

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner  
The Third Sunday in Lent (C)  
Sunday, March 24, 2019

*Exodus 3:1-15 | Psalm 63:1-8*  
*1 Corinthians 10:1-13 | Luke 13:1-9*

Last Sunday I had the privilege of being with our younger parishioners in the chapel during the 9:00 service.

We talked about Lent and what we put away during this time of the church year.

You know, the church puts away the Alleluias, the flowers, the Gloria, things like that.

We talked about specifically the things we put away as individuals – things we stop doing during Lent to remind us what a special time this is.

We also talked about some of those things we take on.

After all, Lent isn't just a time of self-denial.

It is also a time to do those things that draw us to God.

It is when we undertake our own journey to the cross on our way, God-willing, to resurrection and rebirth.

So I had some ideas of things they could "take on" during Lent... like reading Easter stories or reading the Bible together as a family.

I brought with me various Bibles and showed them different ways to hear the stories of God throughout history.

There is the Action Bible, written like a graphic novel.

There is the Lego Bible, which uses something very real for children to illustrate the story of the Bible.

I brought the Storybook Bible and the Student Bible...

You get the picture.

But after last Sunday, I realized I may have set us all up for disappointment.

Because the God portrayed in the Bible is difficult to understand.

Sure, we know the big Bible stories.

Noah.

Abraham.

Sarah.

If you grew up as I did, you heard all those Bible stories – probably told to you by a preacher or a parent who meant well.

But when you got older you heard them again and thought, “wait a second...”

Of course, the way the world got THE Bible is not the way we got our Bible.

And by that I mean, it wasn’t always a nice, neat book in with chapters and verses, and gold on the pages and our name printed on the front.

Don’t get me wrong.

I’m part of the problem.

I often give people, children, babies – Bibles.

Neatly wrapped with a little note about how glad I am that they are going to be a part of this wonderful family called Christians.

But I never write in my welcoming note, “Caution! Handle with care!”

“Contents may be confusing!”

I don’t write that I think it doesn’t really begin with Genesis – it begins with Jesus.

You see, the story of the Bible begins when Jesus’s tomb was found empty.

Let’s be honest, if those brave and wonderful women had shown up on the third day and Jesus’s body was still there, well – game over.

But, when there were people who dedicated their lives to the risen savior, suddenly there was interest around documenting and recording the life, work, and witness of Jesus.

Eventually, the apostle Paul and others went to major port cities to share the story of Jesus with those who didn’t grow up knowing the Law and the Prophets.

When these new Gentile Christians – people like you and me who did not grow up as Jews – began to follow this amazing Jewish rabbi they wanted to know the sacred texts about which he taught during his ministry.

Face it, you can’t understand John’s prologue – “in the beginning was the Word” if you have never read “In the beginning God created.”

And so in the first and second centuries, it was because of the Gentiles that all Christians embraced and bound together these ancient Hebrew Scriptures as sacred texts.

And that is how we got the bones of the Bible we have now.

But Gentiles were never fully prepared for what it meant when Moses encountered God in the burning bush.

The truth is, ancient Biblical authors were very comfortable portraying the one true God in complex identities with different attributes.

First of all, the spiritual being that the Bible calls God is transcendent and the author of all reality as we know it.

Any knowledge that we have about such a being will always be limited and partial because a Creator by definition is above and beyond that which is created.

But the story of the Bible also describes a God who wants to connect with his creation in a genuine partnership to reveal the divine purpose and plan.

And so when God appears to people in the Bible, it's both understandable to them (people can see, hear, and interact with God as a person), but it also breaks their categories at the same time.

It's not just that understanding God is complex; it turns out that this God is also extremely complex.

Because this portrait of God in the Bible and how he reveals himself in ways that both make sense and simultaneously blows apart our understanding of reality is particularly hard for me.

I want clarity.

I want certainty.

One commentary I read about the burning bush said

“The challenge in our own lives is to recognize our own ‘burning bush’ moments: when a sign appears, we must have the patience and faith to embrace it, understand it, and be inspired by it.”<sup>1</sup>

I'm sorry... What?!

That is so like a religious scholar to package something complex and complicated up into a pithy saying.

It makes us feel like somehow we are not religious enough when something doesn't make sense.

Which is when, in my experience, we decide we can't read the Bible because it is too complicated.

Too confusing.

Too old-fashioned.

Too ridiculous for modern people.

That is why I'm going to take another tack.

My goal today is to encourage you – and me – to be open, to the God of our history, the God who loves us so that we might see and know God more deeply.

Not to know God fully!

That, I truly believe is beyond us.

But to know God more intimately.

Because I believe God wants to be in relationship with us.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jtsa.edu/understanding-the-burning-bush>

Each of us.

The claim in the ancient texts of the Bible is that God is transcendent.

A divine being through whom we live and move and have our being.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the Biblical authors understand there is only one God.

But this same God appears to humanity and the world in many different ways.

And, as I said, when humanity encounters God in the Bible, it usually breaks our categories.

Like when we see a bush that is burning but not consumed.

Or when we encounter God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The God of the Bible is not a being we fully understand.

And yet, this same God wants to deeply draw us closer to him in such a way that we can't help but to want to understand more.

Which is why I think the burning bush is both a sign for us and a promise – today – thousands of years later.

The promise is this: God shows up.

When we least expect it.

And in ways we don't fully understand.

But God shows up.

Our job is not to control or comprehend or contain – but just to recognize.

All we have to do is stand there.

And possibly remove our sandals.

The point is to be available, to be known by God so that we can participate in God's acts of redeeming love.

Even if we don't understand.

Even if we don't necessarily agree.

But to be in conversation.

Because that is how we are trying to live our lives anyway.

We may not understand everything or everyone.

We may not agree with everything or everyone.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:28a

But we want to stay in the conversation.

We want to engage.

We want to participate.

We want to be in relationship.

With one another.

With the world.

With God.

It can be easier to throw up our hands or just turn away.

It can be tempting to try to explain away evil or suffering or assign blame.

It is especially enticing to try to shave off the rough edges of the Bible.

But it is more effective – and, dare I say more Christian – to be available.

To turn toward God.

To lean in.

And in the process, possibly to right an injustice, to lift up the down-trodden, or to just love your neighbor.

The Bible is complicated.

The church is unnecessarily confusing.

And religion is all of that and more.

But God is not.

This Lenten season, simplify.

Look for those signs God gives you.

Not because the Bible says so.

And not because the church tells you to.

But because deep in your heart, you know I AM, the God of all, the ancient God of Israel, the God who came to earth in the person of Jesus, is your God – who loves you like a Father loves his child.

If we can live like that, then the Bible stories we tell aren't just stories anymore.