

# "Why Believe the Bible? Because of a burning bush."

Exodus 3:1-12

Luke 4:16-22

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church  
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by Rev. Dean Snyder

It is an ancient set of writings, and if we were to be honest we'd probably have to admit that it is an odd collection of writings.

Some of the writings are history loosely told, more to make a theological point than to report the facts. Some of the writings are legends told for centuries through oral traditions - legends that became more and more colorful before they were ever written down. Some of the writings are short stories that came from the imagination of their writer, told to make a moral or an ethical point. The Bible includes all sorts of literature and all sorts of writings. There are hymns here and poetry and folk songs and anthems and personal correspondence and rants and polemics. If you know where to find it, there is even some erotica in the Bible.

The Bible was written by people who assumed the scientific knowledge of their times. The writers of the Bible had no special information about science; they just followed the assumptions that everyone else did about the world around them. They didn't know that the earth revolved around the sun or that there were other planets. They didn't know about germs or bacteria or molecules. They had no special knowledge about medicine or mathematics or geology.

The writers of the Bible often also assumed the same political and cultural views as everyone else around them. In the Bible, you can find examples of all of the human fallacies and short comings of thought and of tolerance of the writers' times. You will find, in the Bible, examples of militaristic attitudes, you will find examples of sexism and from time to time assumptions about the inferiority of women. You will find homophobia sometimes in the Bible and xenophobia and such politically outdated thoughts as the divine right of kings.

The Bible was written by human beings - imperfect people whose imperfect assumptions and conclusions are scattered throughout this book. The Bible includes inconsistencies. It includes failed prophecies that never came true. It includes superstitions and it includes ideas that today we would surely consider to be outmoded.

And yet, knowing all that, I find myself as I get older, living more and more inside the pages of this book. Because, in spite of all of the human imperfections and inaccuracies, there are themes within this book that speak to the deepest questions of my soul in a way that nothing else I've ever found does. There are themes inside of this strange collection of writings that help me feel at home in the strange world in which we live in a way that nothing else ever has, including (as helpful and as interesting as they are) the scriptures of other religions and traditions.

I want to talk over the next couple of months, in a series of sermons, about five themes in the Bible that compel me - five themes in the Bible that I don't believe are articulated anywhere else in the world in a way adequate to nurture the questions of my spirit and my soul. I find in this book (and there may be more) five

themes that become for me, the word of God in which I feel myself addressed by God in a way that my life has a different purpose and meaning than if I had never read or seen a Bible.

A friend of mine, Vance Ross, the pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Hyattsville said that he spent the first half of his life reading the Bible, but lately when he opens these pages, the Bible reads him. I find five themes in the Bible that put my life into context, that becomes for me the word of God in such a way that I can say that the Bible is the book of my salvation.

The first theme that I want to talk about is the theme of the call. The theme of the burning bush.

Moses, one day is tending his flocks when he sees a bush that is burning and not consumed. He goes to pay attention to it and out of the burning bush comes a call. The theme of call appears throughout the Bible like the rhythm of a drum beat. Again and again, people testify to being called. Noah is called to the foolishness of building an ark. Moses is called to lead a rebellious people out of slavery. Samuel, as a young boy, is called in the middle of the night to he knew not what. David is called to become a soldier and then a king. Jonah is called and tries to run away from his call and then in the belly of the fish, the word of God comes to him a second time. This time, he answers the call.

The prophets, one after another, are called out of lives of normalcy into lives of testing and trouble. Mary is called to become a parent. Jesus is called to proclaim good news to the poor. The disciples, in groups of two and three, are called to follow Jesus. The apostle Paul on the road does not have a conversion experience. If you read the book of Acts carefully, you will see that he was not converted on the road to Damascus, he was called to be an apostle.

I think that were it not for this book, there is no where else in the whole world, that I would have any sense of this thing that the Bible calls a burning bush. Calls a call. I think that there is no where else in the world that articulates the concept of call in such a way that it helps me understand the times when there has been a burning bush inside of me.

The call is different from everything else. The call is counterintuitive. There is a way that the call just doesn't make sense by the norms that we usually live our lives. The call is not ambition. I would understand ambition. The call is something different than ambition. If Moses had merely been ambitious, he would have had it made. He had a wife and some sons and he was tending some flocks of his father-in-law in the land of Midian. All Moses had to do was wait long enough for his father-in-law to die and he would have been one of the richest men in his part of the earth.

The call is something other than ambition. It takes us in another path than our ambition. The call isn't an attempt to find happiness and peace. The call is different than a longing for happiness and peace in our life.

You know what the church really thinks about the concept of being called? You know that if you come to the church and tell the church that you have experienced a call to ministry, do you know what the Board of Ordained Ministry will do? The first thing that the Board of Ordained Ministry will do is to send you for psychological testing. That's in reality what the church thinks about a call, and the church is not all wrong. Because if the call is something you can fix with some psychotherapy, I would advise you to do it.

No one who was called in the Bible lived a peaceful or a happy life afterwards. The call takes you into a life of trouble and frustration. Look at Moses trying to lead the children of Israel through the desert into the promised land. Look at the prophets. Then, look at Jesus. The call is different than a longing for happiness or peace in your life.

Apparently the call is not a condition. I could sort of understand if the call were a condition within us. Some longing or craving that is a part of the human psyche and the human condition. But, apparently, Moses was

able to live quite peacefully for many years raising his children and tending his flocks until one day in the desert, in the middle of no where, there was a burning bush who talked to him.

Apparently the call comes when we are 16 or when we are 42 or when we are 86. The call is not a condition that we live with. Instead, the call is an event that reaches out and claims us. I don't think there is really anywhere else in the world other than this book that helps us understand this strange phenomenon of a call. I don't think there is any logic in the world that helps us understand why it is that anyone would answer a call.

I went out to lunch this week. One of my favorite lunches is to go to *Fresh Fields* and sit at the counter by the window. I take a book with me usually, and I read a little bit. Then, I sit and watch people walking on the sidewalk while I eat my sesame tofu and millet for lunch. I was feeling a little overwhelmed and oppressed this week, so I took a book of poems by Toyoka Kugawa and I told the staff I was going to be gone an hour for lunch. Then I turned around and said, "don't be surprised if I'm really gone an hour and a half."

I got my tofu and millet and my oxygenated water from *Fresh Fields*. I was all ready to eat and to drink my water. When I was finished with that, I would get a cup of *Fresh Fields* green tea and sip that so I would have an hour, maybe an hour and a half of reading the poetry of Toyoka Kugawa, sitting and staring and watching people out the window. I was about five minutes into lunch when a voice came over the loud speaker and said, "Dean, please pick up line one." I realized that I had never heard that before and that there must be a new manager or worker at *Fresh Fields* named Dean. I went back to eating and reading my poetry and five minutes later there was another voice over the loud speaker that said, "Dean, please pick up line one." I stopped reading and finally I got into the poetry again and it happened a third time. I packed up my poetry and finished my lunch and after only fifteen minutes came back to work in the office because you really can't do something else when you persistently hear someone calling your name.

That's the only reason, I think that anyone would answer a call. It is a counterintuitive thing to do.

George Price died two years ago in obscurity and poverty in England. George Price, unrecognized mostly, was one of the greatest scientific minds of his century. He was a believer of evolution. A defender of the theory of evolution. His first marriage ended after only eight years because his wife was a Christian and he was a firm Atheist. There may have been other reasons, but that was one of them.

He wrote a number of very important papers defending the theory of evolution. One of his outstanding papers was one entitled *Evolution and Covariance*. What it did was to explain how the theory of atheist evolution could be consistent with the idea of altruism. One of the problems with the theory of evolution had always been that if we're really motivated by survival of the fittest, how is it that we have the capacity to be altruistic? His paper explained this in such a way that it was considered a great leap forward in defense of theories of evolution. Then, at 47 years old, in 1970, George Price woke up one morning and discovered that he believed in God, and that he couldn't shake it.

He spent the first year of his life after he discovered he believed in God doing exegesis of the Gospels and trying to explain the contradictions that he found in the Gospels. He wrote a paper called *The Twelve Days of Holy Week*. The paper demonstrated how there could be no contradictions in the Gospels. How the contradictions in the Gospel could be explained if Holy Week had lasted, instead of from Sunday to Sunday, twelve days. He wrote the paper and in the process of writing that paper, he came to the conclusion that being a believer wasn't really just about figuring out how there might not be contradictions in the Bible.

He committed himself to follow Jesus by serving the poor. He left the prestigious post he had in England and he moved into a shoddy apartment in a very troubled urban neighborhood. He devoted the rest of his

life to caring for alcoholics on the street and for aged people in poverty in nursing homes that no one else could or would care for -- bathing them and caring for them tenderly. He lived in poverty, and became sick himself because his poverty was so extreme that he ate a poor diet.

A friend wrote to George Price and asked, in effect, "How could you, of all people do this? How could you, who explained scientifically what altruism was as a part of evolutionary theory and the survival of the fittest, how could you live in poverty and become ill caring for other people?" George Price, after brooding over this for three months wrote a letter back to his friend in which he said, "Do you think that this is what I *want* to believe in? Do you think this is what I *want* to believe in?"

Not all the time, but sometimes within us there is burning bush. Very rarely is the burning bush something that we want to believe in or something that we want to respond to or to do with our life. When there is someone calling your name, it is very hard to pay attention to anything else.

Listen, if you were smart enough and articulate enough, and you locked me in a closed room, it is conceivable to me that you might be able to convince me that there is no God. If you were smart enough and articulate enough, and had enough time, it is conceivable to me that you might be able to convince me that Jesus Christ was just another guy. But I am convinced that you will never, ever be able to persuade me that there is no burning bush, that there is no call. You will never, ever be able to persuade me that there is no call because I know that there is a call. Because there has never, ever been any place else that has been able to articulate it for me in such a way that makes any sense of my life, I pay attention, with all of its shortcomings and faults, to this book.

I heard a story a long time ago that sticks in my mind. It was by a journalist who was reporting from Korea after the Korean war. He came across a clinic in an isolated place and there was a nurse inside the clinic, a nun, who was treating the gangrenous wound of a Korean peasant. The journalist said he could hardly stand to be in the same place, but he was standing there watching the nun treat this old, ugly terrible wound. He said to the nun, "I wouldn't do that for all of the money in the world." The nun paused and looked him in the eyes and said, "neither would I."

I pay attention to the Bible because of a burning bush.