

Homily for March 7, 2010 (3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)

“Beholding and Becoming Burning Bushes”

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12; Luke 13:1-9

A little over a week ago, I was blessed to find myself looking down into the crater of the Irazu Volcano, located between San Jose and Cartago, Costa Rica. At over 11,000 feet above sea level, it is both beautiful and foreboding. Just outside its largest crater, Irazu (from indigenous words meaning “peak of thunder”) features a large slate-grey plateau covered in volcanic ash. It is a reminder of the time it was last active forty-five years ago, when it sent ash showering down upon the nearby towns and cities and glowing rocks tumbling down its sides.

It was at Irazu that I had a “burning bush experience”—one of those times in life when one is given the privilege of sensing God’s presence in a particularly powerful way. As we traveled on the road that wound from Cartago up to the peak, we felt the temperature drop five, ten, and finally twenty degrees. After looking down into the multi-hued crater, now filled with water, I turned around and saw a cloud, nudged by a gentle and whispering wind, gracefully make its way across the ash-covered plateau, leaving a cool mist in its wake.

I stopped where I was. Crouching down and pressing my hands together, I rested my elbows on my knees and spent a moment in silent meditation, attentive to the sights, sounds, and smells of the moment. I was on holy ground.

I suspect that many of us have such moments in our lives. Some are inspired by nature and others by people. Some, like an altar call at a revival, happen in the midst of a group; but others are solitary experiences of finding God in the desert of silent meditation or even in the midst of darkness.

Our first reading from Exodus recalls the original (and quite literal!) “burning bush experience” of salvation history. On the top of Mt. Horeb, Moses encountered God who revealed not only his identity and name (“I AM”) but also his compassion and plan to liberate his people. Not only that, this meeting between God and Moses also revealed that we need not be saints or spiritual Olympians to be so blessed by the Lord.

To say that Moses wasn’t perfect when he was called by God is an understatement. He had committed murder and was a disgraced member of Pharaoh’s household (Exodus 2:11-15) who found himself in the land of Midian, reduced to shepherding for his father-in-law. Yet God still spoke to him in a remarkable way and called him to lead his people from slavery to freedom.

Caution: not everything that we experience in life, even when it is extraordinary, is a manifestation of God. Sometimes bushes burn merely because they are on fire! It can be tempting to read particular meaning into events based on our own limited perceptions or even our prejudices. Recently, a prominent

televangelist was roundly criticized for telling his audience that the devastating January 12 earthquake in Haiti was divine retribution against the Haitian people for supposedly making “a pact with the devil” centuries ago.

While it is true that our actions—good or sinful—often have consequences, even serious ones, in our gospel passage from Luke 13 Jesus challenges the assumption that there is always and everywhere a cause and effect relationship between sin and suffering. Sometimes, as with the building collapse in Siloam, bad things happen by accident or forces of nature. At other times they come at the hands of others, including calloused tyrants like Pontius Pilate.

It’s natural to try to assign blame or responsibility for what happens in our lives and those of the people around us. At its best, this tendency is part of our desire to make sense of our world. At its worst, it can be no more than an exercise of hubris, a vain attempt to control the people and things we ultimately cannot. Things do have explanations; but not every explanation is the right one.

In reminding his disciples of the tragic and unjust deaths of the people in Siloam and the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices, Jesus was trying to get them to ponder their own mortality. Thus in our gospel passage his reflections on those incidents were followed by the same warning: “But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!”

We may not be able to control when or how we die, but we can control how we choose to live; and God will hold us accountable not for how we died but rather for how we lived. The Galileans who were victims of Pilate and those who were killed in the collapse of the tower in Siloam died suddenly. Disasters like the recent earthquakes in Chili and Haiti remind us of the fragility of life and that none of us are guaranteed tomorrow. They are invitations for us to (re)evaluate and reorder our priorities and our lives.

Today we have the gift of another day of life and the chance to live an even deeper commitment to the Gospel. Even more, we have the promise that God is willing to work with us. In our Responsorial Psalm (103) we heard that, “The Lord is kind and merciful.” In the parable of the gardener and the fig tree, Jesus revealed his Father’s patience and forbearance as well as his own dedication to cultivating and fertilizing us so that we may bear fruit as his disciples. The spiritual disciplines of Lent—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—are part of that process.

As we grow in the Lord we begin to realize something even more amazing than what Moses beheld on Mt. Horeb: we, too, can become “burning bushes,” on fire with the Holy Spirit and speaking the word of God—a word of compassion, hope, and liberation for a world that sees so little of it. When that happens, our homes, our churches, our schools, our neighborhoods, our nation and even our world can become “holy ground”...and we won’t have to climb a mountain or gaze into the mouth of a volcano to know it. +