

The Burning Bush that Beckons You

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Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-18; Matthew 16:24-28

Of all the searing images to come out of Hurricane Harvey, which one affected you most deeply?

The pictures or videos of wheelchair bound nursing home residents, chest-deep in water, being hoisted to safety? A mother, baby clutched to her chest, looking desperately for help through her tears? The splintered wreck of a home with its address spray-painted on its cinder block foundation, along with the haunting line, “this was our home?”

And yet, along with stories of devastation and ruin, came another, more hopeful story: That of neighbor helping neighbor survive the catastrophe. In the Bible, the only ones to escape a flood of this magnitude are Noah and his family. But this time, thank God, a flotilla of mini-arcs appeared to bear so many of God’s children to higher ground.

Crickett Erwin, a suburban mom, safely removed from harm, went tearing into the flood zone on her jet ski to rescue other mothers with children. “If I have the opportunity to have jet skis,” she told a reporter, (then I’m gonna) go in there and bring ‘em back.” Thousands of lives

were saved by gutsy folks like Ms. Erwin joining in a makeshift coalition of local, state, and federal rescue efforts.

Thank God, in the wake of Charlottesville where we saw America at her worst, we've once more seen America at her best, as people of every color and creed pitched in to help one another. Such an outpouring of color-blind kindness must surely send a chill up every neo-Nazi spine.

In today's New Testament lesson, Romans Chapter 12, the Apostle Paul implores us to "weep with those who weep" and to "show hospitality to strangers." Sadly, Hurricane Harvey gives us ample opportunity to do both as we hold those reeling from this disaster in our hearts and prayers and contribute to the relief efforts. And incidentally, this is one time giving money really is the best way to respond since it allows relief personnel to secure exactly what is needed.

But in the not-too-distant future, Hurricane Harvey will no longer be the news lead. The heart-wrenching stories, now gripping the nation, will be displaced by the next catastrophe or outrage. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands in Texas and beyond will still be struggling to rebuild shattered homes and lives. And for that work, government, business, and faith partners willing to go deep and stay long are needed. As one Baptist agency described the scope of the tragedy, "While the winds and rains from Hurricane Harvey have finally begun to taper off for residents along the Texas and Louisiana coastlines, the cleanup effort will likely be measured (not in days and weeks) but in years."

And that, believe it or not, brings us to Moses and the burning bush. Because this story is not about being a Good Samaritan or a first-responder, as important as that is. This story is about going deep and journeying long in the pain, and service, of God.

After all, what is the first thing God says to Moses when the wandering shepherd is stopped up short by a bush that is burning, but is not consumed? “Take your shoes off, son. You are standing on holy ground.”

And what makes that ground holy is not some abstract perfection on God’s part, but rather God’s righteous indignation over what is happening in Egypt: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt,” says God. “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.”

Moses is told to take off his sandals and step more deeply into the pain of God. Only by removing the hard leather protecting the bottoms of his feet can he soak up God’s anguish as God holds his feet to the fire.

Last Wednesday night, some of us listened in on a remarkable dialogue moderated by our own Diane Lipsett. Our guests were Dr. Bill Leonard, a Baptist pastor and professor, and Lee Hill, this year’s recipient of the Wake Forest Divinity School’s Bill J. Leonard Distinguished Service Award.

Bill, a Caucasian, has long been a member of a black Baptist church. And Lee, an African American pastor, now serving in San Diego, was Knollwood’s youth minister about a decade ago. These two were lined up for that program before Charlottesville, mind you. But they became God’s gift to us last Wednesday night as they held our feet to the fire in responding to that violent witches-brew of hate.

Bill said the church was now facing a “Dietrich Bonhoeffer” moment, a reference to the German pastor and author, martyred by the Nazis for his resistance to the Third Reich.

Bill commended Knollwood for small things we have done to address the racial divide in our community, such as being a signature partner in an upcoming interracial hymn festival. But he also said we had to find new ways to stand with those who feel imperiled by the hateful rhetoric and actions on the rise in our country.

Lee, in his kind, gentle way, said the time for talk was past. Now is the time for action.

Lee's call reminded me of what Rabbi Abraham Heschel said about marching arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King, Jr., from Selma to Montgomery: "For many of us, (that march) was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

Standing barefoot before the fire leads to one of two outcomes: Running away or putting legs on your prayers. Moses already tried running away. The back story of his encounter with the burning bush is that he fled Egypt, years before, after slaying an Egyptian tormentor of his people. He made his way to a wilderness outpost called Midian where he took a wife, raised a family, and became a shepherd. His life was nice and comfortable until he stumbled on that burning bush and heard God calling his name.

Your burning bush is that call that keeps dogging you, that longing that keeps haunting you, that compulsion that won't let you go. Maybe like Moses, you found a way to run, a way to settle. But then at mid-life, or even in retirement, God used a Hurricane Harvey, a Charlottesville, or a life crisis to pick the scabs off your conscience and stir your soul.

Just this week, I spoke with a woman whose life is being disrupted by a call to the ministry. Actually, this is a call she first felt long ago but put on hold, as Moses did to raise a family and to build a career.

But now, the call has circled back around and God is once more calling her name. Only this time, as the Spirit holds her feet to the fire, she is answering with a fierce, joyous, “*Yes!*”

How do you know a call is from God? In part, because the call won’t let you go, won’t let you be. Like the burning bush, it just keeps flaring brighter and brighter, refusing to be consumed.

The poet William Stafford says it like this:

There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Your burning bush is that thread that weaves its way through your life. Your burning bush is that call, that work, which is uniquely yours to do.

Yes, you share with all the believers the call to “take up your cross and follow Jesus.” You share with all Christians the call to “weep with those who weep” and to “show hospitality to strangers.”

But then there is the call *within the call* that belongs just to you when God, like Uncle Sam on those old recruiting posters of old, flares up in the burning bush, points a long, gnarled finger in your direction and says, “I want *You!*”

My wife long ago heard an almost audible voice sound her vocation as an artist: “Paint my beauty.”

I know someone else who in the wake of Harvey, hopes to leverage his emergency response and rescue skills to teach others how to help during another such crisis.

I know another sister in the journey who is asking God, herself, and me, “What can *I* do to combat racism and hate? After Charlottesville, I can’t stay quiet and complicit anymore.”

Another Knollwood member is investing his life and work in faraway Malaysia, building the network and resources to help long-term when the next tsunami or natural disaster strikes.

That incidentally, is why we need ministry partners like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship with whom he serves. Such partners invest in being present for the long haul. And that’s the only way to move beyond emergency relief to recovery, and from occasional benevolence to the ongoing work of justice: addressing the underlying causes of so much mischief and mayhem and misery in the world.

Maybe there is a burning bush beckoning you: a persistent, but unacknowledged call that keeps whispering your name; some need you are uniquely positioned to meet; some skill you have to offer but for lack of confidence, keep holding back; some ache or anguish about something terribly wrong in the world you try to numb with activity or alcohol or even religion. But that particular expression of the pain of God keeps haunting your dreams and choking your prayers.

If only you knew for sure what to do. If only you knew everything would work out for the best. If only God would give you some miraculous sign to help you find your way, instead of expecting you to strike out in faith.

Moses wanted all that too, but he didn’t get it. He only got the vague promise that the one named “I Am Who I Am” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be” would be with him; and that someday,

Moses would be back at that same mountain with the burning bush, only this time with the now liberated people of God behind him, which being translated means, “You don’t get the answers ahead of time. You figure them out as you go.”

Ernie Campbell, one-time pastor of New York’s famed Riverside Church, told of attending a summer conference as a youth. While fretting about what to do with his life, Campbell heard the conference leader say something that stuck with him: “You can’t steer a parked car.”

Campbell observed, “We were urged to move out on our best hunch. Once we were in motion, God would have something to work on. But there is no point in sitting in front of the wheel, keys in hand, debating the course of the journey. Even God cannot steer a parked Christian.”

Jesus says that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life--for *his sake*--will find it.”

So listen to your life and take a chance on God. Start moving, however fretfully and slowly, in the direction of your best hunch about who God is calling you to be and what God is calling you to do. Until someday, like Moses, you arrive back at the mountain where it all began; and at last see from that lofty height that the elusive, but ever present one--“I Am Who I Am”--was with you every step of the journey.

Yes, Hurricane Harvey, Charlottesville, other national and personal crises have a call for us all: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. But sometimes, within that larger calling, there is a specific life-calling God has just for you.

So slow down and start paying attention as you craft your own deeply personal answer to the question, so powerfully posed by poet Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

O God, give us eyes to see the burning bushes in which you beckon. And ears to hear your call. And hearts brave enough to strike out in faith after Jesus. In his name, we gather, and pray, and hope to serve. Amen.

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