

3 Lent
March 7, 2010
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Light a Fire”

Lent invites us, today, to witness and examine an extraordinary event in the “story of the Burning Bush.” Moses has been away from Egypt for many years. He is married and has children of his own. He is the right arm of his father in law, Jethro, and an important person in the community and throughout the hill country of Midian. The Burning Bush is God’s telephone call to Moses, just to get his attention and say: “Moses I need to talk to you.”

If a tree burst into flames for no apparent reason on Cummins Hill or Moon Valley Road or at Mount Haven, it would probably get our attention real quick. We would be surprised however if any one stood up at announcements and said: “yesterday I had a strange experience. A bush on my property burst into flames and the voice of God started to speak to me.”

We would be equally surprised if that was all the person said. We would want him to go on and tell us what God said. We wouldn’t promise to believe him, but we would want to hear the end of the story, before we passed judgment. He could have been dreaming. He could have been drunk or on medication. He could have had an authentic religious experience.

Anyway, in this particular episode the parishioner said: “The bush burst into flames; God spoke to me from the bush; he said there was a small parish in Central America with 650 children that needed our help and we should look into finding ways to help them, that Christ’s Gospel may be served and his Kingdom grow.

Hearing this we might be skeptical. No one could blame us for that. There are strange people who live on some of the hills around Milford, compared to the rest of us who live closer to the river or in town. The least we would possibly say is: “God works in mysterious ways, let’s investigate and see if we can possibly help.”

One of my favorite movies is “Castaway” with Tom Hanks, where he is stranded on a Pacific Island, 5,000 miles away from anywhere. Every time a plane or ship passes, he is totally unprepared with any kind of signal. Half the audience in the cinema are screaming “light a fire”, while Tom is frantically running up and down a beach in the dark waving his arms.

The lesson is clear: “When you have something to say: light a fire.”

So what about this story:

“You are down on your luck. Your health is shot. None of your family talks to you anymore, because of the bad decisions you have made in your life. You have no friends and you see no future, only death and darkness to ease your pain.”

Then along comes this teacher, who teaches you how to esteem yourself again. He heals you and raises you up. He turns you into a leader and gives you a job. He builds a community of friends around you and tells you that God loves you and has designed great things for you.

The young teacher stands by his teaching to the extent that he is prepared to die a cruel death that you may attain happiness and the Kingdom God promised you. Further, by dying all your offenses have been wiped clean. You are now a right and worthy person in the eyes of the entire community.

If you learned 3 days later that your young teacher had come back from the dead, what would you do?

I would light a fire. No one is going to believe you. You know that, don't you? Now you have a message. You can't keep this to yourself. You have to tell someone. You could run up and down Fifth Street waving your arms in the dark. Or run to the top of Sawkill Rd. No one is going to take any notice. Only three things get any notice in Milford. "You shoot the mayor, you declare bankruptcy, or you apply for a building permit."

No, if you really want to get people's attention, you really do have to light a fire.

To tell everyone that Jesus had risen from the dead after 3 days the Early Christians went out and lit a fire. They called it their Paschal Fire of Easter. They lit a fire because they had something incredible to say: "Their young teacher and healer was the first person in the world to rise from the death. You have to tell someone. You have at least to tell the story. You know people are not going to believe you. The least you can do is get their attention. You light a fire.

When you light a fire, you are into Evangelism and you have become Evangelist. An Evangelist is someone who has something important to say and they are going to say it even if they have to light a fire to get your attention.

Patrick around the year 424AD built the most famous Easter fire in the history of Christianity. He built his fire at the Spring Equinox, the most sacred night of the Druid calendar. Patrick chose to build his fire high on the hill of Tara, towering above the Central Plain of Ireland. Tara is called the 'Hill of the Kings' because it was there that the high kings of Ireland were crowned. He built his fire because he wanted to send a message: "Christ, the real king has arrived, he has risen, pay attention. Take notice."

This year on the 3rd day of April we will build our Paschal Fire on 5th Street outside the front door of the church. We do so on Holy Saturday night because we Christians have a message and we want to get people's attention. "Jesus is risen, let us go to meet him."

For me there is nowhere else to be on Holy Saturday night than standing waiting for the light of Christ to enter the church.

Last week Bill Lewellis the retired Communications Officer for the Diocese of Bethlehem, wrote extensively in his column in the Morning Call, the local paper for Bethlehem and Allentown. The question he poses his readers was: "Have you ever had a religious experience?" Have you ever had an experience where you simply knew that God was speaking to you and the divine had entered your life?

It is my belief that most of us have religious experiences, but they are of two distinct kinds. The first is something that happens that is beyond coincidence and truly shakes us in mind, heart and body. It could be related to the death or illness of someone truly close to us. It is always a serious matter and one we tend not to talk about to anyone who is not a close confidant. A religious experience of this nature lights a fire in our consciousness and in our memory, that remains all our life.

The second kind of religious experience is not quite so direct, but I believe it is still a very authentic experience of God in our life. It is when we look back and reflect and we discern a pattern or something that is beyond coincidence in our lives. We are able to connect the dots and we feel that God has not only been speaking to us, but guiding us also.

Perhaps it happens when someone is telling you their 'faith story' or you are reading the pages of a book. You have to stop or put it down, so that you can compute the words in your head and your conclusion is: "That has happened to me."

The story of the Burning Bush as miraculous and dramatic as it reads, should also tell us that God also speaks to us. If we have time to listen, in prayerful moments, in the words of a friend, reading a good book, reflecting on scripture, and especially in this season of Lent, God our God has something to say to us, and he will get our attention even if he has to light a fire.

Amen+