

The Rev. Dr. Stephen H. Applegate  
 The Third Sunday in Lent  
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights  
 March 23, 2025

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

“There the angel of the Lord appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.”” Exodus 3:2,3

St. Paul's Vestry met this past Tuesday. For those of you who don't know what a Vestry is, it's the elected governing body of this parish, responsible for overseeing the parish's finances, property, and ministries. We covered a lot of ground at Tuesday's vestry meeting. I won't go into all that we did, because minutes of Vestry meetings make for boring sermons. However, one thing I will share is that the Vestry set some priorities for the work we'll undertake during the time we have remaining in this transition.

We ended up with five things we want to pay particular attention to. I'll share the complete list of the priorities in a future edition of the weekly eNews. But this morning, I want to talk about just one of them. It's this: Parishioners said that they wanted St. Paul's to strengthen the process by which members are called and equipped for ministry and leadership.

When I think about what it would take to do strengthen such a process, I think about creating a plan: decide on the outcome we want and then working backwards until there's a step-by-step plan for what St. Paul once called “equipping the saints for the work of ministry.” That's all well and good, and such a plan would probably result in the desired outcome. But there's a different way to go at this, one that I learned about during a Vestry retreat many years ago.

The retreat was led by a priest named Jim Hanisian, an old friend of mine. He baptized our two younger kids and was a part of a clergy support group I still belong to. Jim's retired in South Carolina now, but he was the rector of the Church of the Redeemer in Cincinnati for more than twenty-five years.

Redeemer is one of ten churches featured in a book by Diana Butler Bass called “Christianity for the Rest of Us.” It's a terrific book about mainline churches that are thriving while most mainline churches are in decline. When Jim became rector of Redeemer in 1979 it was a dispirited, failing congregation. When he left it was an active, growing church with services being offered simultaneously in separate worship spaces every Sunday and a serious commitment to serving their neighbors. Twenty years after Jim left, Redeemer is still thriving.

One year I asked Jim to come and talk about empowering lay ministry during a daylong retreat with the Vestry of the church I was serving. Now you'd think that Jim would come and teach us techniques about how to get people to do the things that the church needs to have done. After all, doesn't

“empowering lay ministry” translate into something like getting more people to teach church school, or recruiting them to work on the stewardship committee so they can help with the Every Member Canvass, or persuading people who know about money to serve on the Finance Committee ?

If Jim had taught us those sorts of techniques, the phrase “empowering lay ministry” would have meant “how to twist the arms of your fellow parishioners” – an understanding of empowering ministry that is far too common in the church.

What Jim did with us instead was to get us to think about these questions: “Where do I meet God?” “Where is God in what I’m doing?” “How is God calling me?” It’s his belief that what ministry is, is *what we are doing when we meet God*. Now, if you stop and think about that idea for only a few minutes – you begin to see what a radically different understanding of equipping the saints for ministry this is. Ministry is *what we are doing when we meet God*.

At the retreat, Jim had the members of the Vestry find a partner. He then asked each pair to find a quiet place somewhere and spend 20 minutes together. He told us to take each other’s hands, to pray for each other, and then, one at a time, to share a “God moment” with each other – a time when we experienced God in our lives. After the 20 minutes were up, he asked us to come back together and share those stories.

Now, my guess is that if I asked you to do something like what Jim asked the Vestry to do, you might feel a little uncomfortable. Sharing a time when you experienced God in your life with somebody you don’t know very well is outside of most people’s comfort zones, and it certainly wasn’t anything we did in the Episcopal Church I grew up in – where we didn’t talk about our experiences of God, and seldom mentioned the name, “Jesus” unless his name came up in a prayer we were reading out of the prayer book. We were all surprised, however, by how much we were encouraged by each other’s stories – how uplifting they were – and how important it had been for us to learn about where each of us had met God in our lives.

Jim’s belief was that most people have had an experience of God – a deep, valid experience of the holy. Here’s a story he told us. Jim had a parishioner who was a scientist with the Environmental Protection Agency. This man’s wife and kids came to Redeemer. He came, too – not because he particularly believed in God, but because he thought it was important for the family to be together on Sunday morning. This scientist had a scientific worldview. He was steeped in the rationalism that scientists need to be steeped in to do their work. For scientists, unexplained phenomena are not miracles to be amazed by. Unexplained phenomena are riddles to be solved using the tools of scientific method.

So, on the Sunday that today’s Old Testament lesson came up about the burning bush, the EPA scientist came to Jim at the coffee hour and said, “There’s no such thing. A bush can certainly burn, but a bush can’t burn without being consumed. I know about bushes, and I know about combustion. When something burns, it burns up.”

Not too long afterward, this scientist decided that it might be a good idea if he had a spiritual director – a person who would help him with his relationship with God and with his prayer life. Who knows what prompted him to do this? I blame the Holy Spirit, but who knows? In Lent, the spiritual director assigned him the passage we have today – the passage where God calls Moses from the bush

that burns but is not consumed. The spiritual director told the scientist to read the passage and then take on the spiritual practice of looking for burning bushes everywhere in his life. The scientist protested – “but I don’t believe this story. When something burns, it burns up!”

“Suspend your disbelief,” the spiritual director told him. “Imagine that burning bushes can happen and then look for them. Just do it for the forty days of Lent and see what happens.” At the end of the forty days, the scientist came to my friend, Jim, and said, “I never believed there were such things as burning bushes, but now I see them everywhere.”

In her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes about a book she chanced upon called *Space and Sight*. After western surgeons discovered how to perform safe cataract operations, they went all over Europe and America, operating on men and women of all ages who had been blinded by cataracts since birth. The book, *Space and Sight*, is a collection of accounts of these cases. In response, Annie Dillard writes about several cases from *Space and Sight* – how different people’s perceptions were – how differently they saw when they first regained their sight than how we “sighted” people see things. One of cases she writes about is the case of a girl whose cataracts had been removed. When the doctor took her bandages off and led her into a garden, the girl – now no longer blind – saw what she described as “the tree with the lights on it.”

Annie Dillard writes: “It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all, and I saw the tree with the lights on it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power.” She continues, “Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in space through the crack, and the mountains slam.”

I do not know what Moses saw when he saw the bush burst into flame. Moses was not a writer, like Annie Dillard. He was the reluctant leader of his people instead. But if I can’t say exactly what he saw, I know the results of his seeing whatever it was he saw. Moses returned to Egypt, faced down Pharaoh, and led his people from bondage to freedom. To use Annie Dillard’s words, I suspect Moses vision was “less like seeing than like being for the first time seen. . .” I suspect that God “knocked [him] breathless by a powerful glance.”

And what I would say to all of us is this: there are burning bushes everywhere. We need to suspend our disbelief. We need to imagine that they can happen and then keep looking for them. We need to look for them for the remainder of these 40 days of Lent, at the very least, and then keep searching.

If my colleague and friend, Jim Hanisian, is right, we’ll begin to see bushes flaming nearby wherever we’re doing ministry in Jesus’ name.

Under no circumstances do I mean to imply that, by the word “ministry,” I mean only things that go on inside the walls of this parish church. Sure, I’ve had Altar Guild members tell me about the deep sense of the presence of God they’ve had when they’ve worked with holy things. I’ve had choir members talk to me about extraordinary experiences of communion with God when they sing with others. And I’ve had more than one church school teacher tell me that they have seen God’s face reflected in the face of a child whose capacity to love and to receive love hasn’t yet been stunted by world-weariness and cynicism.

But I’ve also had people offer stories about God’s palpable presence while they were at work – how Jesus helped them in an especially difficult situation or guided them when they had a tough decision to make. These stories, and stories like them, are all stories of “God moments,” all experiences of God – moments when the “the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.”

And if we are still having trouble seeing what that blind girl once called “the trees with the lights on them,” let me suggest a few places where we are most likely to see them. They are the Lenten places – the places where the cries and sorrows of God’s people ring in our ears – where the powerful use their power unjustly. There are still far too many places where we hear the cries of people enslaved by oppression, hunger, war and disease. God continues to have compassion on the sufferings of the least and the lost, and, as he did long ago, God longs to lead people out of their bondage and into new life. And God still calls to us out of the burning bushes to help repair the world.

I can’t say where you will see bushes bursting into flame. Maybe it’ll be while you are praying for those whose lives have been devastated by the conflict in Ukraine or the Middle East or any of the other wars. Maybe it’ll be when you attend Tuesday’s Greater Cleveland Congregation listening session organized by St. Paul’s Core Team. Maybe it’ll simply be when you reach out to someone whose heart aches with loneliness. There are burning bushes everywhere. Let’s keep our eyes open, because if we want to be equipped for ministry, a burning bush is a darn good place to start.

Amen.