

***Fire on the Mountain***  
Exodus 3:1-15  
Sunday, September 27, 2009  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

A few days after the Station Fire started on August 26, I happened to be driving north on Fair Oaks Avenue about 10:00 p.m. One's eyes could not help but be drawn upwards to the sight of fire on the San Gabriel Mountains above Pasadena. For one who's lived here for only two years, I still am not used to the idea that fire can get this close. As I looked at the flames in the middle of the darkness that night, I found the sight to be on the one hand, eerie and frightening, and on the other, strangely beautiful.

On September 3, officials announced to the public that they had determined that the fire was the result of arson. Someone deliberately set a fire near mile marker #29 on the Angeles Crest Highway.

George Carlin, the American comedian who died on June 21 at the age of 71, was often found humor in the strangest of places. For example, he once joked by saying, "The very existence of flame-throwers proves that some time, somewhere, someone said to themselves, You know, I want to set those people over there on fire, but I'm just not close enough to get the job done."<sup>1</sup>

What is it that causes a person to deliberately set a fire? Is it that strange mixture of fear and beauty that draws one to destruction?

And if arson wasn't bad enough as a cause of the fire, a front page article in this morning's *Los Angeles Times* suggests that a huge miscalculation by fire officials may have inadvertently accelerated the growth of the fire. "On the first day, the Forest Service expected that the Station fire could be controlled by the following afternoon, with no buildings lost and with minimal harm to the natural treasures of the San Gabriel Mountains."<sup>2</sup> As a result of that incorrect estimation, the Forest Service cut back on the number of helicopters dropping water on the fire as well as cutting back on the number of fire crews deployed to the critical area. In short, containment projections

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<sup>1</sup> George Carlin (1937-2009), "George Carlin Quotes," <http://georgecarlin.tv/george-carlin-quotes/>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Pringle, "Station's Fire Strength Was Miscalculated," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-fire27-2009sep27,0,6025715.story>.

have been broadly optimistic throughout the life of the fire. The article ends with the words, “the fire is still burning.”

What is it that distinguishes a destructive fire from a holy, life-giving fire?

Helen Keller, the American author and educator who was born blind and deaf, knew about the latter. She wrote, “Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow.”

For time immemorial, there is something about mountains which spoken to the sacredness of life. Tonight, PBS television premieres a six-part documentary entitled “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.”<sup>3</sup> Created by award-winning film-maker Ken Burns, the series shows our national parks in all of their glory – including Yosemite and other magnificent California treasures.

Irma Zaleski, the author of several books about the Christian journey, tells a story that happened to her when she was 5 or 6. She says, “One night, I was awakened by my grandmother leaning over my bed. There was a noise of a great storm outside. Grandmother picked me up and carried me out onto a big veranda which ran all along the front of the house. Look! she said, and turned my face toward the mountains, Look, this is too beautiful to sleep through. I saw black sky, torn apart every few seconds by lightning, mountains emerging out of darkness, immense, powerful and so real. Thunder rolled among the peaks. I was not frightened – how could I be? I was awed. I looked up at my grandmother’s face and, in a flash of light, I saw it flooded with wonder and joy. I did not realize it then, of course, but now I do, that what I saw was ecstasy. My grandmother was the first to point out to me a door to joy.”<sup>4</sup>

John Muir, the famous naturalist who is also considered the first modern environmentalist, wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea,” Public Broadcasting System (PBS), <http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/>.

<sup>4</sup> Irma Zaleski, “The Door to Joy,” *Parabola*, Summer 1998, 50.

<sup>5</sup> John Muir, quoted in “Before New York” by Peter Miller, *National Geographic Magazine*, September 2009, 137.

Which brings us to one of the formative passages in the Hebrew Scriptures – the story of Moses and the burning bush. Biblical scholar, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, says of the Exodus story that “we are quickly put on notice that this narrative concerns no ordinary happening, and we must not expect to understand it through our usual categories. The narrative features an angel (messenger), a bush that burns but is not burned, and God’s own voice. At the outset, we do well to recognize that this narrative is of a peculiar genre, a vehicle for the appearance of God’s presence, God’s first presence in the exodus narrative...”<sup>6</sup>

One day as Moses is tending the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, on the slopes of Mt. Horeb, he comes upon a strange phenomenon that shakes him to the core of his being. He sees what seems to be an angel of the LORD appearing to him out of a flame coming from a bush that is burning but is not consumed. Yahweh calls his name from the bush: “Moses, Moses!” and Moses says, “Here I am” – the traditional response to God’s call. When the LORD God tells him that he is standing on holy ground, Moses understands that this is the God of his father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

How does one describe what happen to Moses? The word that biblical linguists use to refer to this phenomenon is “theophany”<sup>7</sup> which means “the appearance of God to a human being.” I believe that the LORD God sends theophanies to all of us throughout our lives – sometimes to comfort us, sometimes to stir us up, sometimes to call us to task.

Being overwhelmed by what is happening, Moses hides his face. “He would not look at God...for to see God is to impinge upon God’s holiness and freedom. Thus Moses’ act of submissive deference is undertaken so that God’s sovereignty is not crowded...”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 711. Dr. Brueggemann is Professor of Old Testament at the Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia (United Church of Christ).

<sup>7</sup> From the Greek word, “theophaneia”.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

A poem<sup>9</sup> by R. S. Thomas, a Welsh poet of the late twentieth century, speaks to the kind of deep silence Moses must have experienced when he hid his face in the presence of Yahweh:

But the silence in the mind  
is when we live best, within  
listening distance of the silence  
we call God. This is the deep  
calling to deep of the psalm-  
writer, the bottomless ocean  
we launch the armada of  
our thoughts on, never arriving

It is a presence, then,  
whose margins are our margins;  
that calls us out over our  
own fathoms. What to do  
but draw a little nearer to  
such ubiquity by remaining still

In the midst of that awful and majestic silence, Moses hears Yahweh begin to speak about the harsh conditions in which the Israelite children in bondage in Egypt by the Pharaoh. Yahweh says, “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me and I have seen how they are oppressed. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey.”

“Moses understands immediately and intuitively that this summons from the God of promise and liberation is a threat to his very life. So it is with God’s call.”<sup>10</sup> Although Moses offers several excuses why he is the wrong man for the job, “Yahweh does not find his excuses compelling...,” according to Dr. Brueggemann. “Thus Moses’ sense of his own inadequacy is not met with an assurance of his adequacy, but with an assertion of Yahweh as the God who will be present. Moses wants to know the name, but all he receives is a formula already known, and an enigma that yields no name at all.”<sup>11</sup> And “Moses’ protest about poor speech is not answered by an assurance of good

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<sup>9</sup> R. S. Thomas, quoted in “Christianity and Literature: The Paradoxes of R. S. Thomas” by the Rt. Revd. Lord Harries of Pentregarth, a lecture presented on March 5, 2009 at Gresham College, London, England, <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?PageId=108&EventId=840>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

speech, but by an assurance that Yahweh presides over speech and gives tongues as they are needed.”<sup>12</sup>

Moses comes to his last, desperate excuse: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” And Yahweh says, “I AM WHO I AM... Tell them I AM has sent you to them. For I am the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

Dr. Brueggemann says that in a wider sense, “this extended narrative invites [all of us to reflect] upon the nature of vocation, and the power of ‘call’ in the life of faith. An uncalled life is an autonomous existence in which there is no intrusion, disruption, or redefinition, no appearance or utterance of the Holy. We may imagine in our autonomous existence, moreover, that no one knows our name until we announce it, and no one requires anything of us except that for which we volunteer. The life of Moses in this narrative, as the lives of all people who live in the narrative of faith, is not autonomous. There is this One who knows and calls by name, even while we imagine we are unknown and unsummoned.”<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann’s reflection on the Exodus text is deeply stirring and powerfully written, for who of us has not tried to live an autonomous life – unbothered, unnamed, unsummoned, alone in our self-absorption?

When candidates for ministry in the church are examined, they are asked to describe their own call, to describe the experience of what it means to know that God has called your name and summoned you.

One of the first memories I have of being called was when I was five years old in the church in Chattanooga, Tennessee where my father was the pastor. At the end of the service, he gave an altar call and many people came forward to pray. Although only adults had gone forward, something spoke to me and I wiggled out of my mother’s arms to go and squeeze into a place at the altar that seemed just big enough for me.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 720.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 719.

R. S. Thomas, the Welsh poet I quoted a few moments ago, also wrote these lines:

Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future,  
nor hankering after  
an imagined past.  
It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary, theologian, musician, and philosopher, said, “In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> R. S. Thomas, from *Later Poems 1972-1982* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 81.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Schweitzer (1875 – 1965), quoted at [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/in\\_everyone-s\\_life-at\\_some\\_time-our\\_inner\\_fire/12658.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/in_everyone-s_life-at_some_time-our_inner_fire/12658.html).