perhaps the question this old story leaves with us is simply this: *If God has caught your attention, what else is God trying to show you?* Amen.