

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Third Sunday in Lent, 7 March 2010.
To God be the glory*

Growing up is always hard. I can still remember two incidents in 8th grade classrooms in which two teachers, at the end of their ropes, screamed, “Tommy Brown, would you just grow up!”

As you know our ancestor in faith, Moses, had a hard time growing up. He’s cut off from his own ethnic ancestry, and he finds heritage in a traumatic way, so traumatic that he has to run from it. Moses found a way to give--in his case to lead--that overcame his fear, and suddenly he wasn’t wrapped up in himself, keeping his head down, and, as the story says, staying home in Midian to tend his father-in-law’s flocks. But what of us? We tend to have a hard time growing up too, at least spiritually, but why is that?

The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush. If you’re still wondering how the bush didn’t get burned up, you’re not alone. Traditional Jewish interpretation, called midrash, dismisses this question, however, and in its stead ancient and contemporary rabbis ask us to focus on Moses’ inner vision. By sight and sound Moses knows that God is communicating with him. He is talking, not to himself, but to God. What is he saying? I don’t want to go. Get someone else to do it. And why is he saying this? Because Moses knows he’s being called to do something he doesn’t want to do. And what would it take him to overcome his fear? He would need to know something more about God.

If Moses were a mirror for us, we might see our tendency to run from our true selves, to run from growing up. We might also see the ways we demand proof from God of God. We have to remember, however, that Moses is the human center of the divine story of liberation. Jews believe they wouldn’t be a people or have a history without the deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Use the mirror to notice a couple of details. Two things stand out for helping us grow up spiritually: 1) One is that in the vision, the spiritual encounter Moses had, he is instructed to take off his shoes, which gave him a sense that he had at last found ground to stand on. “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. We stand on holy ground, and many of us know that we can’t make it in this life without holy ground. We’re blessed at Epiphany with a place, literally, that’s always here, taking us in and taking us as we are, and shaping us to be something more.

The second thing about Moses is that he demanded to know about God. Who is God? The answer, in God’s own words, is “I am WHO I am.” Again, traditional Jewish midrash has guided Christian theology in this regard. The name of God is untranslatable. God is completely God. God is real, God is unknowable, a mystery. Therefore we worship. We are still filled with questions, but when we can really give our heart to worship, in the end, we surrender. Knowing that, Moses came alive. He had a call. And he ultimately

persuaded a whole nation that God would redeem them, and lead them out into their own life.

This is where we come in. Liberation begins inside us, when the burning bush finally stops us in our tracks, puts us on holy ground, and gives us the mysterious name of God to be central to our lives. I don't think but a handful of people in any era are called to be the leading liberators like Moses. But we surely are called to begin with ourselves, and to have one moment, one project, one person perhaps, who needs healing which we offer. That's why God starts the burning bush inside, to strengthen us on holy ground, and to grow us more and more in God's own image.

In Jesus God's image and self are sharpened. In the very outstretched arms that become his enduring pose in art, we learn that we have to abandon ideas of control. If we read the Jesus story with depth, I think we take away from it that we have to reach out and take life in both arms. When we stretch out our arms we're in a vulnerable position, not a protected position. We have to take it all in—take in the likelihood of pain as a condition of being alive, and we have to accept doubt, darkness, and mystery if we're going to have anything to do with anything called God. In Jesus, God helps us grow up. For us, it's Jesus' whole life, that makes us look into the mirror and to keep growing up. On the night before he died, in his last supper, Jesus told again a story of deliverance, he broke that bread and blessed that cup and associated his own life and death with that liberation. We become a people, you and I become fully who we are--all grown up--in this action, a personal equivalent of the Exodus.

Moses took enormous risks after the burning bush. And Jesus did too, walking all the way to Jerusalem, confronting authorities, and delivering compassion. To grow up, we must take risks too, and when we come to know that, we will have met our burning bush.