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Text: Exodus 3: 1-14
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The Voice from the Flame:
Imagination in the Time of Corona

As you can see, we're filming this sermon today down in New Orleans. I'm standing here in front of the French Quarter, the Vieux Carre, and what a sight it is. The Mississippi is right over there, and right here you can see Jackson Square and the French Market, along with the grid of streets that shelters every imaginable human behavior in its gaudy splendor, some of those behaviors noble, others less so. And just a little beyond the Quarter, just out of sight, the 2020 Jazz Fest is happening, and, as is our custom, Rachael and I simply had to get there. She's still getting ready for the day, but see, I had my hat on already, and once you've got your hat on you're sort of obligated to hit the town. And so while I waited, I thought I'd offer a few thoughts for the day.

I know, I know - we're supposed to be quarantined. We're supposed to be staying at home, confined to our chairs and couches and yards. We're only supposed to go to the grocery store or the pharmacy. But sometimes other imperatives intrude. Back in 2014 Rachael and I escaped to Jazz Fest for the first time, to celebrate her 40th birthday. It felt like a renewal of life for us, as well as a renewal of our relationship after some tricky years, and so we vowed, then and there, to return every single year, no matter what. It's brought us enormous joy. It's reminded us of what we love about one another. And it's opened us to experiences and friendships we wouldn't otherwise have known. For eight days - during the last weekend of April and the first weekend of May - the greatest celebration on the planet takes place, and it's been crucial to the health and joy of our relationship that we find a way to get there.

Of course, Covid-19 made flights and hotels and large crowds impossible this year. And it's been pretty hard to feel like celebrating much of anything. But one of the most important things I've learned from the city of New Orleans is that it's important to reach for that which is worth celebrating, even when times are hard. Especially when times are hard. And so throughout the past week, we've dressed up each day as if we were going to the Fest. We've ridden our bikes around Old Lyme, dodging trolleys and revelers making their way home in the morning light. We've returned to the parsonage, which now doubles as a restaurant in the Marigny or in Bywater, and we have Bloody Marys and brunch before noon, when the broadcast begins. When it does, we enter the Fairgrounds, where it all happens each year, and we do our best to stay there until the music ends. Then we go out for dinner, and talk to friends and family as we eat. To anyone else, it might look like we're just hanging around the parsonage. But we're not. We're upholding the vow we made to one another back in 2014, and despite the obvious pall cast by Covid-19, we're finding reasons to be glad.

We're glad for the memories we've created, but we're glad for other things too: for a community such as this one, for friends and family near and far, for the love and care that people are finding within themselves, and for the spirit of shared sacrifice that much of the world has embraced. I don't know - it's strange to find enjoyment right

now, and it even makes me a little nervous to tell you about it, for fear of sounding out of touch. But maybe, seven weeks into this thing, finding a way to celebrate, even in our imaginations, is just what we need.

But I also have a wider point I'd like to make having to do with imagination and the life of faith. It's a point that came up in a recent conversation with Paul Verryn, where we spoke about imagination being one of the central components of what it is to have faith at all. Faith is a construal of reality, an ability to perceive more than what is simply given. It's like that first page from Antoine de St. Exupery's wonderful book *The Little Prince*. When presented with a picture of an object bearing a vague resemblance to a hat, the adults in the room simply see a hat. The Little Prince, of course, doesn't see a hat at all, but a boa constrictor which has swallowed an elephant whole. Sometimes a picture is more than it seems. Sometimes a parsonage, or a New England village, can become something other than how it appears. Sometimes you, me, the world itself, even God, are so much more than what meets the eye.

I want to unpack those themes using another of the most famous, and sacred, stories available to us in the Bible. It's the story of Moses and the burning bush, which I believe can be read as a parable of the imagination, and how imagination can be used to direct us toward life giving possibilities in the midst of a crisis. It's a story that helps us to understand the productive power of imagination in the life of faith, one that also provides us with several important clues about the task before us as we continue to wrestle with the effects of Covid-19.

Start with the bush, and the flame. Let the burning bush stand for an overwhelming experience. Let it stand for moments in which life comes to a standstill, when our attention is arrested by a spectacle that won't let us get away. Let it stand for beneficent moments that change the course of our lives, but let it also stand for ambiguous, tenuous moments that can, at times, seem frightful. Let the flame stand for every major transition in our lives, when we are hailed by something, or someone, that says, not this way but that, not this path but another. Let the flame stand for the event, any event, which marks a turning point in the string of days allotted to us. Let the flame stand for the moment of Covid-19, stopping us cold, arresting us in place, holding our gaze in its hypnotic and scalding reach. Let the flame stand for the moment we face.

But let the voice within the flame stand for the message that emanates from within the event. The flame is that which attracts the gaze of the shepherd named Moses, a fugitive from the land of Egypt, hiding out after he let his temper get the best of him. When he witnessed an Egyptian captor beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had intervened, accidentally killing the captor. But then he had covered it up, only to realize later that witnesses had seen it. That realization led to a cascading series of events – flight into the desert, a hastily arranged marriage, and a new identity as a lowly shepherd. It might have continued that way had it not been for the flame, which stopped the shepherd in his tracks. It might have continued had the voice not spoken from within the flame, from within the event, initiating what proves to be an imaginative exercise with far reaching consequences for the imagination of the self, for the imagination of one's social reality, and for the imagination of God, those three. Let the voice within the flame, within the event, stand for the grace which can and does emanate even from that which overwhelms or engulfs us.

First the self. By any outward reckoning, Moses was an enormously flawed individual, a person with a highly developed sense of justice, yes, but one prone to violence and to shame in equal measure. His mistakes overwhelm him, and he goes to the desert in order to hide, perhaps most of all from himself. It's an extreme example, I know, and few of us have found ourselves in quite those dire straits. But we've known what it is to make mistakes. We've known what it is to feel that life has come to a dead end, and to feel trapped by our own missteps. And we've known what it is to feel lost, burdened by the past, burdened by a finger pointing voice inside of us that tells us we're not worth all that much, that we don't add up to all that much, that we probably deserve whatever it is we get. I wonder if that's a part of what has made the experience of quarantine so difficult for some people. I wonder if that's why it's hard for a lot of people to be alone in the first place. It's not so much that there's nothing to do. It's that when there is nothing to do, we're asked to be alone with a self that, deep down, we're not entirely comfortable with, that we're not sure we even like. That's a very real piece of the suffering that I sense among many people right now: the "company" we keep when we're alone, the inner voices that speak within us in our solitude, don't feel especially supportive, or loving, or generous, or kind.

The voice that speaks from within the flame, however, speaks otherwise. That voice, emerging from the very center of the overwhelming event, assures Moses, assures us all, that we are more than the worst thing we've ever done. It indicates that whatever corner we're trapped in, there is a way out. It promises that however we might be tempted to imagine ourselves, God sees us differently – as someone worthy of dignity and respect. And that same voice hints, speaking from within the overwhelming event of the flame, that God isn't through with us, that there is a story still to be written, and that we have a role to play. The voice from the flame is a voice of grace. Though the flame burns hot, the voice itself is gentle. You are neither as lowly, nor for that matter, as grandiose, as you might imagine, it says. But you are worthy of love. You are worthy of grace. You still have infinite value. And your story isn't through, not just yet. There is a voice, and it speaks a word of grace from the flames, a word that can help us each to imagine ourselves as those still in possession of agency, as those in possession of great wells of compassion, as those in possession of gifts we may not even understand just yet. The voice in the flame helps us to imagine ourselves otherwise.

It does something else as well. It helps Moses to imagine a different social reality for the people to whom he belongs. The Hebrews were a captive and subjugated people, and they had been for generations, for as far back as anyone could remember. It was, in effect, a permanent condition, and no one could have been faulted for assuming that it would continue that way for time immemorial. It was simply the way things were. But there too the voice from the flame insists otherwise. It suggests that the future is mutable, that new social arrangements are possible, and that a life of flourishing, not simply for the few, but for everyone, might yet come to be. The voice from the flame isn't realistic exactly. In fact, the voice from the flame speaks of the impossible – a land flowing with milk and honey, a garden of delights, meant not for the elite, but for the afflicted ones, the lonely ones, the lost ones, those in one kind of captivity or another. The voice unleashes a social imagination that would have been all too easy to dismiss as a fantasy, a pretty dream unattached to things as they are. No doubt there were many, including

Moses himself at first, who thought the whole thing was more than a little ill conceived, who thought it best not to shake things up. But the voice in the flame is insistent.

How often we find ourselves lulled into that trap. How often our imaginations fail when faced with the possibility that something genuinely freeing and life giving might arise, not only for ourselves, but for everyone around us. How often we assume, as Margaret Thatcher said in the 1970's, that there is no alternative to a life of competition, of rampant inequality, and of fixed social hierarchies. How often we've assumed that there really isn't a viable alternative to a life of consumption and ecological plunder. But the unthinkable has already happened. The world has been brought to a standstill. And we have an opportunity to consider whether we simply wish to rush back headlong into the way things were, or to use this as a chance to imagine a different way of being. Our energy consumption habits, our food consumption and agriculture, our social safety net, our obligations to one another, including the least among us, the way we spend our days – all of these are suddenly up for negotiation in a way they've never been previously. And I don't know about you, but I'm not entirely sure I wish to go back to the way things were, not without a full consideration of what this crisis reveals about our collective life, not without moving to address the ecological crisis bearing down upon us. We've listened for far too long to the voices that say things can't be otherwise. Perhaps it's time to listen to the voice speaking from the flame, encouraging us to imagine otherwise.

But there's one other implication of Moses's encounter with the burning bush. It encourages him to imagine God in a different way. Perhaps it's something ingrained in human consciousness – we tend to associate that which is divine with whatever is prestigious or refined, with whatever speaks to us of status or power. But it just isn't so. That's not the God revealed in the pages of the Bible. It's not the God revealed on Good Friday or Holy Saturday. It isn't the God revealed on Easter Sunday. And it's not the voice speaking from the flame. That voice is in love with people in all of their complexity. That voice is in love with people who struggle, and who are trying to find their way through the mess. That voice is in love with those trying to live humanly under inhumane conditions. That voice, that God, simply wants to be with people, to remind them of their worth, and to elevate their humanity.

It's here that I want to bring us back around to New Orleans. It was last weekend that I was drawn up short by a Jazz Fest performance from a vocalist named Gregory Porter, entitled Take Me To the Alley. It represents exactly the kind of theological imagination that we encounter in the voice speaking from the flame. And so I thought I'd play it for you now. Here's Take Me to the Alley, from Gregory Porter:

(Gregory Porter: Take Me To the Alley)

Take me to the alley. Take me to the afflicted ones. Take me to the lonely ones who somehow lost their way. I'll see you there, guided by a voice speaking to us from the flame, one who tells us over and over again, no matter how hard things get: "I am your friend. I am your friend. I am your friend." Love in the Time of Corona. Amen.