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“Words That Widen”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Exodus 3:1–15; Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45c; Romans 12:1–3, 9–21; Matthew 16:21–28

In the beginning was an angel and a bush that burns but does not consume.
Quite a light show: enough to catch a solitary shepherd's eye,
 cause him to turn aside from tending his sheep,
 and tend to the voice that emanates from the mysterious conflagration.
The fiery bush may not consume, but the words spoken leave a soul scar on the shepherd,
 bone deep: deep as any fourth degree burn might be.

There was a burning bush incident in my neighborhood off Cole Mill Road
 earlier in the month, where an accidentally-sparked brush fire on vacant land
 burned and consumed 31 acres of ground beneath the pine canopy.
Because I was here at the church until late in the day,
 tending my flock of sheep by training our newly elected church officers,
 I didn't know that anything was amiss until I received a text message
 from Mary Gitata asking if we were okay “because of the fire.”
Fire? What fire? I asked myself as I drove home at sundown with heightened vigilance.
I didn't understand what she might be referring to until I turned off the highway,
 noticing the haze of smoke hanging low over the neighborhood
 and the acrid smell of burning wood.

What's burning, I wondered, *and how close is it to our house? Are we in danger?*
 And what about BJ and Parker and Sam, Sheila, and Julianna, our neighbors?
When I got home and checked our voicemail, I heard a message from

Barbara Campbell Davis, our recently retired Executive Presbyter,
asking if we are okay— and I am truly touched
by the concern and compassion of these two friends.

Apparently, a brush fire has come very close to our residence,
and we have not been consumed,
and all of my senses are suddenly overwhelmed by danger averted,
and my God-consciousness is piqued.

I ride over a few blocks the next day to check out the damage:
the blackened tree trunks, the scorched earth, the wide open space between.
The woods look different to me now, more spacious and noticeable,
and I am tempted to explore the newly-expanded terrain.
Maybe fire is God's instrument of opening and widening our vistas and making us
see familiar things in new ways.

Fire has a way of grabbing our attention, no doubt!

It is a dangerous element, defying control.

Like the wind, you hear the sound of it,
you feel its heat, you smell its smoke, but you do not know where it comes from
or in which direction it will go.

It warms, but it can burn. It gives light, but it can blind.

It can re-landscape familiar ground into unfamiliar ground.

Its power can render us powerless.

Fire in scripture is frequently a sign of God's presence, an element of theophany,
an invisibility cloak behind which God veils God's self.

When the children of Israel wander in the wilderness,
Yahweh/God guides them by cloud during the daytime
and comforts them by pillar of fire as their night light. (Ex. 13:21)

When they make pleasing sacrifices to God at the Tent of Meeting,
God comes down to them as fire on the altar
and consumes their burnt offerings. (Lev. 9:24)

When the prophet Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel,

God suggests superiority by flaming down on inflammable objects. (1 Kings 18:38)
And when Elijah finishes his earthly course, God comes down in a chariot of fire
to whisk Elijah off to heaven. (2 Kings 2:11)

The prophet Malachi describes God's judgment as a refiner's fire
that will purify those posing as priests (Malachi 3:2),
and the prophet Jeremiah describes God's word in his heart
as a fire shut up in his bones... a fire that cannot be contained. (Jer. 20:9)

And once we get to the New Testament, fire becomes a symbol for God's Holy Spirit
and the Spirit of Jesus, which manifests itself to believers at Pentecost as both
mighty wind and as tongues of fire (Acts 2: 1-3).

What the lectionary skips over, but what is important for us to know,
is the prequel to Moses' encounter with the burning bush.

In his salad days, when he was younger, Moses' passion once burned out of control;
his anger causes him to kill an Egyptian whom he witnessed
beating one of own Hebrew cousins.

He thought no one saw, no one noticed, no one knew of his crime.

But someone did see, and someone did comment,
causing Moses to flee the crime scene as a fugitive,
fearing for his life, fearful of Pharaoh's ire.

So he leaves Egypt on the lam and settles in the land of Midian,
where an elderly priest with seven daughters takes him in
and offers one of his daughters to be Moses' wife.

Life is sweet and idyllic for Moses in Midian. He has a wife and a son there,
a supportive extended family, and a peaceful job
daily ushering sheep from green pastures to still waters.

At the same time, however, his people are suffering in slavery in the valley of the shadow,
groaning under the oppressive Egyptian work-load,
crying out to Yahweh in their distress.

And whereas Moses once had been concerned about one of them, about one of his people;
whereas his anger once had burned hot

about the mistreatment of one particular kinsman-slave,
Yahweh God hears their anguished cries and is concerned about all of them,
about each one of God's covenant people.

And God's compassion bursts into full-flame, burning bright for every single one

of his people who are suffering mistreatment:

for the barefooted child, for the scantily-clad slave, for the pregnant woman,

for the scrutinized mid-wife, for the diapered old man,

for the nursing mother, for the hyper-vigilant big sister,

for the injured, for the sun-burned, for the brow-beaten,

for the unbound heart-broken.

And in that desert moment, that holy ground moment,

God's compassion for many meets Moses' passion for one,

and God's fiery voice calls out to Moses

to widen the compassion that already burns deep within him,

to refocus the passion that once drove him to violence,

and to burn brightly anew, but non-violently this time, for all of God's covenant people,

for the people who have cried out and captured God's own heart.

Three things are terribly interesting to me about this encounter that I want to note.

First, that God has a conversation with a criminal, a murderer,

someone who has committed what we would consider to be a felony crime.

God has not given up on Moses just because he has made a mistake in his past;

God can still use Moses and the passion that burns within Moses.

So likewise, do you think it's possible that God might be conversing

with those who sit in the Durham County Jail,

those behind bars in Central Prison in Raleigh, or those in the federal prison at Butner?

Do you think these words of God might widen our possible ministry,

our listening, our attention,

to those who sit in the darkness of incarceration?

Some have wondered aloud what our church's calling might be along these lines;

some have lamented the disconnect between what our core values

claim we profess and our lack of involvement with
those who sit captive in our own front yard.

Does the fact that God does not give up on Moses call to us, as deep calls to deep,
not to give up on others who have embodied their passion in violent ways?

Secondly, I am intrigued how God calls to action this someone, Moses,
who already is endowed with an inner passion for justice,
and how God fans the flame of that innate passion that he already possesses,
to cover a wider swath of concern.

I am reminded of the Latin phrase featured on our US coins and currency,
the one found on the great seal of the United States:

E pluribus unum—out of many, one.

But in this case, the Latin phrase for what I hear God calling Moses and us to do and be,
I think, is more like *Ex uno plures*—out of one, many.

In other words, take the small passion, the small compassion that we feel
for one person, one issue, one need, and let God stoke it to burn wider and brighter
for many people, for many suffocating from similar smoke,
for many gasping for air to breathe freely.

And thirdly, sometimes God calls people out of their cushy green pastures
and still waters, back into the valleys of shadows from whence they have come.

That's what Peter fails to see in the Gospel passage for today:

that God is calling Jesus back to Jerusalem,
back to the danger zone where his life is most at risk,
where his need of God will be most acute,
where his ministry is most greatly needed.

Remember Tony Hayward, the former Chief Executive Officer of BP,
who in the midst of the last summer's Deepwater Horizon Gulf Coast oil spill, exclaimed,
"I'd like my life back," and so he went sailing for the
weekend on his yacht around the Isle of Wight?

I don't particularly fault him, nor would I fault Moses or Jesus if they would have

preferred to deny God's call and catch the first boat heading in the opposite direction
posthaste.

But they didn't because God's words of commission had branded them bone-deep,
as had God's words of promise to accompany them: "I will be with you."

In this third instance, I am reminded of the famous Catholic social activist
of the 20th century, Dorothy Day, who moved to Chicago as a child
when she was young, beautiful, and very smart,
and who read avidly, night and day, the works of the likes of Dostoevsky, Jack London,
Frank Norris, and Upton Sinclair.

Since Sinclair's exposé of social injustice to America's immigrant population, *The Jungle*,
is set in the slums of Chicago's west side, Day read his work
as she pushed her little brother in his stroller along Chicago's
West Side streets.

And as she walked those streets very close to where she lived,

"she was startled to find that life itself was just as Sinclair had described it.

Passing taverns, she imagined scenes from the book taking place inside,
and she felt joined to the people whose fictional counterparts she had read about."

'Though my only experience of the destitute was in books,' she recalled in her autobiography,
'the very fact that *The Jungle* was about Chicago where I lived,
whose streets I walked, made me feel that from then on my life
was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine;
I had received a call, a vocation, a direction in my life.'

(Elie, Paul. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, p. 15)

We might say that God fanned the pilot light of passion that already burned in Day
and turned up the heat of her compassion.

Or we might say that God, working through the creative imagination of Upton Sinclair,
spoke to Day with words that burned deep but did not consume,
but which widened her interest in the human rights of immigrants,
beginning on the west side streets of Chicago, but expanding to include
others newly arrived in America everywhere

yearning to rise above the blight of alienation and poverty,
which became Day's life's calling.

Today, as the memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

is supposed to have been dedicated in our nation's capital,

but was postponed by Hurricane Irene,

I also am reminded of that kitchen table moment when Dr. King's passion for justice
was almost quenched early in his ministry in 1956.

Exhausted after a long day of organizational meetings, King's wife, Coretta,

and their two-month-old daughter, Yolanda, were already asleep when the
phone rang at midnight.

King answered the phone to catch a southern torrent of obscene words,

concluding with the threat:

"Listen, n**g*r, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry
you ever came to Montgomery."

King hung up without comment as was his custom, left the green pasture/still waters
comfort of his shared bed,

went downstairs to a kitchen table prepared for him

in the presence of his enemies

to pray over a cup overflowing with coffee.

And God met him there in the person of Jesus.

And Jesus spoke to him there in his torment and agony,

in his doubt and apprehension,

in his fear and faltering,

as he cradled his head in his hands and prayed over

the hot steam rising from his coffee cup, saying to him,

"Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice.

Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you

even until the end of the world."

And as Dr. King tells it, "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never
experienced God before. Almost at once, my fears began to go.

My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

(Marsh, Charles. *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, p. 25)

Friends, today is the first day of a new year of faith-based action in the life of this church.

Most of us have never had a burning bush experience like Moses,

a get-behind-me-Satan experience like Jesus,

a these-are-my-people experience like Dorothy Day,

a kitchen-table experience like Dr. Martin Luther King.

But each one of us knows of the small embers of passionate empathy and compassion

that lie deep within us, dormant for most of us, all but quenched by

the busy crosswinds of our daily living.

God once took a detour from God-things to attend to the heart-wrenching cries

of those suffering

and to come down to elicit the help of us mere mortals

in rescuing them.

And Jesus once took a detour from the bright green pastures and still waters

of popular acclaim to step back into the darkness of those who suffer

to become our redeemer and rescuer, our life and hope,

by losing his one life for the finding of many.

Ex uno plures.

On this day, on any day, may we be willing to take off our running shoes,

step out of our flame retardant garb,

put down our guard and lay down our defense mechanisms,

disable our firewalls,

and allow God total access to our small passions and compassions

so that we, too, might be instruments

of God's constant and abiding love and concern

for the well-being of all of God's children. Amen.