

**“ASHES OR EMBERS”**  
**Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21**  
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When something is burned, it moves through a complex series of chemical reactions that quite frankly I don't fully understand. I do know that fires are one of the most beautiful and dangerous forces in nature and that humankind's ability to use and contain fire has been an ongoing struggle throughout time. Fire brings heat and chemical reactions together to break down the elements of the fire, and in the end, there is nothing left but ashes. Or so it should be; and that is what Moses was wrestling with as he stood upon the hill. The process that fire takes is one of the things that most interested me about this passage. Moses was reacting to the fact that the fire he was seeing was not doing what it was supposed to do. Rather than moving through a process that would eventually lead to nothing remaining except for ashes, the burning bush instead remained constantly and consistently aflame. I don't think the biblical writers had the metaphor in mind when they wrote; but as I read this passage, I thought of the difference between two stages in the life of a fire. Ashes or embers—what is to become of a fire? What is to become of a life?

These two stages are both near to the end of the life of a fire, but one has finality to it while the other still has the potential of fire. Obviously, the stage that has a finality to it is when a fire becomes nothing more than ashes. This is the final stage because it means the heat has dissipated and the only remaining evidence that a fire existed is the grey chalky residue that we call “ash.” Although ashes can have new life as an amendment to soil, there is no hope of ashes becoming a fire again. When we see ashes, we know that a fire once existed there, but it is no more.

On the other hand, when a fire has released its initial burst of vibrant and active flames and when it finally seems to be starting to die off, poke at it a bit. And there, buried amidst the blackened remains, is still a lot of potential. As the charred wood breaks down, the glowing embers emerge; and although they do not leap forward with shooting flames, in their red-hot existence the embers of a fire have the potential to be stirred up and create anew the fire that once existed. And I wonder if that isn't what Moses was experiencing in the burning bush. Did he realize that the embers were refusing to die and that, instead, they were being reinvigorated with the breath and voice of God? Did the glowing embers of that long ago fire somehow reignite and call Moses to a new understanding of what his life was to be about?

Our scripture lessons for today offer us an opportunity to see how God has always called people into relationship and how people respond. Today we find Moses hearing the voice of God at that burning bush. When heard in concert with our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, I believe we are able to see how God's calling is an historic tradition and how the call of God continues to evolve, change, and stay relevant, even as we gather thousands of years after God's voice bellowed from that burning bush.

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” These are the first words from Moses in our lesson from the book of Exodus. This lesson begins with

Moses standing in a field keeping watch over his father-in-law's sheep when suddenly an angel appears from a burning bush.

Now here is where we begin to understand just how unique Moses was. What does Moses do when he hears God's voice bellowing to him from the flames of that bush? Does he run and hide? Does he scream out in fear? No, his initial action is simply to say, "Here I am." Now I admit that it doesn't take Moses long before fear overtakes him. After God tells Moses that he is the God of his ancestors, Moses does, in fact, hide his face from God. But initially, the response we see from Moses to God's appearance in a burning bush is simply to say, "Here I am."

I love this passage because we see the humanity of Moses at every turn in this story. First we see him as a family man, working the fields with his father-in-law's sheep. Then God is revealed to Moses in this incredible event and Moses is virtually unfazed by it all. "Here I am," is all we hear him say. I can almost picture Moses shrugging and speaking to that bush with a mixture of confidence and naiveté. And then, as the seconds elapse, I can also picture Moses beginning to understand the gravity of this conversation. Surely there were moments of panic and awe as it all set in. How many times did Moses try to figure it all out? "God is talking to me!" Wait a minute, "God is talking to me?" "God is talking to me!" "This can't be real; I've got to get out of here," and so he hides his face. But God doesn't let Moses go away, even as he questions exactly how *he* is to save God's people from Pharaoh's tyrannical regime. And suddenly, it isn't the burning bush that is so amazing about this story. What is truly remarkable about this passage is that God is, indeed, speaking to Moses and calling him to be more than a family man and shepherd. If Moses, why not me or you? Moses is going to have to move away from the comfortable and holy ground on which he stands and lead God's people. God is calling; the sheep will have to wait.

The story of Moses is a story of God's calling and of God's saving grace. Remember that earlier in Exodus, Moses has murdered an Egyptian man for virtually no reason and just dumped his body. Moses isn't Noah, the righteous man who had to be saved. No, this story is one of God's grace for everyone—not just of God's saving grace for the Israelites but also of God's grace for Moses, too. Thus, we have God redeeming not just an individual but also using a flawed and none-too-brave individual as the impetus for the saving of a nation. From this legendary drama we are confronted by the reality of God's call: Not to the bravest or the morally pure—Moses doesn't fit there—but, instead, to the one who would step forward, even naively, and say, "Here I am." It was as if Moses reached his hand into that burning bush and gathered up the burning embers of the fire and carried it with him. And so the glowing embers of God inspired Moses, even when it would have been easier for him if they had turned grey as ash.

And that is what Paul is calling upon the church in Rome to resist. Jesus was gone after all. The tomb was empty, sure; but Jesus was no longer moving across the countryside healing and ministering to the people. The church was dead, right? Those same embers that Moses carried, which served the nation of Israel so well, were being desperately fanned by Paul as he called upon the people of Rome to fully live the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Paul, the life of Jesus had

not ended, because there were people who had not yet heard about him. And there were people who had heard about Jesus, yet their faith was flagging. The faith of some was desperately close to being extinguished. But if the message of Jesus Christ was going to survive and flourish in the world, Rome was a critical venue: the center of life and a gateway to the rest of the world. The church in Rome had to survive. The people of Rome had to get on board with the mission of the church and follow the teachings of Jesus.

And so, Paul begins to teach them that they are the body of Christ, so they need to act like it: Hear the words again: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21).

This isn’t an easy list—for anyone: for us or for the people of Rome. This is the to-do list of faith as far as Paul is concerned. And it stands up pretty well today; as Paul sees it, these are the new commandments of faith. Instead of “thou shalt not,” they are “thou shalt.”

In Rome, these words were heard with a certain amount of desperation for the church’s survival. Today they seem revolutionary because they go against much of what our culture tells us is right. “Get ours before we lose it.” “Get in front of that car that cut us off.” “Be first, be best, win at all costs.” On many levels it is ingrained in us, but Paul is calling us back to God. Paul is calling us back to the central meaning of our lives: Love one another. Care for the ones who are around you; live in peace. Paul was calling the church at Rome to live outside of what they knew. It is not different for us. We, too, are called to be different than what our culture calls us to; not an easy task, but it is the one we are called to.

And maybe—maybe those hot coals that our actions will heap upon the heads of our enemies—maybe those coals will not burn them but will, rather, inspire them. From Paul to Rome to Corvallis to our enemies and beyond. . . may the embers continue to burn. Amen.