

## **The Life of Moses: The Burning Bush**

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on 29 August 1999. Scripture Lesson: Exodus 3:1-15.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

The symbol of the Church of Scotland is a burning bush with the Latin words *Nec Tamen Consumabatur*. Meaning, "Burned, but not consumed." The church has faced persecution but it has never been destroyed. The church has battled complacency, and yet the fire of faith has never completely died. The church sometimes acts like a wet blanket, but the fire has never gone out.

Late in the summer of 1987, two years before the fire, I stood over by the oak tree on the Green admiring the old church building. I looked at the steeple. I thought I saw smoke coming out of one of the little round openings about two-thirds of the way up the steeple. Then my imagination ran wild. I imagined long tongues of flame shooting out of the louvers in the tower. I saw flames coming through the stained glass windows. Within moments the slate roof was engulfed in tongues of red, yellow, green and blue fire. The whole church was in flames. But, and here's the strange thing, the church wasn't being consumed by the fire. It glowed like molten gold being refined.

The streets filled with people. Businessmen and businesswomen stood in the doors of their stores looking, wide-eyed, at the church. Bill Bilger stopped cutting hair and led the men out of his barber shop down the street to look at the church. Residents in the Oxford hotel leaned out the windows and called others to see this strange sight, a church on fire yet not consumed. Children playing in Memorial park stopped swinging and ran toward the burning church. Old men and women, young mothers holding infants, and little boys and girls came running to see this great sight. People had walked by the church for years without noticing us. Now they stood filled with wonder at what they were seeing. A church on fire and yet not consumed.

HT 16:21-28

Then I heard the voice of God speaking from within this burning church, "Don't come near; take off your shoes for the place on which you're standing is holy ground. I'm the God of Alexander Gellatly whom I sent as your first pastor from Scotland in 1753. I'm the God of Samuel Jackson, John Hawthorn, John Fulton, William Ramsey, James Wherry, and William Ross, the first elders in this congregation. I'm the God of your fathers and mothers who've worshipped me at this location for two hundred and fifty years."

At the sound of the voice of God I hid my face. I was afraid to look at God.

For centuries Presbyterians have seen the burning bush as a symbol of the Church. The burning bush is Israel in the furnace of affliction in Egypt. The burning bush is Israel in captivity in Babylon. The burning bush is Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. The burning bush is the church on the day of Pentecost, with tongues of fire resting on the heads of believers. The burning bush are Christians burned at the stake by Roman emperors. The burning bush are African slaves brought in captivity to America whose faith sustained them. We are a burning bush. Sometimes we're on fire for the Lord. Sometimes we feel burned out. But the Lord doesn't abandon us.

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee;  
I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

God's church is on fire yet not consumed.

The Lord spoke from the burning bush. "I've seen the affliction of my people. I've heard their cries. I know their sufferings. I've come down to deliver them." God has placed the church in the world to be his ears, to hear the cries of the afflicted. God has placed the church in the world to proclaim God's word of grace. *God calls each . . . sends . . .*

A church on fire, yet not consumed has a God ordained mission. "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." Bishop Sam Shoemaker use to ask, "Can our kind of church change our kind of world?" We might well ask, "Can our kind of church, change Oxford? Can we deliver?" The success or failure of our church isn't determined by the size of

the building. It's not determine by the number of people on the membership rolls. It's not  
determine by our ability to meet our budget. <sup>The Fire of God's passion for lost, lonely, grieving, hurting</sup> ~~But~~ <sup>oppressed</sup> are we able to deliver people from various  
kinds of bondage? Emil Brunner use to say that the church exists by mission as fire exists by  
burning. What is the consuming passage of our church family? Think about that question. Why  
is our church here in Oxford? Where do you fit into the mission of the church? What is the  
purpose of our church? How would you explain to someone what the purpose of our church is?

Do you know what the mission of God's church is here in Oxford? <sup>Churches go through</sup>  
<sup>cycles ... become bright ... burn out ... cycling ... rediscovering the fire</sup>  
Archibald MacLeish concludes his play *J.B.* with these words:

Blow on the coal of the heart.  
The candles in churches are out.  
The lights have gone out in the sky.  
Glow on the coal of the heart  
And we'll see by and by...  
We'll see where we are.  
The wit won't burn and the wet soul smolders.  
Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know...  
We'll know.

Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were arrested by Queen Mary in 1555 and  
condemned to be burned at the stake because of their desire and their attempts to reform the  
church. On October 16 they were brought to the place of their execution in Oxford, England and  
tied to the stake. While the flames were being lit, Bishop Latimer was heard to say in a loud  
voice, "We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be  
put out." May our church light such a candle, by God's grace, in Oxford, as I trust shall never be  
put out. ... <sup>That will draw men & women to the light & warmth.</sup>

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish  
family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Set us on fire so that we won't be  
consumed. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within  
your holy Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.