

“Ablaze but Not Consumed”

Scripture: **Exodus 3:1-12**

Rev. Lucy Baum

August 30, 2026



When I was a kid, the church I grew up in used to go on a retreat together every summer to Kerr Lake, right on the border between North Carolina and Virginia. And one of the highlights of the retreat each year was the bonfire night. The men of the church would build a huge pile of wood all carefully arranged so that it would burn really hot and bright for about an hour and then settle into a bed of hot coals that was perfect for toasting marshmallows. There is no joy in the world like being eight years old with the heat of a bonfire aggravating your fresh sunburn and a recently aflame marshmallow charring your fingertips and flooding your bloodstream with cheap sugar an hour past your usual bedtime. God bless my parents for giving me that joy and also for dealing with the inevitable crash that followed. The morning after bonfire night, we kids would come back to the fire ring and poke around in the ashes that would often still be warm, and we noticed a strange thing that would sometimes happen. Sometimes there would be a big chunk of wood left in the firepit, that was all charred and blackened on the outside, but that was still pretty much the same size and shape as it had been before the fire. It still looked like a solid log, but if you poked at it with a stick (and we always poked at it with a stick) it would instantly crumble into nothing. It had been all burned and hollowed out from the inside so that what looked like a log was really just an empty husk.

Well, I don't know if Moses ever toasted any marshmallows, but he definitely knew how it felt to be burned up and hollowed out.

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You remember the story, Moses was born a Hebrew boy in a time when the Pharaoh of Egypt was killing Hebrew boys, and so his mother and his sister hid him in a basket and floated him down the Nile, where Pharaoh's daughter spotted him among the reeds and took pity on him and raised him as her own in the Pharaoh's palace. And not only that, Moses's clever sister Miriam arranged to find a "nurse" for Pharaoh's daughter to care for the baby and orchestrated it all so that Moses could be nursed by his own Hebrew mother even as he was adopted by the Egyptian princess.

Surely it must have been an open secret in the palace, that Pharaoh's own daughter had rescued a Hebrew baby in defiance of her father's command, and I am personally delighted by this little trio of women who acted with subversive justice and empathy right under Pharaoh's nose. But it must have been a lonely way for Moses to grow up. Never able to openly claim who he belonged to, and knowing that his adopted grandfather would really rather that he and all his people were dead.

But Moses did grow up, and something of his mother and his sister and his adoptive mother's rebellious spirit was in him, because the story tells us that one day, when he was grown, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk, and some revolutionary urge flared up within him and he intervened. He fought back against the brutality of the Egyptian slave order and he tried to protect his people. But it all went horribly wrong, and instead of sparking a movement for justice, he killed that Egyptian

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and hid his body in the sand. And the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened and he tried to convince them that they should not be fighting each other, their own people! But the Hebrews said to him, who are you to tell us what to do? Are you going to kill us like you did that Egyptian yesterday?

And in an instant, Moses's brief attempt at revolution comes to an abrupt halt as he realizes that he's wanted for murder and that his own people don't trust him. He has failed utterly. He knows in that moment that when the Egyptians look at him, they see a Hebrew criminal, and that when the Hebrews look at him, they see an Egyptian oppressor. And what does he see? When he looks at his hands, he sees not the hands of a liberator, but the hands of a killer. If you had poked him with a stick in that moment, he could have crumbled into nothing, just ashes. So, he runs away. He flees into the wilderness of Midian and lives there in exile for 40 years.

I wonder what those 40 years were like for him—He marries a Midianite girl, Zipporah, and takes a job tending her father's flock, and I imagine there were some beautiful and happy times there in Midian. But I wonder if once again, he found himself in a land where he did not quite belong, only a Midianite by marriage, not by blood. I wonder if he had dreams about Egypt, and about the people he had left behind when he fled—his mothers, his sister Miriam, his brother Aaron. I wonder if he led his flock so far into the wilderness because he needed to be in a place that was as lonely as he was. The Hebrew says that

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when he came at last to the mountain of God, he had gone so far that he was actually “behind” the wilderness, as if to say that he had come to a place that’s so far off the map you can’t get there from here.

And there, in that empty place, out of the corner of his eye, Moses saw something. A flicker of light in the shadow of the mountain. And when he looked again, he saw a bush blazing with fire, but not consumed. Somehow that bush was still green and fresh like the morning dew had just dried from its leaves and yet it was completely ablaze with a burning, crackling light. Here there was heat and light, but no destruction. And Moses, who had spent 40 years feeling like a charred log—destroyed but no longer able to produce heat or light turns aside to see it. Of course he does. Moses *turns aside* because he sees something that could never happen in the world he knows—a fire that burns without consuming.

The Hebrew here for turn aside doesn’t just mean that he goes right or left. It has the sense of veering off of one path you were on and stepping onto another road, another path entirely. Sometimes it can mean turning aside to wander astray, but sometimes it’s the kind of turning aside that can save your whole life. Moses turns aside to see how it can be that there is a fire that does not consume.

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And when God sees that Moses has turned aside, God says to him, “Moses, Moses, take off your shoes, the ground where you are standing is holy, I am the God of your ancestors, I have heard the cry of my people and I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

Can you imagine the spark of hope Moses must have felt at God’s words? Somewhere in the ashes of his heart, there was a flicker... And can you imagine the fear he must have felt immediately afterwards? God, you can’t send me to Pharaoh. I tried to be a liberator once before and look what happened. When you have been badly burned it can be terrifying to hope, and so no sooner does Moses hear God’s call than he answers with an uncanny echo of the words the Hebrews threw in his face on his last day in Egypt: Who are you to tell us what to do? Who am I to go to Pharaoh?

When your hopes have been disappointed, when you’ve been brought face to face with your own guilt and complicity, your own emptiness, it can be very hard to imagine that anything else could be true about you. Even after 40 years in the wilderness of Midian, the harsh words of Egypt are right there on Moses’ tongue. Who am I?

And God doesn’t answer his question exactly. God says to him simply, I will be with you.

At some point, we all ask the question, Who Am I, God? Who am I to do this thing that attracts me and terrifies me at the same time? Who am I to parent this child? To speak

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out for justice? To take this job? To make this hard decision? To openly claim the truth about myself? Who am I, God? And the answer is the same. I will be with you. Whoever and whatever you are is enough, because you can trust who God is. And God says, I will be with you. Barbara Brown Taylor often prays this prayer before she preaches or speaks, “Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire. For if you are with us, nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, nothing else matters.”

God says, It will be different this time, Moses, because I will be with you. And this time, when you go back to Egypt, you *will* bring the people out, and you will come back to this place together to worship me here on this mountain.

You see, the world operates like a bonfire that can only burn as long as it is constantly stoked with fresh fuel to consume. And, back in Egypt, Moses only knew the fire of the world. And when he killed that Egyptian it was because he tried to fight violence with violence, and violence is one of the world’s favorite fuels for the flame. But it will leave you charred and hollow. You can’t bring the people out of Egypt using Egypt’s tools of oppression and control. If you try, you will simply become the new Egypt, and you will lose yourself in the fire. In fact, there are a lot of ways the world would be glad to burn you out from the inside—violence is one, hatred is one. Fear and competition are another. Any system that tells you that it’s eat or be eaten, or that your worth is predicated on what you produce, or that those who disagree with you are not just wrong, they’re evil, or that

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your security comes from what you have the power to consume and control, that's the world's fire. And it will absolutely use you up and leave you empty sooner or later.

But God's fire... God wants to set you on fire but not burn you up. God made you to live a life that is ablaze with heat and light and also as green and fresh as the morning dew. God's fire burns with the truth that love wins, that there is enough, that you don't have to prove yourself, that the other you fear is actually your kin. Do you see it? Will you turn aside to find that life?

I believe that you can. Like Moses, it is possible to step off of one path onto another, not by your own power, but because God will be with you.

In his book "Let Your Life Speak," Parker Palmer describes his own experience of turning aside and stepping onto another path—he had been working as a community organizer in Washington DC, doing work that aligned with his Christian faith and his ethics, work that he cared about deeply, and yet, the longer he did it and the harder he worked at it, the more depressed and empty he felt. He says, "After five years of conflict and competition, I burned out. I was too thin-skinned to make a good community organizer. I had allowed ego and ethics to lead me into a situation that my soul could not abide. I was disappointed and ashamed. But we are led to the truth by our weaknesses as well as our strengths. People like me are raised to live autonomously, not interdependently. I had

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been trained to compete and win, and I had developed a taste for the prizes. But something in me yearned to experience communion, not competition.” He goes on to describe how he left his work in Washington and went to live in a Quaker community outside of Philadelphia, where he began to seriously question his vocational path and to untangle the knot of ambitions, fears, and values that had been consuming him. Eventually he found his way back to teaching and to writing, and discovered a way of living that set him on fire but did not burn him up. He says, “burnout in my experience results from trying to give what I do not possess — but when the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself — and me — even as I give it away.”

Turning aside to find the life that burns but does not consume was not easy work. Not for Palmer, and not for Moses. Moses was terrified to return to Egypt—he practically begged God to send someone else. And Palmer says of his time with the Quakers, “though I felt called to stay at Pendle Hill, I also feared that I had stepped off the edge of the known world and was at risk of disappearing.”

And that is often what it feels like, isn’t it? Remember that the Hebrew word for turning aside can mean wandering astray as easily as it can mean turning onto the path of life. We would love there to be some reassurance as to which kind of turning aside it will be before we do it. But listen to what God says to Moses in verse 12, “this is how you will know

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that it was I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

I can imagine Moses thinking, “that sounds great for future Moses, God, but how does it help me now?” Unfortunately, God does not usually give us assurances *before* we respond to God’s call. It is only as we take each next step in faith that we are able to look back and see how the path has unfolded. It is after God sees that Moses has turned aside that God speaks. It is after the people have been liberated that they will worship together on the mountain. It is a real risk to turn aside when you can’t see yet how it will turn out. To go back to Egypt with nothing but hope and God’s promise to be with you. To step off the edge of the world. But the alternative is just to keep burning until you have nothing left.

So, listen. God will be with you. You will not be able to tell at every step of the way that you are still on the path of life, and you will have to take some steps just on faith, but someday when the deed is done, you will find yourself right back where it started, on the holy ground of the hope that kindled the fire in you in the first place, and you will worship God. May it be so, Amen.