

Sermon, 31 August 2008—Proper 17

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6,23-6; Matthew 16:21-8

Jean Kershner died late Friday afternoon at home surrounded by her family and their love for her. The cancer that she had successfully resisted in her lungs found a way to her brain and did its greedy filthy work there. Jean's stubborn determination to live made it quite a contest, but even in her pain, her peace grew until she could rest. The family has scheduled a visitation at Benson's Funeral Home from 4 to 8 p.m. tomorrow. The funeral will be here at 11:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning. Jean spoke to me at length last year of her love for this congregation; several of you showed how you loved her by serenading her in her home. I hope you can join her family to celebrate her life and to commend her to God.

The bush burned and was not consumed. Of course, that catches Moses' attention. It is against nature. We know, as with Jean's cancer, as with the radiation she underwent, that what burns does consume. But there on Mount Horeb, Moses sees incompatible things coexisting, and their coexistence in a single moment and a single location is impossible. It is the nature of fire to devour what it resides in, and yet the wood doesn't burn. The same wonder is perceived in Jesus' journey on foot across the stormy Sea of Galilee. It is the nature of water to swallow what falls onto its surface, and yet Jesus' body doesn't sink. In both cases, the nature of the more essential primal element, once it is released into full ferocity, is to engulf or incinerate the more complex evolved creature—and yet here both are, upheld. Nothing is achieved by this miracle: no one is healed or fed. The only thing that happens is that God is known. God is known, not as one or the other of the components of the picture, but as the power to sustain

both, the grace to balance both, the wisdom to accomplish this conjunction of opposites.

Dear friends, you know what it is like to stare at a fire: the longer you hold your eyes on the embers, the deeper the heart of the fire becomes. As you get closer and closer, the light gathers into heat, the heat condenses into flame, the flame intensifies into a luminous searing whiteness that floats between the golden coals, and you could almost imagine that it is possible to move through the glow itself and know the source of every living thing. So let's imagine this morning what Moses might have seen, as he stared more and more deeply into that burning bush, as he wondered "how can this be?"

The first thing to see is the truth of God's Creation itself. Creation burns and is not consumed. Each individual rises and falls; generations rise and fall; this bush, this person, might not endure; but Creation itself endures. What consumes it is what feeds it. We can be utterly sure of this exchange of energy and matter, and we can rest in it. But we can only do so if we see them as one, only if we see the fire and the bush as one. If I identify with the bush, I am afraid that the energy locked up in me might be released and I will be reduced to cinders. If I identify with the fire, I am afraid I will not find the intricate structures whose released energy is my light and my heat and I will never come into being at all. But if I am able to see fire and bush as one exchange, and if I can identify with the interlocked continuity of that exchange, then I can be at rest in the cosmos, because I cannot be cut off from life itself. Life does not exhaust what it dwells in.

The second thing Moses was able to see is the truth of God's People. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt—in what was later called the "iron furnace" of Egypt, the great smelter, the foundry, melting them down, reducing them, refining them, strengthening them. Slavery burned in them,

but it did not consume them. What Moses saw in the bush ablaze but intact was the suffering of the People of Israel, who even in the fire of slavery remained themselves and survived. They resisted annihilation. In fact, their refusal to be consumed forged their identity. What an astonishing thing this is, to realize that the catastrophes, the temptations, the trials, that we ask God to keep from us are often the very things that teach us who we are, so that in the heat of fever or of shame, we come to know ourselves clearly and inescapably. We burn and are not consumed; instead we see who we are.

The third truth, as Moses' eyes sank further and further through the luminosity, was the truth of God in revelation. The Orthodox Christians make a distinction between God's energies and God's self. God's self is utterly beyond human capacity to know, but God's energies—God's glory, God's forgiveness, God's joy—are in fact what we know about God. This is the light that caught Moses' attention: the knowable activity of God, the warmth of God's action in our life. But this blaze of what God intends and accomplishes does not reduce or destroy the world in which God is known; instead, the world holds what God manifests before us, so we can give thanks. The world is God's lamp where God's light can reside. So the Jewish people were careful to say that the Temple was not where GOD dwelled, but the place God had chosen for God's Name to dwell—and even that Name could not be uttered.

So when Moses asks to know God's Name, what he hears is "I AM WHAT I AM"—the Name itself burns, but is not consumed. It gives off light, but it is itself in exhaustible. Unlike the pagan deities, this Name does not point to an identity, a personality, a series of qualities and quirks and characteristics. This is not Zeus or Athena or Baal or Astarte, whose story can be known because identified with the story of a city. This Name refuses

to be possessed, because it simply designates what is: to be what one will be is to be open into an endless future. We understand that what we can know about God has something to do with the ability to be distilled into itself, so that divinity does not depend on anything else in order to be, but even that does not help us fill in the identity of God. This we share with Buddhists, who insist that any residue of personal individuality, of a distinct self, sullies the luminosity, and that every trace of distinct personhood disappears when one is enlightened, so that what says “I AM” is nothing over against or separate from or describable. Awareness burns, but is not consumed, because there is nothing to consume.

Finally, the fourth truth Moses saw was the truth of the human self given over to God, the God-inhabited person, the person who knows that there is something within that burns but does not consume and is not consumed as it burns. It is no different from the burning bush: we cannot understand how the more essential, more simple, more pure element doesn't overpower the more intricate, more complicated, even more contradictory and problematical creature, but we come to realize that to purify is not to destroy. Somehow more than the ordinary bush is present; we see that the fire is also present in the bush. Somehow, when God goes to work in us, more than our personality is available to us and known in us; we are still ourselves and recognizable, but the glow of grace is also glimpsed. In other words, Moses sees—though he cannot yet recognize it and though he asks to be relieved of it—his own life as prophet and leader of God's people. His face will glow as he comes down from Mount Horeb after talking to God, bringing the Law that will free these escaped slaves, but he will not die.

This is not to say that the Spirit of God has no purifying and sanctifying effect. Human ability to be in this equilibrium, where the holy

and the mundane meet in me and you and each one of us, is NOT possible where self-seeking and survival are paramount. Somehow it is my person, not another, that is being able to display steady endurance, faithfulness unto death; and somehow it is apparent that more than my ordinary self is involved, and that all that interferes with my steadiness is being burned away. Who knows in what way the bush was seared and charred? Perhaps everything that was too tender was blistered and burst and whitened into ash? Taking up the cross is the Christian burning without being consumed: the fire of Christian discipleship, of service, refines, but does not obliterate our identity or the particular gifts and quirks of personality—instead, these elements allow the fire to burn and are at the same time wondrously replenished, sustained, maintained. That is seeing the burning bush as ONE thing, not two incompatible things.

Paul says it best: “Christ lives in me.” He became convinced that the Resurrected Christ had been revealed in him; he came to realize that this encounter was not reversible; he lived to show that the indwelling was complete and irrevocable. The bush consented to be burned, but the fire that took hold in it did not consume it; instead it made it visible and glorious. Jean Kershner, in her own way, displayed this as well: the force of will, even the turbulence of demands, necessary for survival, distilled down, through the fierce consuming of cancer, into something that could not be consumed. So Jean could say, after receiving communion in her home, when she could not walk on her own and could hardly talk, “I am blessed;” and the warmth of something other than cancer and other than self-will glowed in her.

Paul always says it best: “Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?” Will we imagine that persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, even terrorists, and tornadoes, and cancer, can tear us away?—because we are

undergoing those things, like sheep prepared for the butcher. No, we can be more than conquerors in all these things through the God who loves us—that is, not on our own, but as the bush was visible to Moses through being in the fire that burns and does not consume. “Because, I am convinced,” Paul says, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is the God, who dwells in us, but does not consume us, whom we praise today and whom we make known as we rest in the flame as our Eternal Source, our Only-begotten Word, and our Life-giving Spirit, whom we hope to praise for all eternity.