SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

The Flame in the Dirt: Living as the Burning Bush

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost · August 30, 2026
Readings: Exodus 3:1–15 · Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b · Romans 12:9–21 · Matthew 16:21–28

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Movement 1: The Reluctant Shepherd and the Scrappy Bush

If you trace the life of Moses before he ever heard the voice of God, you don't find a grand, pious hero. You find a man whose life had completely crashed and burned.

Forty years before our reading today in Exodus 3, Moses was a prince of Egypt. He had power, status, and wealth. He saw the horrific oppression of his Hebrew people, and he decided to do something about it. But he tried to bring justice the only way his primal human nature knew how: through force, anger, and violence. He struck down an Egyptian taskmaster and buried his body in the sand. Moses tried to light his own fire to save the world, and in a single day, it burned his entire life to the ground.

His own people rejected him— *"Who made you a ruler and judge over us?"*—Pharaoh put a price on his head, and Moses fled for his life into the deep wilderness of Midian.

Fast forward forty years. Four decades of silence. Moses is no longer a prince; he is an eighty-year-old exile in the back end of nowhere, tending sheep that don't even belong to him—they belong to his father-in-law, Jethro. His ambition is dead. His name is forgotten in Egypt. He has accepted a quiet, monotonous life of survival.

And it is precisely *there*—at the end of Moses' self-reliance—that God shows up.

Moses leads the flock to the far side of the desert, near Horeb, the mountain of God. Suddenly, he sees a bush ablaze with fire. Now, in the dry desert, a bush catching fire isn't unusual. What caught Moses' attention was the nature of the fire: the bush was burning, but it was *not being consumed*.

Notice what God chooses for this encounter. God doesn't inhabit a towering cedar of Lebanon or a majestic oak tree. God chooses a *seneh*—a dry, thorny, scrappy desert scrub bush. The smallest, least impressive piece of vegetation in the wilderness.

Before God ever spoke a word, that bush was a message: God delights in inhabiting the lowly, fragile, and ordinary stuff of this world.

Movement 2: The Fire That Doesn't Consume and the Present "I AM"

Moses says to himself, *"I must turn aside and look at this great sight, why the bush is not burned up."*

This is the turning point. Transformation begins when we break out of our automatic, primal survival routine long enough to pay attention to what God is doing.

When God sees Moses turn aside, God calls to him out of the bush: *"Moses, Moses!"* And Moses says, *"Here I am."* Then God says something extraordinary: *"Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."*

Why take off his sandals? Sandals are what protect our feet from the rough terrain. They are our boundary, our defense, our way of maintaining control over where we walk. To take off your shoes is to stand raw, unarmored, and vulnerable directly upon the earth. It is an act of total physical surrender.

Moses asks God, *"If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me,' and they ask, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"*

And God replies with those legendary words: אהיה אשר אהיה — **"I AM WHO I AM."**

God does not say "I Was"—dwelling in Moses' failed past in Egypt. God does not say "I Will Be"—promising a stress-free, predictable future. God reveals Godself as the absolute **PRESENT**. God is the reality right here, right now, in the dirt beneath Moses' bare feet.

Psychology teaches us a fundamental truth about human nature: anxiety lives almost entirely in the future—worrying about what might happen, how we will survive, how we will protect ourselves. Depression and shame often live in the past—ruminating on what we ruined, who we used to be, or what was done to us.

But peace—and God—is only ever found in the *present moment*. When God says "I AM," God invites Moses out of the ghost-town of his past failures and out of the terrifying phantom of his future anxieties, anchoring him right here in the present flame.

And look at the nature of that flame: **it burns, but it does not consume.**

In our primal physical world, fire eats fuel until nothing is left. That is how human effort operates when we try to run life on our own juice. We hustle, we control, we defend, we self-preserve—and eventually, we burn out. But divine fire is different. God's presence inhabits physical matter without destroying it. God does not vaporize the ordinary wood of the thornbush to make it spiritual; God sanctifies the wood so that it glows with eternal light.

Movement 3: "Get Behind Me, Satan" — Primal Drives vs. Transfiguration

Now, keep that burning bush in your mind as we leap centuries forward into our Gospel reading from Matthew 16.

Jesus has just revealed to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Peter—bless him—reacts instantly. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him: *"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"*

And Jesus turns and says to Peter words that ring down through history: "**Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.**"

Why such a harsh rebuke? Is Peter evil? No! Peter loves Jesus. Peter is acting on his basic, primal human nature.

Our primal physical nature is hardwired for two things: **seek comfort and avoid pain.** It is the evolutionary drive of self-preservation. Peter's instinct is entirely natural: *Protect the leader. Bypass the suffering. Avoid the cross at all costs.*

Our primal drives are not inherently evil. They serve us well—they keep us alive, they tell us to eat when we are hungry and run when a bear chases us. But here is the crux of Jesus' message: **our primal drives make a great servant, but a terrible master.**

Left to themselves, our survival instincts turn into a prison. If your highest worldview is self-preservation and avoiding discomfort, you will spend your entire life running away from anything that costs you something. You will run away from sacrificial love, away from deep vulnerability, away from justice, and away from the call of God.

Jesus exposes the tragic paradox of the purely physical life: *"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."*

If you try to hoard your physical life—if you treat yourself like dry wood to be protected at all costs—you end up rotting anyway. But if you yield your life to the Cross, placing your self-protective ego on the altar, your life becomes like that desert thornbush. It gets inhabited by the holy fire of God. Carrying your cross isn't about seeking out misery or hating your physical existence; it is the courageous act of saying: *"My comfort is no longer my god. I choose love over self-preservation."*

Movement 4: Integration, Counseling, and *Simul Iustus et Peccator*

So how do we live this out? How do we integrate our physical, messy, primal human selves with this transforming spiritual presence of God?

In my work in counseling and psychology, I frequently work with couples who are struggling in their marriage. And every once in a while, one of the partners will look at the chaos between them and say: *"I can't work on this relationship right now. I have to go fix myself first. I need to get my own stuff together, and once I am healthy and sorted out, then I'll come back and work on the marriage."*

It sounds so reasonable on the surface, doesn't it? It sounds responsible.

But week after week, month after month, the delay continues. Because the clinical reality is this: **people don't heal in a vacuum.** You cannot fix a relationship from a safe distance. The truth is, if you wait until you are emotionally pristine and fully sorted out before you engage your relationship, you will wait forever, and the relationship will die in the delay. Real growth only happens when you step back into the messy arena of connection, raw and imperfect, and say: *"We are going to work on this together right here in the dirt."*

How many of us do the exact same thing with God?

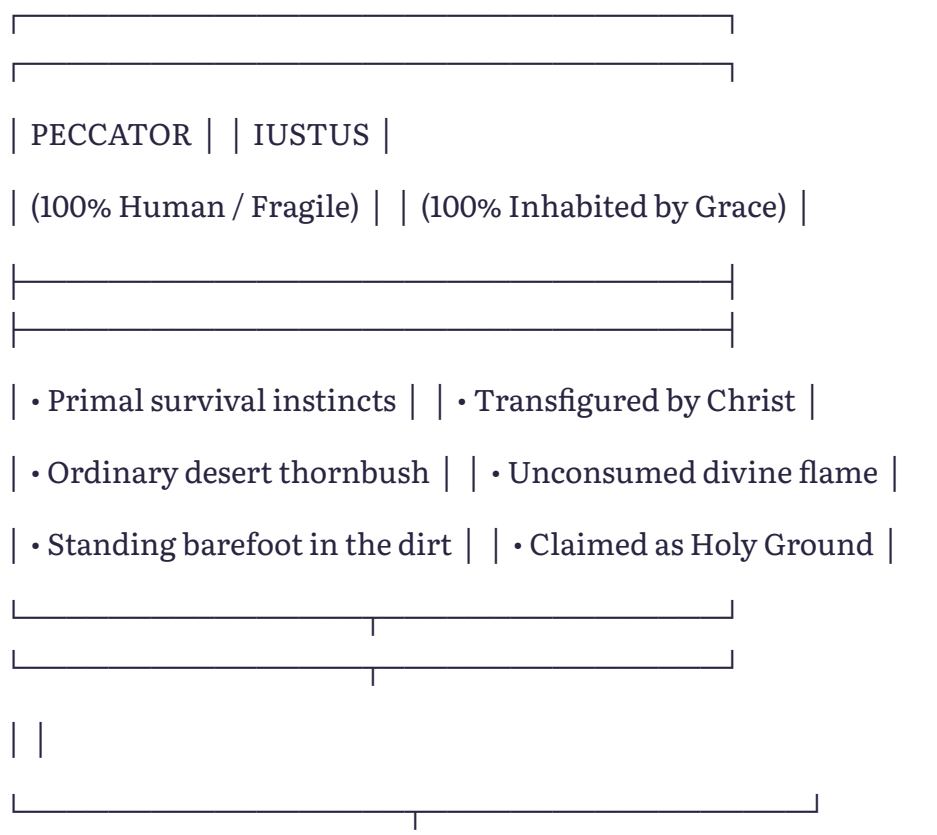
We stand at the edge of faith, looking at our lives, and we say: *"God, I'm not ready for you yet. Look at my past. Look at my temper, my addiction, my failed marriage, my secret shame, my messy house. Let me clean up my act first. Let me get my life together, let me become righteous and saintly—and then I'll take off my shoes. Then I'll go to church and give my life to God."*

Friends, that is not the Gospel! That is classic works-righteousness. That is Peter telling Jesus, *"Never, Lord—this is too messy."*

As Lutherans, we have a profound Latin phrase handed down to us from Martin Luther that speaks directly to this: ***Simul iustus et peccator*.**

It means that we are **at the exact same time righteous and sinner.**

SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR



INTEGRATION IN THE PRESENT

Luther didn't say you are a sinner on Monday and a saint on Sunday. He said right now, in this very breath, you are 100% a fragile, flawed, self-preserving human being (*peccator*), and at the *very same time* by grace through faith, you are 100% claimed, redeemed, and inhabited by the righteousness of Jesus Christ (*iustus*).

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran author out in Colorado, puts it in modern terms. She reminds us that the Church was never intended to be a **museum for polished saints.** The Church is an **emergency field hospital for sinners.**

God does not wait for you to become a pristine cedar tree before God speaks to you. God meets you as the thornbush. God doesn't ask you to extinguish your physical human nature; God asks to inhabit it.

Salvation is not your work. Integration is not something you pull off through sheer willpower. Moses didn't light the bush. Moses didn't make himself eloquent—in fact, he argued with God five times at that bush, telling God all the reasons he was the wrong guy! And God simply replied: *"I will be with you."*

Conclusion: Standing on Holy Ground

So what is the worldview, the foundation, that we build our lives upon today?

It is the narrative of **Integration.**

You don't have to live a divided life. You don't have to pretend you have it all together, nor do you have to hide your fragile human self from God. Your physical body, your ordinary daily job, your family routines, your natural drives—these are not obstacles to your spiritual life. They are the very wood of the bush. They are the place where God wants to show up.

This week, when your primal self-preservation kicks in—when you feel anxious about the future, when you want to run away from a difficult conversation, when you want to hoard your time or your comfort—remember Peter and Moses.

Stop running. Take a deep breath.

Turn aside from the frantic grind of your own self-reliance. Take off your metaphorical sandals—let down your defenses, stop demanding control over the outcome—and stand barefoot right where you are.

Look down at the floor of your kitchen, the tile of your office, or the dirt of your backyard. That ground is holy. Not because you made it holy, but because the eternal **I AM** is standing there with you in the present moment.

You don't have to save yourself. You don't have to manufacture your own fire.

Yield your life to the Cross. Let the unconsumed, transfiguring love of God inhabit your ordinary human bush. Step into the flame, and trust the promise: **you will burn with God's presence, but in Christ, you will never be consumed.**

Amen.

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