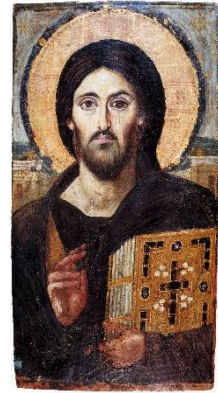


### “Burning Questions”

St. Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai desert was built in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>1</sup> It houses a huge library of early Christian writings. In fact, it is second only to the Vatican Library. The library is not open to the public, but many of the documents can now be accessed online. What you can see when you visit the monastery is a startling collection of early icons such as the famous Christ Pantocrator or Christ the Ruler of all. **[At left.]** Another feature of the monastery is a plant. In fact, the monastery was built to enclose the Burning Bush from which God spoke to Moses. It is not still on fire, but its foliage can be bright red. It is a holy if unspectacular sight. **[At left].**



However, when Moses saw that burning bush about 3,500 years ago, it did catch his attention. It was aflame and yet not burning up. Moses, who was tending his father-in-law’s herd of sheep, was so amazed that he left the herd to get a closer look. As he approached, God called his name from the bush. Moses answered, “Here I am.” God then tells him to take off his sandals because he is treading on holy ground. God follows by giving Moses an assignment. God says, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people... out of Egypt.” Of course, Moses questions his fitness for the task because prophets always say they are not fit for their job in the Hebrew Bible.



Even after God assures Moses that he will be with him throughout this project, Moses comes up with another reason not to do it. He doesn’t know the name of the God who is sending him to the Hebrews. Saying that this is the God of our ancestors is not good enough. He wants God’s name. God replies with the word יהוה (transliterated YHWH), which we think is pronounced *Yahweh*.<sup>2</sup> It is translated as “I AM WHO I AM.” God goes on to say that when Moses addresses the Hebrews, he should say, “I AM has sent me to you.” God finishes by saying, “This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

The learned Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes of this passage, “The burning bush was not a miracle, it was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention for more than a few minutes.” I respectfully

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<sup>1</sup> St. Catherine’s monastery was built in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world.

<sup>2</sup> This name is considered so sacred that observant Jews never speak it or spell it aloud. When the word is encountered in a text the word *Adonai*, which means Lord, is most commonly substituted. Some Jews do not write the word God instead substituting a dash for the letter i.e. G-d.

disagree. I think it is more basic than that. God wanted to know if Moses could see what was in front of his face, given what was consuming his mind daily.

We are so often absorbed in our thoughts and concerns that we frequently miss what is happening right in front of our eyes. For example, just yesterday, I was driving into town from the west when I noticed a stone wall in the median of Route 50. I have been driving that road into town six or seven times a week for more than two years, but this was the first time I noticed that wall. Underbrush can hide it during the growing season, but I have driven by it for more than two winters, and I had not seen it. I am so preoccupied with the traffic or my thoughts about what I need to do when I get into town that I do not see what is there. I wonder what else I am missing.

Could it be that we are walking or driving past a burning bush as we go through our daily lives? Perhaps our daily concerns are so distracting that we miss God's signal. We could miss our calling, and we don't even know it. Remember, Moses is on that mountain herding his father-in-law's sheep because he has run away from Egypt. He had been a favorite of Pharaoh, but having killed an Egyptian guard because he was mistreating a Hebrew slave, Moses is on the run. Besides the sheep and his family, he also is concerned about Pharaoh and his minions. Then, the bush distracts him. He may not have known it at the time, but this burning bush would turn his world upside down. He would have to return to Egypt and face the danger of confronting Pharaoh.

When we open our eyes, we might be aware of many burning bushes in our path. Sometimes, it is hard to tell which one is speaking to us and which is a distraction. Sometimes, there are so many things on fire that we cannot keep up. The bills, work, health issues, a broken-down car, and the AC on the fritz. We can get so overwhelmed with the fires that we give up and go watch television or take part in activities that are distracting but may also be more damaging than bingeing on TV.

To live a God-centered life, and I pray that all of us are working toward that goal, we cannot give up looking for God's signal to us. We must get out of our heads and set aside the burning concerns of the day in order to see the burning bush that is calling from God.

We do this in the same way Moses did. We turn aside from the daily grind and take a look. We approach that bush and ask what is going on. We wonder why the other questions are consuming us when this bush is not consumed. We look for meaning.

God only knows what that bush may be calling us to. It might show us that we need to share food with the poor, or focus on our relationships, or remember a promise that we made. It may be said that our devotion to work is killing us. It might remind us that we are not showing our love of God in our

actions toward others. There are an infinite number of messages that God may be communicating. I doubt that they will all require that we face up to a monarch in order to free an enslaved people, but we don't know until we take off our sandals and listen to the voice calling our name.

We must keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open so that God can get in. God won't give up. God will keep speaking, but we have the option of being awake, alive, and alert to what God may be saying, or decide we are just going to focus on our own little world.

People, especially those who are skeptical of religion, are always asking why a just God allows certain bad things to happen. What they do not ask is what is God calling them to do in response. They expect God to solve all of our problems without our participation. Remember, in the book of Genesis, God puts the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden with the responsibility to tend to the Garden. It is still our responsibility. The Garden is bigger now. The issues are complex. Our ability to make a difference seems miniscule. Yet, our responsibility remains to tend the Garden and all that is in it—plants, people, animals, and the natural resources.

To paraphrase President Kennedy, "Ask not what your God can do for you, but what you can do for your God." Let's begin by looking for our burning bush. Approach it with humility and listen for our calling. Argue with God if you must, but relent and get to work. The more of us who do this, the more beautiful the garden will become. Then, those "Why God" questions will be consumed by the fire of our faith.