

## **Third Sunday of Lent – Year C (Mar. 14, 2004)**

Have you ever talked to a burning bush? I haven't but I know people who talk to plants and flowers. They tell me it helps the flowers and plants to grow better. Somehow it communicates a good feeling to them. I don't know. I'm not a gardener and I've never tried it.

It might have seemed like a silly question except that in our first reading today we heard that Moses talked to a burning bush. Of course this was no ordinary burning bush. This was God communicating with Moses.

Our readings today tell us a great deal about God. I guess we always want to know more about God. We have many, many images of God from our Bible both the Old and New Testaments. But in spite of the fact that there is an abundance of information we never tire of looking deeper into the mystery of who God is, what God does, how I relate to God. Just what does it all mean? Let's take a closer look at the readings.

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus Moses is actually a fugitive from the law. He had killed an Egyptian and is now in hiding in a place called Midian. He has married the daughter of Jethro, a local priest. In our scene he is tending the flock of his father-in-law when suddenly he is aware of a bush that is on fire nearby. Now you or I might want to douse the bush with water or call the local fire department, but Moses is too curious to do that because oddly enough the bush, though it is burning, is not being consumed by the fire. It burns but it remains alive and green and in full bloom. A very strange sight indeed. So Moses decides to get a closer look at what is going on, but as he approaches the bush he hears a voice. It's God's voice saying, "Don't come near. This is holy ground. Take off your shoes. I am the God of your Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." And evidently Moses had no difficulty accepting the voice at face value. It was the voice of God. How did he know? Well in the context of the story, he just knew. The first thing this tells me about God is that God communicates in mysterious ways, and that God often uses material things as media of communication. In fact the whole world in some way is constantly bringing us messages from God. As the poet Gerard

Manley Hopkins puts it, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." My own personal conviction is that God is constantly trying to communicate with us if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear.

But God had a reason for speaking to Moses in this way. God had an important message, so after attracting Moses' attention in this dramatic fashion God told him that he had heard the cry of his people.

Remember, God's people, the people of Israel, were slaves in Egypt. They were suffering under Pharaoh who was a cruel tyrant, the Saddam Hussein of his day, and they had been crying out to God for help. So equivalently God tells Moses, "I have determined to save my people and I want you to be the instrument of their liberation from slavery."

Now imagine Moses' reaction. As a fugitive from the law in Egypt he risks arrest and his own life by going back to confront the Pharaoh, and he is understandably hesitant. He needs more information. If he simply goes to the people and says, "The God of your Fathers has sent me," would they believe him, and so he asks God, "What is your name?" Now knowing someone's name did not simply identify the person. It told you a great deal about them. To the ancient Israelites it revealed the inmost being of an individual. Now God could not reveal the inmost being of the divine essence, because ultimately our finite minds could never grasp it. So God gives Moses an answer which turns out to be somewhat of a riddle: I am who I am or I shall be who I shall be. For centuries theologians have been trying to figure out what that means. It's mysterious and it's elusive. But subsequent events add some understanding. This GOD who is, is a God of fidelity who stays with his people, who stands by them. As he tells them later in the book, "I shall be your God and you will be my people and I will be faithful to you." I will be faithful to you, no matter what. Oh, the people would not always be faithful to God, and God sometimes got upset by that as the prophets frequently warned. But God never abandons them and is always calling them back. "Come back to me with all your hearts," God says through the prophet Hosea.

So, from our first reading we learn that God communicates all the time in many and mysterious ways, often in ways that are unexpected and surprising. We learn, too, that God cares for the people, hears them when they cry out to him, and comes to their aid. The sacred name of God, I am

who I am, means that God is faithful, never abandoning those whom he loves.

The Gospel gives us still more information about who God is and how God acts with us. When people talked with Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed and those who were crushed by a falling tower, they presumed that these bad things happened to them because they were wicked people, that God was punishing them. Jesus lets the people know that God does not act that way, that those who were killed by Pilate or crushed by the falling tower were no worse than anybody else.

This is followed immediately by still another picture of God. In this one God plays two roles: God is the owner of the vineyard who has a fig tree that has not borne fruit for three years, so he decides to cut it down because it's using up the richness of the soil and is producing nothing. But God is also the vine-dresser who looks at the fig tree and thinks that if he gives it one more chance then perhaps it might bear fruit. Our God is always willing to give us another chance. My feeling is that if the vine-dresser came back with the owner the following year and still found no fruit he would again decide to give it another chance. That's just the way God is.

These are all positive images of God. We can add to them what we prayed in the responsorial psalm: "Merciful and gracious is the Lord. Slow to anger, abounding in kindness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him." There are moments in our lives when perhaps we doubt God's care, when troubles overwhelm us. That's when a great deal of faith and trust are needed. Perhaps it might help to think of Moses who was called from a relatively trouble-free task of tending his father-in-law's sheep to become the opponent of Egypt's Pharaoh and the leader of an escaped band of homeless people. Real faith and trust in God are not always easy to come by. However, our God, though utterly mysterious, is truly and always "kind and merciful."

We have been announcing for several weeks now that the parish will sponsor a weekend retreat April 2-4. This would be a wonderful opportunity to spend some time praying and reflecting with other parishioners about the kindness and mercy of our God. The retreat is at the Jesuit retreat house in Faulkner, Md., a beautiful site on the Potomac River.

**I urge you to give serious consideration to coming on the weekend retreat. You will find registration forms included with the parish bulletin this weekend.**