

Maybe it's an occupational hazard, but I have come to love pithy quotations. You know what I mean, those little gems that cut right to the heart of a matter in a few phrases?

One in particular that I like is a little quote from Elie Wiesel. He said,

“Whenever an angel says "Be not afraid!" you'd better start worrying. A big assignment is on the way.”

Think about it. That makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Every angel of the Lord I've ever heard from – and I've only heard from them in scripture – has had to throw out that disclaimer, “be not afraid.”

I'm sure there are people who, upon waking and finding an angel in their bedrooms might not be afraid, but I am not one of them. Strange creatures in my bedroom at night strikes me as a perfectly reasonable basis for fear. If appearances of angels of the Lord were common in our day here in Georgia, I have a feeling the angelic speeches in the Bible would begin not so much “be not afraid,” as, “don't shoot!”

Angels of the Lord are otherworldly. Of course we're afraid. We're afraid by their appearance, not just the content of their message.

So to Elie Wiesel's sage line about angels and assignments, I would like to add my own pithy bit of advice. Feel free to use it: beware of the burning bush!

That's my advice: beware of the burning bush! If you don't want your life to be disquieted and disrupted, well, then run the other direction.

When my brother's step-son joined the navy, my brother who is himself a marine, offered this bit of advice to him, “don't be first, don't be last, and whatever you do, DO NOT VOLUNTEER FOR ANYTHING!”

Think of how different Moses' life would have turned out had he simply heeded the kerygma of that well-worn advice: when you see a burning bush in the wilderness, run the other way!

I cannot imagine Moses was looking for more excitement in his life. We met Moses last week down among the reeds and rushes – you remember how the story went. Pharaoh tried to stamp out the Hebrews by murdering their first-borns. When the midwives Shiphrah and Puah refused to carry out his dastardly deeds, he went to more extreme measures. In order to preserve her child's life, Moses' mother put him in a basket and floated him down the river with his sister nearby to keep watch. Pharaoh's daughter found him and Moses' sister sprang to action, offering to find a nursemaid to assist her in raising this newfound baby. When the dust has settled not only is Moses safe from Pharaoh's oppression, Pharaoh's own daughter is paying Moses' mother to raise her own child!

When he was older, Moses was taken to be raised in the household of the very man who sought to kill him. As a Hebrew male, he would have had a telltale mark of the covenant on his body, and yet he was raised in the Egyptian palace. He was a made man, to steal a line from the old gangsters, but what an uneasy way to have it made – sort of like being one of the later wives of Henry VIII – never fully sure what might come.

Then one day, walking through the fields, Moses came across an Egyptian overseer abusing a Hebrew slave and in a fit of rage, Moses killed the Egyptian.

Then it all changed. The household of Pharaoh's daughter might have been able to overlook the fact of being a Hebrew, but when a Hebrew killed an Egyptian in plain sight with witnesses, justice would be demanded, a harsh and cruel justice.

So Moses went on the lam. He ran.

Moses went into hiding in Midian. If Egypt represented excitement and culture, civilization, if you will, Midian was its opposite. Midian was to Egypt as Lizard Lick, NC is to Atlanta.

In the hillbilly world of Midian, Moses ran into some women by a well and the Bible makes a long story short in this case: Moses got married and went to work for his father-in-law herding sheep.

It would seem to me reasonable after such events that he should avoid excitement. A wanted man should not seek high profile assignments.

It would seem to me that a man who has already cheated death should avoid the supernatural.

It would be good and sage advice for Moses to heed the advice, “Beware the burning bush!”

If I had been him, I would have run like there was a pack of rabid dogs chasing me.

There’s no telling why God chose Moses. The Bible doesn’t say. One of the early lessons of childhood learned by those of us who survive to adulthood is that when something that is not supposed to have flames shooting out of it does, it is best to leave it alone. Perhaps God knew that the sort of person who was needed for the job was the sort who would indeed walk right up to a shrub with sparks spitting out of it to get a better look.

Whatever the reason, God and Moses met.

What strikes me the most about this interchange is not the incendiary shrubbery but rather the argument that ensued.

Getting Moses to agree to take on the mission is not a slam dunk by any means. I suppose the sort of person that would walk right up to this pyrotechnic pyracantha is also the sort of person that has no compunction whatsoever about replying to the almighty, “thanks for thinking of me, but I’m just going to take a pass on this one.”

Five times they go back and forth, God and Moses. Point, counterpoint.

I wonder sometimes whether the writer of Exodus tells us this story in this way so that we’ll have a little foreshadowing of what is to come between God and Moses. To say that the relationship is tumultuous would not be too much of an overstatement. Back and forth go Moses and God all through the years. The relationship between God and Moses seems at times to be marked with argument, whining and obstructionism.

It is not a distant relationship. It is a close, pushy, difficult relationship.

But before we witness this merry-go-round. Before we learn of God’s faithfulness to God’s sometimes feckless followers, Moses asks for God’s name.

Remember that naming is important in the Bible! Only what is significant is named. But what we don’t perhaps realize is that it’s something of a trick question and if God answers, then Moses will know the nature of the deity with whom he is arguing.

In the ancient culture of Egyptian magic, to be able to name a deity is to exact control over it, to have the power to coerce. In seeking God’s name, the wily Moses is seeking to know God’s very essence and thus to be able to claim control of the relationship.

The ancient culture was full of deities and idols, talismans upon which the people placed their deepest hopes and into whom they confided their deepest fears. They could be transported here and there and when good fortune followed, it seemed the deities were

strong and favored their owners. And when bad fortune followed, the deities were weak or disfavored their owners. To know the name of your god was to be able to control it.

To Moses' question, "What is your name?" an answer is given.

"I am." I am alive. I am real. I am not dead stone, but the living God, the holy one of Israel, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

That's the common translation. But I like a different translation. It's a murky phrase, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, and there is disagreement about how to translate it. I recently encountered a way of reading it that opened my eyes to a world of meaning. It can be correctly translated this way, "I will be with you."¹

What an extraordinary promise to counter all of our arguing and bickering with God about a calling. "I will be with you."

If I were Moses I'd have run from that burning bush as fast as I could because of what God was calling me to do: to wander in the wilderness with a mercurial, tempestuous, unpredictable pack of God's people.

Once Moses approached that burning bush, he couldn't not be called anymore. He could ignore it, he could turn his back on it, he could walk away, but he couldn't *not be called*.

That's true for all of us. There's a tendency to think of the idea of being called to service to be something reserved for other people. You know, most of the sermons that I have heard about these calling stories seem to be addressed to ministers who need to be reassured of God's presence with them in the midst of ministry to God's people. Now maybe I've been spoiled but I've never looked at it that way. When it comes to calling, we're all fair game. We're here. We've come to the burning bush.

¹ For more, see Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses.

You see, that's the irony of faith! If you don't want to hear what the burning bush has to say, stay away from it!

There was a pulpit I preached from once a number of years ago. I don't remember where it was – I had just graduated from seminary and I was preaching the same sermon in ten different churches through the summer, doing pulpit supply to make ends meet before my fellowship started in Indiana. I want you to know I do take preaching very seriously, but if ever there were a suitcase sermon to be delivered on a moment's notice, it was this sermon. I walked into the tiny Presbyterian church in the middle of nowhere, an hour and half from anywhere to preach my sermon to a congregation of four very, very elderly cousins who comprised the congregation and the session of this church and when I walked in to put my manuscript on the pulpit, I noticed that the pulpit looked a bit odd. It's not uncommon for pulpits to have carvings on them. They are usually pretty standard fare, ships' hulls to represent the church, or a descending dove to represent the spirit. This pulpit had a carving of a burning bush! Here I was with a suitcase sermon for a congregation I'd never met and would never see again about to stand up in a pulpit with a burning bush on it and proclaim the word of the Lord!

"Holy Smokes," I thought, "I'm not up to this! Send someone else, Lord."

If there is a mercurial, tempestuous, unpredictable argument going on, it's within ourselves!

You see, you're here. You've come up to the burning bush when the easy way is to walk away. Conventional wisdom says that if you want the easy way you avoid the places where expectations are a way of life. Beware of the burning bush. Don't be first, don't be last, and **DO NOT VOLUNTEER!**

In Matthew's version of the Gospel story, he takes great pains to set Jesus up as the new Moses. There are five great teaching discourses in Matthew just like the five books of Moses. When Jesus gets up to give his great sermon, his exposition of the law, just like Moses he stands on a mountaintop and preaches about God's way for us.

Here in the passage we read this morning, Jesus, the new Moses, tells us we are going to have to take up our crosses and follow him. What could possibly be enough to convince us that this is a reasonable course of action?

"I will be with you."

"When they ask you who sent me, what shall I say?"

Tell them "I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

You're here because you want more. Maybe you're here because tending your father-in-law's sheep has gotten a bit boring. Or maybe you're here because the fishing in the sea of Galilee isn't quite what it used to be. Or maybe you're here because you heard Jesus was coming by and so you've climbed a tree to get a look.

Whatever the reason, you've come to the burning bush and God is speaking.

What's the word to you today? And what are you going to do about it?

When confronted with a calling, the church and the individual, just like Moses, have to reach conclusions about what to do.

In some ways, God has given us a pretty clear path. The instructions are clear. We are a voice for deep hospitality and inclusion. We are place of nurture for God's children of every age, a companion to walk with youth through adolescence and the elderly through aging and everything in between. To be called here is to be called to a way of life.

It's a little dangerous to talk about calling because we might start to get some ideas about how to do God's work in the world. It's sort of like when our young folks in Double Digits heard about the famine in Africa and figured that we ought to do something about it. I feel called to perplex you with a question: what is God calling you to do? And I feel called to give you an answer: do it.

You see, the call of Moses was God's response to the cries of God's people. As absurd as it surely seems, to the pain of the world, God's response was to send someone to make God's case. God sent Moses. I read somewhere that for God to send Moses was akin to a supreme court justice being accused of murder and saying, "I'll let the first year clerk handle my defense."²

"But Lord, I can't speak for you... I'm not articulate. I have a stutter."

"I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

"But Lord, I'm afraid of those people. They're not like me. I won't know what to say."

"I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

"But Lord, I could spend that money ten other ways. I'm sure I'm not saving enough for a rainy day."

"I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

"Lord, my sermon's not good enough. I'm not ready to speak for you!"

"I will be with you howsoever I will be with you."

"Don't be first, don't be last, and DO NOT VOLUNTEER!"

"Take up your cross, and follow me."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Carlyle Marney, Priests to Each Other