

## *Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land*

### *Where Are Those Burning Bushes?*

#### [Exodus 3:1-6](#)

In these final six weeks of my time with you, we are immersing ourselves in the stories of the Exodus, the journey that led our Jewish ancestors out of slavery into freedom. From the empire where they'd been co-opted into a system of small dreams and low expectations, to the promised land, where their lives would be shaped by a covenant of promise, with God and with each other. The way there was a journey so long and hard and full of challenges, that it re-shaped them. It turned them into 'a people'—a people who would never forget that God had saved them. Set them aside to be 'God's people'.

The leader they trusted and followed on this journey was Moses. The name of Moses is famous now. Movies make him look like this. (picture of Charlton Heston) You don't have to be a scholar of the Bible to know that Moses was the greatest leader in the history of the people of Israel. But Moses was not born a leader. He didn't come to power through a legacy, or because of precocious skills he displayed early on. Moses stumbled into leadership. It was thrust on him, and he took it on reluctantly.

Moses was a minority—part of an immigrant community in Egypt. And he was born at a time when there were too many immigrants in Egypt by the government's calculation. The Hebrews were a useful labor force; they held the lowest-paid jobs; they were hard workers. But as far as the Egyptians were concerned, they had far too many children. "They were fruitful and prolific...they multiplied, so that the land was full of them," the Bible says. One translation says the Hebrews 'swarmed' over Egypt. The country's leaders feared that soon there would be more Hebrews than native Egyptians. It was a danger to the stability of the country, the order of the economy. So a policy was enacted; midwives were instructed: if a girl is born to a Hebrew family, let her live; but if it is a boy, you must kill the infant immediately.

Two midwives dared to disobey the order. In defiance of the law, putting their own lives at risk, they helped the Hebrew women hide their newborn sons. This is the scene Moses was born into. The midwives helped Moses' mother hide her baby for three months, to give her 'illegal' child a chance to live. Like many mothers, of every race, she was desperate to save the life of her son. Desperate enough to take a big risk. So she found a basket, plastered mud around it to make it water-tight, put her baby inside of it, and let it go in the river, to float.

You may already know this story. It's the stuff of Sunday School lessons and Disney musicals. The princess—daughter of the Pharaoh—happened to be at the river that day, to bathe; she saw the floating basket. When she realized that there was a Hebrew baby inside of it—an immigrant whose life in this country had been declared illegal—she could have ordered the baby killed. But instead she took him in, let him live. The life of Moses, the one who would defy the Egyptian king and free God's people, was saved by an Egyptian...and a woman.

Moses grew up on the margin. Protected by the princess, he lived both inside and outside Egyptian society. He wasn't exactly one of the Hebrew slaves; he had privileges they did not; but neither was he a full citizen of Egypt. There was no home, no community that he belonged to fully. His heart was with his own people, the Hebrew slaves; he agonized over the injustice that kept them enslaved. But when he tried to help, he fumbled, did it ineptly. Moses was an alien. No matter who he was with, he felt like a foreigner. With no power. No identity.

Moses got himself a sort of menial job—keeping sheep for his father-in-law. He was not an ambitious guy. One day he let the sheep wander a little farther than they usually did. They went up a mountain that was not their usual grazing place. Out of the corner of his eye, Moses saw something that looked like a bush on fire, but not in a way he had ever seen before. Something was different. Not dangerous; the fire didn't seem to be spreading out of control; just different.

Like many of the stories in the Bible, this burning bush incident is a small story, but it has great meaning buried in its details. So it's worth paying attention to those details. In Judaism, there is a whole tradition of stories within the stories of the Bible. *Midrash*, it's called. Midrash takes the literal details of the Bible's stories and invites us to imagine more; to stretch out the story until we have a clearer picture of all the meaning the story might hold.

In the biblical story, Moses says to himself, "I must turn aside and look to see why this bush is not burning up." It's not until the next sentence, *after* Moses turned to look at the bush again, that God calls to him. The midrash imagines that Moses didn't just turn his eyes to see the burning bush; he actually had to *crane his neck* to see what was happening over there. He made a deliberate motion to move toward this out-of-the-ordinary thing. He went to the trouble to see. And because he did that—because Moses *twisted his neck* in wonder and curiosity—God chose to speak, to reveal himself to Moses.

I want to stop there for a moment. When God set a bush on fire, he didn't choose one right in front of Moses. The bush God chose was within sight, but far enough away that Moses had to go out of his way to explore it. And he did. He stopped the work he was already busy doing. He turned his head. He craned his neck. He went out of his way. It was simple curiosity that moved Moses toward that burning bush. Maybe we hear an echo of the curiosity that prompted that Egyptian princess to investigate a basket hiding among the reeds at the edge of the river. Both times: a discovery that turned out to hold the presence of God, something that would change a life. Change history.

Curiosity. Could it be that what we lack in those days when we feel like God is far away and unreachable, or when we struggle to find our purpose, is a sense of wonder, enough curiosity to go out of our way to see?

Maybe the spiritual life—a life attuned and attentive to the holy—is about watching for the things that are meant to catch our attention. Not angels, but the things that invite us to ask "What is that?" and to turn our heads, twist our necks, to find out more. What if the invitations to join God on the journey to freedom and wholeness come in people and events we don't understand, things about which we're inclined to say, "That's weird," and then walk away without investigating?

Later in the Exodus story—in fact many times in the book of Exodus—God and Moses both refer to the Israelites as a ‘stiff-necked people’. It happens in the moments when the people are most stubborn, disobedient, resistant to following where God is leading them. It’s actually kind of comical. God and Moses alternate in their anger, like two parents of a willful child. Moses calls them “your stiff-necked people” when he’s expressing his frustration to God. When God gets angry, God says to Moses, “they’re your people—stiff-necked and stubborn.”

The phrase ‘stiff-necked’ comes directly out of the image of Moses craning his neck to see the burning bush; it’s the opposite. To have a stiff neck is to be set in one direction, unable to turn to see what appears from the side, what’s not on the expected route. It can be an attribute; stiff-necked people are loyal to a fault, deeply committed to the things they know are right. But being stiff-necked can also keep us from seeing that God is doing a new thing, surprising us with new wisdom, calling us to turn in a different direction, to see something that had escaped our notice before. If your neck is stiff, it’s hard to look up in wonder. And it’s hard to bow down to something bigger than yourself.

When I got here three years ago, you, Campbell Church, were a people whose necks had lost whatever stiffness they might once have held. It happened through hardship—the loss of pastors, and members, staff members, all those markers of strength. But that journey had left you—it seemed to me—open to new life. Your necks were soft, flexible. So was mine. I too was ready to twist my neck to see things that were off any path I had walked on before. So we looked, together, for the burning bushes that seemed to call for our attention. We turned our heads to see, asked what made that fire. And right here under our feet, we found new patches of holy ground.

That’s not the first time burning bushes have appeared in this place. Susan Sargent, who’s been keeping the history of this church for a long time, recently showed me a chapter from the 1950’s, when Herb Neale was the pastor here. It was a time of great fear in this country about the spread of Communism. Being stiff-necked about American democracy was expected, demanded. Churches, like many others, were asked to sign loyalty oaths to weed out any communist influence. This church refused to sign the loyalty oath demanded by the State of California. Instead, its pastor, Rev. Neale, made a goodwill trip to the Soviet Union—which must have seemed at the time like a completely reckless thing to do. And when he got back he asked this congregation to stretch further. Within a few years, you were offering summer camps to the families of migrant farm workers, and hosting refugees from Hungary and Indonesia.

The history of burning bushes is deep in the DNA of this place. You are, and you live among, a people with flexible necks. This allows you to see—always—the next surprising place God shows up. May it always be so.