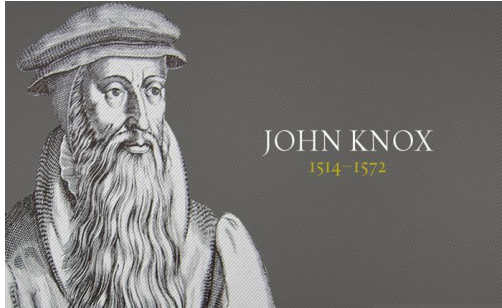


# “A Flickering Flame”

September 22, 2019  
Exodus 3: 3

Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett  
Wall Street United Church

"Moses looked, and he saw that the bush was burning, but it was not consumed."



John Knox, the great Scottish reformer, was so taken by this verse of scripture that he chose it to be the motto of the Presbyterian Church. To this day, almost all mottos are written in Latin, and in Latin it reads, "Nec Tamen Consumebatur" — the bush was not consumed.

The Presbyterian crest is a flame, like a halo, surrounding the outside of a green untouched bush.

In 1925, the Presbyterians were one of the three founding denominations of our own United Church — and so the burning bush was incorporated into our United Church crest.



It's worth taking a moment to look at our crest:

- *The Dove = the symbol of the Methodists, the Holy Spirit;*
- *The Open Bible = the symbol of the Congregationalists;*
- *the Presbyterians = the symbol of the burning bush.*
- *At the bottom is the Greek Alpha and Omega, meaning 'the Beginning and the End'.*

In the Bible, the story of the burning bush begins with Moses leading the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, to the west side of the wilderness, to a mountain that is sometimes called Horeb, and at other times called Sinai. I wonder what thoughts might have gone through Moses's mind on those long, lonely and not very easy vigils. After all, Moses was not raised to be a shepherd in a primitive outpost in the wilderness. He was raised to be a

prince in Egypt; the most advanced and sophisticated civilization in the world. But he had to flee from Egypt as a murderer. He had seen an Egyptian overseer abusing a Hebrew worker and he killed him. He hastily buried the Egyptian guard's body, but others had witnessed it. And so he ran. He had little choice but to flee. And now, here he was. What a comedown – from a prince to a criminal – from a palace to a wilderness – from an aristocrat to a refugee!

I always find it interesting, the type of people that God uses. If you have ever scoffed at the idea that God might just want to use you, don't. He uses the strangest people — like you, or me, or a murderer on the lam — like Moses.

But to go back to the story: How did Moses feel about his altered circumstances? It is very hard to know. Perhaps he liked the quiet pastoral life far away from the intrigues, the politics, and the pressures of Pharaoh's court. We can't be sure. What is clear is that he was grateful to be alive and not at all anxious to return to the place where arrest and judgment might await him.

In the midst of this particular journey, Moses was stopped in his tracks by an amazing sight — a burning bush — a bush that seemed to be on fire, but was not burning up. He did what you would do, what I would do, what anyone would do: he stopped, stared, and went over to take a closer look.

Now in case you are a skeptic and think this story in Exodus is rather cute but can't be true; let me say that I have no trouble believing it. I say this because the phenomenon of a bush that appears to be burning but is not burned up has long been known in Africa and parts of the Middle East. Bushes in that part of the world in order to survive have adapted to long periods of drought by having thick leathery leaves and very thick, tough bark. At certain times of the year some of them emit a kind of sap that, if ignited, will burn — without hurting the bush. It is rare, but certainly well known. What likely causes a bush to ignite is if a drop of the liquid lands in just the right place to be magnified by the sun, it can suddenly catch fire. It is just like the way you held a magnifying glass in your hand when you were young and tried to ignite a pile of leaves.

But back to the story: When Moses stopped and stared at this apparition, he heard a voice call his name. It told him to remove his shoes, for the ground on which he was standing was holy. "I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob," said the voice, and Moses hid his face. "I have seen the oppression of my people in Egypt," the voice went on, "and

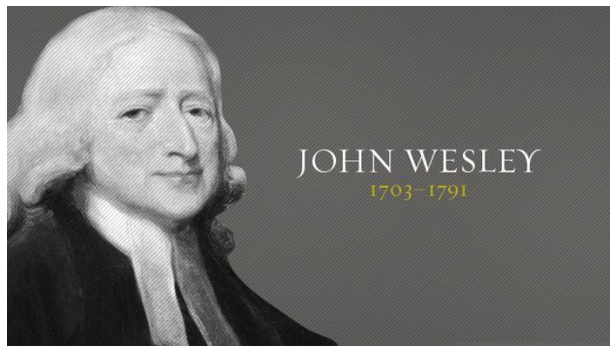
you must go to Pharaoh to set my people free." When Moses asked who was speaking, God answered "I am!"

One little observation here – in English we have three tenses – past, present, and future. Everything we say is put in one of those three tenses. (*I am, I was, I will be.*) Ancient Hebrew by contrast had just two tenses – one for an action that continues and one for an action that was completed. In this passage, when God says to Moses, "I am who I am," it equally means, "I was who I was, and I will be who I will be." He is the One who is for all time.

In this story, one person's encounter with the Divine changed history. The significance is not that Moses saw a burning bush, *but that he became one himself.* The God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob came to him, and lit a fire within him that never went out. It drove him back to the land he had fled. It pushed him into repeated confrontations with Pharaoh, until he gained freedom for his people. And in the years that followed, this same fire sustained him through many years in the wilderness.

It is always this way. People who are touched by the love of God seem to have a light about them. Actually I suspect this is the origin of the idea of a halo. You most often see it in works of art. Wherever such people go they somehow manage to light up the lives of other people. They're very popular — people like to be near them. Do you recall what Jesus said about himself, "I have come to cast a fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled."

The founder of the Methodist Church was like this. His name was John Wesley.



He was an ordained Anglican priest, but in his day most of the other Anglican clergy didn't like him. They called him an 'enthusiast' and they barred him from speaking in any of their Churches. So, undaunted, John Wesley went outside and started preaching to huge crowds in the open

air. It may seem hard to believe, but in England, no one had ever done that before. Conservative religious people were scandalized. It seemed to them a terrible thing to do. But ordinary uneducated English people walked for miles to hear him speak. It was remarkable. Wesley was once asked "Why? Why are so many people coming to hear you preach?" Wesley

thought for a moment and then replied, "God has set me on fire, and people come to watch me burn."

One of the consequences of the fires lit by John Wesley is this very church. We first opened our doors as a Methodist Chapel 190 years ago in 1828. The first original 1830 building is still here. If you just go downstairs to the lower hall where we have our coffee house, you are standing in that original Methodist chapel. Its front door faced what today is the Bank of Montreal. Interestingly, the person most responsible for this Church being here was not a minister -- she was a layperson. Her name was Barbara Heck. There is a monument to her in the Blue Church cemetery on Highway 2, just past Invista. It was her followers who began this Church.

What I want to say this morning is that a Church is alive only when the Spirit of God's love burns brightly in its people. In the Bible the word Church means a group of people – not a building. The word itself means "of the Lord." There were no Church buildings when the New Testament was written. It wasn't until a few hundred years later that Church buildings appeared. What this simply means is that the only thing that makes this Church worthwhile and wonderful is its people – and yes, I mean you.

I want to tell you a story I love. It's about a man by the name of Ed Barcus. Ed was a Methodist minister who lived in The United States, in Texas actually, in the first half of the last century — the 1900's. He was eighty years old and retired when he took his first trip overseas by ship. He went to England. You see, having been a devout Methodist, all his life, he had always wanted to see the actual place where John Wesley lived and preached and taught and worked. A British Methodist pastor, Jim Butterworth, was asked to guide the old white-haired gentleman from Texas around. He was glad to do it. They went everywhere — to Wesley's grave, to Aldergate St. where John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed, to his home village of Epworth. Finally Rev. Barcus asked if he could see the chapel on West Street in London where the Methodist revival had first begun two hundred years before. But here there was a problem. The chapel on West Street has been torn down years before. All that was there now was a plaque on the wall of the current building — *which happened to be a burlesque theatre!*

Jim Butterworth explained all this to Ed, but Ed was bound and determined to see for himself. So they travelled across London and stood outside the theatre reading the plaque. Then before Jim could stop him, Ed marched right into the theatre. At that very moment a group of scantily clad young women were rehearsing a chorus line. Right down the aisle he marched, up onto the stage, and clapped his hands for attention. He got it

— everybody stared wide-eyed at this eighty-year old white-haired apparition who had suddenly appeared in their midst.

"Young ladies," he said, "I am a Methodist pastor from Texas. "Here where I stand, our beloved founder John Wesley began his work. Now I invite you to join me in prayer." With that, he knelt on the stage. The women were so stunned they didn't know what to do. Some of them actually knelt with Ed Barcus. Most just stood and watched. But they all listened, for out of the Reverend Ed Barcus poured a heart-warming prayer.

He first thanked God for John Wesley, and then he made a direct personal plea to God for God's protection over the young women rehearsing in that theatre. The result was astounding. The women were so moved that many of them started to cry. In fact they didn't want him to leave. His obvious concern for them touched them very deeply. Prior to this, any clergy they had ever met had been full judgment, scorn, and finger pointing criticism.

Ed was so different. He was positive and full of love. Ed Barcus is long dead now – gone to his reward, but the results of that one day live on. The Methodist Church in England today has an active ministry to the theatre people of London's West End. It started that day with a simple prayer. It started because the fire of Christian love burned so warmly in the heart of an eighty-year old from Texas by the name of Ed Barcus.

Like the burning bush of so long ago, the fire of God's love is warm and attractive. It pulls you in. It burns but it never consumes. It never hurts and never destroys, it never tears down. My prayer is that the fire of God's love will burn brightly in your own heart and soul — and light up those around you.

There is an absolutely desperate need for a spirit of love, kindness and compassion in our world today. I think that it is the biggest need we have today – as big as climate change. I read this week with shock, of a gas station attendant in Saskatchewan who was screamed and yelled at and pushed down – badly frightened, by a man full of hate. This angry man kept screaming at the poor attendant to leave Canada. You see the gas station attendant who everyone says is a happy and very gentle soul is originally from Middle East. He was just doing his job.



And then there is Greta Thunberg, the amazing young girl from Sweden who spoke at the UN about climate change and walked in the climate change parade in Montreal on Friday.

I so admire her and what she is doing! And so I was shocked to learn this week that she has received of a torrent of hate-filled emails and texts and twitter feeds. Now, I can sort of understand if I stretch my mind a bit how some people could disagree with her. (A bit like talking with a flat earth believer!)

Personally I think she is right on. But even if you don't agree with her, how could that possibly justify sending hateful messages (and I mean really vicious stuff) to a young sixteen-year-old girl?

The simple truth is there is far, far too much hate in our world today. And this is why people need to hear about the Spirit of love and caring and kindness we see in Jesus. It is what he taught and what we believe and what our world desperately needs to hear.

This is why my prayer is for the flame of God's love to burn brightly in your heart, and by God's grace light up the lives of people around you, and make a difference in a world that needs you.

Amen.