

HOLY GROUND AND BLACKBERRIES

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The Third Sunday in Lent

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I haven't preached on the story of Moses and the burning bush for a long time, so I decided to see what the Rev. Dr. Google had uncovered in the way of theories about how that event really happened. Apparently, some scientists and scholars, who clearly don't have enough to do, have come up with some interesting ideas.

A professor of cognitive psychology at Hebrew University (Professor Benny Shanon) in Jerusalem has determined that a particular bush, *ayahuasca*, commonly found in the area of Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai, gives off a gas that can be a hallucinogen. According to his theory, therefore, Moses was high when he imagined a conversation with God. The professor defended his theory by adding that while that cannot be proved, it was common in ancient religions (and even some modern sects) to use hallucinogens in religious rituals.

A second theory originated with an Israeli guide who happened to be climbing a peak opposite Mt. Horeb around the time of the winter solstice and saw a strange fiery glow coming from the wall of a cave on the holy mountain. Some astronomers and archeologists have also noted this phenomenon, theorizing that Moses was simply seeing a solstice event.

Based on these theories, the burning bush was simply smoke and (or?) mirrors.

Biblical scholars call this story a myth—a story deeply embedded in tradition that conveys some truth, explains some aspect of the culture. The story may be unprovable—too bad for those so-called scientists—but that makes it no less valid.

One of my favorite bits of poetry is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long poem "Aurora Leigh":

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

The Exodus from Egypt occurred about 1,400 years before Christ, but the book of Exodus was probably written during the Babylonian Exile, which occurred between 500-600 years before Christ. By then, Israel had become a blackberry people: living day-to-day in a foreign land, their own land having been conquered and decimated by a foreign army. (Sound at all familiar?) The people needed to remember *who* they were, and *whose* they were. They needed to reach back, in this case, about 800 years, to recall that God had brought them out of a horrible, life-draining situation once before and could be trusted to do so again. And in Jewish tradition, such truths were carried forward in stories. Didn't matter whether they were factual or not. They were still *true*.

And truth for the Israelites is also truth for us. Why do we hear this story now, in mid-Lent? We'll hear the story of the Exodus itself at the Great Vigil of Easter. Among all the optional readings, that story is the one *required* reading before we announce the Resurrection. And this story of the burning bush, of Moses being called onto Holy Ground, is the prelude, the casting of the play where Moses is chosen to partner with God in this great drama.

Why do *we* need to hear it? What is the truth in it for us?

Are we a blackberry people, so focused on everyday needs and wants that we miss the reality that, as Browning wrote, "earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God"? Do we get so caught up in making things run smoothly, in fulfilling obligations, in making sure the necessities of life are met, in checking things off a list? I say "we" because I know I'm guilty of such list-making and consider a day well spent when stuff is accomplished. I could pluck that blackberry bush clean! But in this story, we're reminded, in a dramatic—if unproven—story that there is Holy Ground to be discovered in places we would not expect it.

Let me tell you a story, a true story. Some time ago, I joined several dozen other Christian clergy for four days of study and prayer at an old Jesuit retreat center just outside of Boston. The huge sprawling facility, spread over several acres—not unlike Mariandale—had once been a Jesuit seminary, but times change, and it is now primarily a

residence and healthcare facility for elderly Jesuits, with some space set aside for outside groups like ours to rent for conferences and workshops.

The geography of the building is simple. Each of the several four-story wings of the building converge in a rotunda, which is topped by a beautifully decorated dome. Under the dome, the acoustics are phenomenal! You can lean over the railing on any of the four floors and whisper and be heard clearly on the ground floor. On our last day together, our group decided to sing our closing prayer and we gathered on the fourth floor, just below the dome, where we knew the sound would be rich and inspiring.

This had been a conference on spirituality and we had begun and ended each day with meditation: in the mornings, we used the ancient *lectio divina* to pray the scriptures; at the end of the day, before a quiet guided meditation, we chanted the beautiful Taizé hymn, *Ubi caritas*. The Latin words are simply: *Ubi caritas, et amor. Ubi caritas, deus ibi est.* “Where charity and love are found, God is there.” It was that simple hymn we chanted under the dome that last day, accompanied by a single flute.

We sang quietly, with all the harmonies that had emerged among us during the week, and it was a glorious sound. The music seemed to vibrate the very air inside the rotunda. As we sang, an elderly priest came to the railing one floor below us, drawn by the sound. He leaned over the rail as far as he could, peering down into the rotunda below him, straining to see where the music was coming from. He listened, he looked, shook his head in confusion, and started to walk away. We kept singing. He came back to the rail, leaned over it again and listened for a few seconds, then straightened up, and still shaking his head in confusion, he walked away. He never looked up.

I can’t help wondering if God doesn’t see us the same way: beauty and grace flowing down around us—and we don’t look up. I even wonder if God had tried to get Moses’ attention a few or a dozen times, but Moses never looked up. He was doing his blackberry thing and didn’t expect God to interrupt—until he simply could not avoid a burning but unburnt bush. *That* got his attention!

This is the season for soul-searching. This is the time to look around, both literally and spiritually, to see where God is manifest in our lives. This is the season to find Holy Ground, take off your shoes, and ask God what it is you need to know, to do, to be. To *BE*—as a parish and as individuals.

Holy Ground is not necessarily a lovely place. My congregation, St. Andrew’s in Brewster, now meets in a chapel on the grounds of an Episcopal convent, but exactly three years ago, we realized—maybe as a result of this same story from Exodus—that our burning bush was the cranky undependable furnace in the old stone church. We decided then that we needed to give up the building in order to refurbish the Church, the congregation.

God speaks in and through any means to get our attention, so be alert! Once Easter comes, we will liturgically enter a season of celebration. Outside of Church, trees will be greening, flowers erupting, the air will be sweet and maybe even—Please God!—peace will come to Ukraine and the streets of our cities. Some things are certain, others are hoped for. After Easter, we will proclaim that Christ is risen, we will be grateful for Resurrection and hope it seeps into every corner of our world.

But it’s still Lent. I offer you a Jewish Sabbath prayer that never fails to touch my heart:

Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, “How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it.”

(from *Gates of Prayer*, Reform Jewish Sabbath Prayer Book)

It’s Lent. May God help us to listen, to search—inwardly especially, but outwardly as well—for the ways God calls us, drawing us closer, offering us grace. Don’t be like that old Jesuit who never looked up. Don’t sit round and pluck blackberries with your shoes on. It’s Lent. Pay attention! AMEN.

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9.