

“REVIVE #1: THERE'S A BURNING BUSH NEAR YOU”

(Exodus 3:1-12)

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[PROP NEEDED: (1) Tiki Torch filled with lighter fluid (2) Lighter]

[Cornerstone UMC.; 9-3-23]

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1. [11am ONLY... Read CEB Text: Exodus 3:1-12 and Pray].

2. “*REVIVE: to return to consciousness or life; to become active or flourishing again.*”¹

A--All of us go through seasons of life where we seem to just "go through the motions," lacking energy, passion, and meaning -- on the verge of physical & emotional burnout.

B--Many people (including perhaps some of us) have experienced this very thing over the last few years, with some *actually* burning out, as well!

C--And in such times, in order for us to survive and thrive, we need to experience *revival*.

3. Well, for the next five weeks, we're going to be sharing in a new worship series called “**REVIVE**” in which we’ll be using lessons from the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt to remind us of a few things it will take for us to experience personal & corporate revival, & for us all (like the Israelites eventually did) to find & live in our own “promised land.”

A--And *FIRE* is a great metaphor for the first quality needed for this. If you've ever built a campfire, or gathered around a bon-fire at a school pep rally or somewhere else, you know what I'm talking about -- when its burning, there's almost a mysterious "calling" power that and attracts people to it.

B--So it's not surprising that in today's scripture, we find God using fire to bring about revival in the life of Moses by calling him (an *ordinary* man) to an *extraordinary* task.

[9am ONLY... Hear the story from Exodus 3:1-12, “*1 Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian’s priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God’s mountain called Horeb. 2 The LORD’s messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn’t burn up. 3 Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn’t burning up. 4 When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” Moses said, “I’m here.” 5 Then the LORD said, “Don’t come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.” 6 He continued, “I am the God of your father, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God.” Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the LORD said, “I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. 8 I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of*”

that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. 9 Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. 10 So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."]

4. Now, most of us have grown up learning at least some part of Moses' story -- how he was born the son of Hebrew slaves, but raised to life of privilege by Pharaoh's daughter.

A--Yet, like many of us today, his experiences in Egypt left him stressed, tired, & burned out in dealing with the selfishness of people around him --I don't know about you, but I can definitely relate to that feeling, because I've felt that (over the last 5-6 years), it seems that our society has grown and more self-centered, prideful, and impatient... to the point where everyday civility & compassion are becoming a rarer & rarer thing.

B--And, as sometimes happens today, that same sense of frustration and impatience eventually led Moses to become violent, killing an Egyptian he sees beating a Hebrew.

C--As a result, he flees Egypt to the land of Midian (nearly 300 miles away), where he seeks revival & a new start as an itinerant shepherd -- it's here that we encounter him.

5. Verses 1-2 of today's text talks about how God called to Moses from a "burning bush" that wasn't consumed by the flame. ²

A--Now, it's important to remember that the focus of this story is *not* about understanding *how* the bush could do that, but about the nature/meaning of God's *CALL through* it.

B--It's a story which teaches us that true revival in *any* person (like Moses) or group (like a family, church, or nation) begins with us *answering God's CALL*, and that **[GRAB TORCH...]** if we'll open the spiritual eyes, we'll see "burning bushes" all around us! --

C-- **[LIGHT TORCH and hold aloft for a time]** ...Things that mysteriously attract and call to us *today*, just as they did to Moses long ago, inviting us to what God would have us do in our world.

D--Not all of them are miraculous or dramatic like Moses experienced here. But I believe there *are* several characteristics that ALL of God's "burning bushes" have, and I want us to look at three today. **[SET TORCH IN STAND]**

6. First, God's "burning bushes" for our lives are often **UNEXPECTED** -- that is, they're *extraordinary* calls that often meet us in the *ordinary* experiences of life.

A--Consider Moses: when all this happened, he was out in the fields tending sheep, doing his usual daily chores -- he wasn't out *looking* for God, or for a religious experience.

1--When you arrived for worship today (in-person or online), I'm guessing you *weren't* expecting me to light a tiki torch in the Sanctuary, were you?

2--But that's the point, isn't it? ...God's "burning bushes" for our lives tend to *find US* right smack in the middle of our ordinary, busy routines at home, work, school, and even in our church life.

B--They're *not* usually things we go *looking* for, but things that *find us* along our paths. ³

1--For example, sometimes I believe that God even uses life's tragedies and challenges to get our attention so that He can speak to us.

2--God doesn't *cause* these things, but just as he did with the burning bush, He often *redeems* and *uses them* as "wake-up" calls so we'll be more receptive to hearing Him speak. ⁴

3--When my wife and I first learned about her breast cancer back in 2006, it was quite *unexpected*. Yet, God used her surgery, treatments, and recovery as a wake up call to remind us all of the preciousness of life and our family.

7. But not only are God's "burning bushes" *unexpected*, they're also usually **UNCOMFORTABLE** -- they often call us out of our comfort zones to tasks and work that may not be easy.

A--For some of you, having this lighted torch in the Sanctuary makes you uncomfortable and nervous -- but that's what "burning bushes" do!

1--Remember that Moses fled Egypt in fear of his life, and when we find him in this story, he'd already been living a life of refuge as a shepherd with his new home and family among the Midianite people for the last 40 years!

2--In other words, when this happened, he was in his retirement years (60+ old), and I'm sure that he wasn't exactly ecstatic about the prospect of leaving his life of familiarity & comfort to go back to Egypt & lead the Hebrews out of slavery.

B--I remember when I first heard my call to be a pastor in the ordained ministry, it felt very uncomfortable because I knew I'd have to give up some things to answer it.

1--I knew I'd have to give up going where I wanted to go, living where I wanted to live, so that my Bishop could appoint me where he or she felt I was needed.

2--Trish and I knew we'd probably have to give up our children making any long-lasting friendships at school, since U.Methodist preaches move around.

3--And yet, for the sake of answering *GOD'S* call, Moses was willing to give up his own comfort (and so were we) -- not easily or without struggle, but to do it nonetheless. That's the way it usually is with God's "burning bushes."

8. A final characteristic of God's "burning bushes" is that they're almost *always* **UNQUENCHABLE** - meaning... they don't go away easily -- they're *persistent!*

A--Remember that in this story, the fire wasn't a dramatic flash of light, but was instead -- like the flame of this tiki torch -- a steady, slow-burning flame that never consumed the bush.

1--You know, some of the hottest & most powerful fires in the universe (stars) are like that: they burn at millions of degrees deep within, at their core, slowly over the course of billions of years. ⁵

2--Well, in my experience, that's the way God's "burning bushes" work, as well -- they aren't always dramatic or miraculous (though they can be), but more often take the form of deep, slow burning "gut" feelings that just won't go away.

3--...Perhaps like the mysterious attraction calling some of you watch this *torch* instead of listening *to me!* :-)

B--I've found that when God wants us to do something, His call is kind of like those trick birthday candles that you think you've gotten blown out, but then "miraculously" (and even frustratingly) keep coming back after you blow them out. ⁶

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9. So, what's *your* "burning bush"? ...the "Calling" or "Vision" or "Dream" that God has placed on your heart?

A--Is it a call to start or facilitate a new small group? help with our children's or youth ministries? consider a call to the ordained ministry? help with one of the mission ministries or experiences you heard about last week on Missions Sunday?

B--Whatever it is, if it's truly from God, then it's something that will be *Unexpected*, *Uncomfortable*, and also *Unquenchable*. ⁷

C--And when you and I not only *identify* it, but also *respond* to it, we'll *begin* to experience REVIVAL -- feeling not only *less* frustrated and stressed, but also *more* joyful, blessed, & fulfilled, with a new sense of purpose, passion & meaning in life! ⁸

10. [PRAYER: "O God, thank you that you didn't just create us to exist in this world, but for our lives to have purpose and meaning. Thank you that you planted within each of our hearts a specific Calling that helps achieve that purpose and meaning, and that you give us longings and desires so that we can discern and claim those Callings from you, and in the process experience REVIVAL. Remind us that all of our seeking ultimately leads us to you, our Creator and Redeemer, and that through the power of your Holy Spirit we can achieve our fullest potential as men, women, children and youth for you. We thank you for the "goal" of heaven in each of our lives, and how our Callings from you help us get there. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen."]
11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Definition of "revive" from Merriam-Webster dictionary at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revive>.
- ² A lot of speculation has been made about this "burning bush". Was it really on fire? Or did its foliage merely reflect sunlight in such a way, or have a certain color, that made it *appear* to be on fire? In the end, this story is *not* really about the *nature or cause* of the burning bush one way or another, but more properly on how God *used* this experience to call an ordinary man (Moses) to the extraordinary task of leading God's people out of bondage in Egypt -- it is about the CALL of God, rather than on the mechanics of HOW that call was communicated.
- ³ Verse 4 says that "*When the Lord saw that [Moses] had turned aside to see, [then} God called to him out of the bush.*" In other words, God used the burning bush merely as a tool to get Moses' attention so that Moses would listen when He (God) spoke. Moses, of course, wasn't expecting the "burning bush" OR God's voice to come from it.
- ⁴ Perhaps you've heard it before: "*Sometimes the only way we'll look up is when we're flat on our back.*"
- ⁵ Consider the Sun in our own Solar System: it burns at nearly 28 million degrees Fahrenheit at its core (about 10,000 degrees on its surface/photosphere; 3.5 million degrees in its corona), and although it has already burned at these temperatures for nearly 4.5 billion years, it will do so slowly and "peacefully" for another 5 billion years or so, before it depletes its hydrogen resources.
- ⁶ I'm not saying that we can't say "No" to God's call. We can. But a true call of God on your life is hard to get away from. An announcement in a church bulletin once read: "*Attention: Last person to leave the Sanctuary, please extinguish the eternal flame*" -- think about it... you'll eventually get the humor! Throughout biblical history, people have tried to extinguish, ignore, and run away from the "eternal flames" and the "burning bushes" of life: Moses tried by giving excuses; Jonah tried by getting on a boat bound for the other side of the known world; before his conversion, St. Paul tried by hunting down and executing Christians; I tried by making a deal with God that I'd be a "Christian attorney" if He'd leave me alone about this "ordained ministry" thing. But since God's "burning bushes" are unquenchable, it eventually catches up to us and His loving ways prompt us to respond affirmatively.
- ⁷ Put another way: what are you most *passionate* about? What brings you the most *excitement* and *joy*? Where is it that you would most like to make a *difference*? Doing *what*?

⁸ **TWO WORDS OF CAUTION:** (1) recognizing God's dream for our lives always involves our feelings and emotions, which do not always easily follow God's will and way. As such, we need to be sure that the dreams we feel called towards are consistent with the will of God. After all, genuine dreams and goals from God for our lives will never contradict His word in the Bible; (2) sometimes people will ask *"If I've discovered God's dream for my life, should I quit my job to go do it full time?"* Sometimes "Yes." But most of the time, a person's work/career merely supports or subsidizes our dream, rather than replacing it.