

FACING THE BURNING BUSH

When it comes to getting direction from God, aren't we all a little envious of Moses? At some point in each of our lives, a burning bush would be a wonderful thing as God clearly tells us where we are to go and what we are to do with our lives.

But as our Old Testament professor Kathleen Farmer noted, Moses had the burning bush – and he still tried to argue with and second guess God! And even though we may not have burning bushes in our lives, God still answers our questions, even as God answered the questions from Moses as they stood together on holy ground.

Many of us remember the story of the baby Moses from childhood. Pharaoh has ordered the death of all infant boys. Moses' mother tries to shield him as long as she can. But when Moses becomes too big to hide anymore, she puts him in a basket in the Nile, trying to spare him death by the sword.

But not only is Moses spared, he is drawn out of the water by Pharaoh's own daughter. In light of how she finds him, she names him "Moses" which means to draw out – which will receive even richer meaning when Moses in turn draws the people of Israel out of Egypt.

But it was not a task without its share of bumps in the roads. Although Moses is raised in with all the privileges of royalty, he flees from Egypt as a wanted man after he kills a man. He finds refuge in Midian where he marries and has a son. And Moses is prepared to live happily ever after in Midian tending his father-in-law's sheep.

But God hears the cries of the Jews. As Moses is tending sheep one day, God gets his attention with the burning bush. And God's instructions: Moses, go to Pharaoh and demand the release of God's people.

Fortunately, Moses isn't like Jonah and takes off running in the exact opposite direction. But neither does Moses step right up and say, "Yes, Lord, I'm here to do whatever you ask."

No, Moses has five protests for God as he faces the burning bush. Later today, take time to read Exodus chapter 4 to see Moses' other protests including point blank saying, "I just don't want to do this." This morning, I want us to concentrate on the responses God gave to Moses' first two questions, both of which were in our scripture lesson today.

The first question, understandably so, is "Who am I? Lord, who am I that I will be able to stand before Pharaoh and draw the Israelites out of Egypt?" Maybe Moses doubted his own abilities, or maybe he asked because he needed a pat on the back from God to reassure him.

Instead, God's answer is, "I will be with you." In other words, who are you Moses? You are nobody. There's nothing about your upbringing in the palace, your background as a murderer, your abilities as a shepherd or anything else that brought you to my attention. You are being called because I the Lord your God will be with you.

And God adds one more thing – a sign. As a sign that God is with Moses, he and the Israelites will worship God together on this mountain after Moses brings them out of Egypt.

*** Note: Those in church skip to Page 4; longer message will be shared at Albright ***

A few years ago at Thanksgiving, Dave's daughter Amy and her husband Eric made a point of getting me and Dave apart from everyone else because they wanted to ask a question: "Is it OK to ask God for a sign?"

After years of being unable to have children of their own, they were considering putting in the paperwork to adopt. However, they wondered whether their inability to produce children meant God didn't want them to have children in the first place. If God's will was for them to be

childless, they were OK with that. So before they began the process, they wondered if it was OK if they prayed for a sign to know what to do.

And Dave and I reminded them of the times God invited people to request a sign. When an attack seemed imminent on Israel, the prophet Isaiah told King Ahaz that God was saying, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God.” It was intended that God could assure the king that the nation would not be overthrown.

Last week during covenant group, Deb spoke about Gideon, who asked for not one, but two signs. First, Gideon laid a fleece on the ground. As a sign that Gideon was to lead the Israelites to battle, he asked God to make the fleece wet but the surrounding ground dry. The next day, Gideon found the ground dry as dust, but he wrung a bowl of water from the fleece.

Pretty impressive, right? But just to be safe, Gideon asked for a second sign. This time when he left the fleece out overnight, he asked God to make the ground wet but the fleece dry. And the next morning, when dew covered the ground but the fleece was dry as a bone, Gideon led the Israelites to battle.

The times God has refused or even become angry at the request for a sign was when the requester wanted the sign but did not have faith in God. It is one of the temptations Jesus refused, to provide a sign so wondrous that the people wouldn't need to have faith. And it is the reason he told the Jewish authorities that the only sign they would receive was the sign of Jonah – that Jesus would be three days in the tomb as Jonah was three days in the fish, and would re-emerge to new life.

As Dave and I told Amy and Eric, it is OK to ask God for a sign when they do so in faith, seeking the sign not as a demonstration of God's power, but rather to help them discern what God would have them to do.

And the great thing was, the next day as Amy and Eric headed back to Cedar Springs, Amy called Dave. They had reached Boyne Falls and turned south onto U.S. 131, and there on the corner was a huge billboard with one word: ADOPT!

*** RETURN TO MANUSCRIPT HERE AT CHURCH: ***

But one thing I want us to especially notice about the sign God offered to Moses. What did it mean that the sign was that the Israelites would worship God on this same mountain? It meant Moses' sign would come only after the fact. The sign God is offering comes as confirmation of Moses' actions, not as a way to initiate his actions.

As our Old Testament professor pointed out, sometimes we have to take a step in faith before we will receive the sign that we are going in the right direction.

Having received pretty much a non-answer to his first question, Moses tried again. Instead of asking in a different way "who am I," he goes in a different direction: "Who are you?" He wants to know God's name. The Egyptians believed in a lot of gods. When Moses goes to Pharaoh and tells him God says, "Let my people go," which God should he say is calling?

And for the first time in scripture, we are given God's name. Our good German forefathers translated that name into Jehovah, but more accurately, the name is Yahweh. The letters mean, "I AM," which can be taken to mean "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." By giving this as a name, God is almost indicating that He is too big for one name. Yahweh is God of all times and all places.

Something to understand about this name: It is, in fact, not a name at all. In Jewish scripture, Yahweh is written as the capital letters YHWH, and all of the Jews understand this to be an abbreviation to represent God's name.

When we say NASA, we understand this is an abbreviation for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. But we say NASA because it is easier to say and remember.

When the Jews use YHWH, it's not because it is shorter or easier to remember. It is because they want to remind themselves that they are not to say God's name. To do so would be presumptuous on their part, to imply they are buddy-buddy with God Almighty.

Can you understand then why Jesus was so radical to the Jewish authorities? When he spoke of God as "Abba," which translates as Father or more literally Daddy? And when Jesus proclaimed, "I AM the light of the world. I AM the bread of life. I AM the good shepherd" – all of those "I AM" statements made the authorities more determined to put him to death for blasphemy. And if there were any doubt, it is erased in John 8:58 when the Jews ask how Jesus can speak as if he has seen Abraham. And Jesus responds with, "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I AM."

God told Moses, "This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." It is the name Moses is able to use in his epic battle with Pharaoh. It is the name of Jesus. It is the name we use as we call upon God for wisdom, power and courage.

We may not have a sign as flashy as a burning bush that refuses to be consumed. But God is just as able to talk to us today through the Holy Spirit whispering in our souls, through confirmation of our thoughts by outside friends and family, and by signs we seek to better discern God's will for us. This week, may we look for those signs, and may we be filled with the God who is "I AM."