

As I was reading our Old Testament Lesson from Exodus for this evening, I noticed something: It sounds a little like the Christmas account from Luke 2. Think about it.

There was in the same country as Horeb a shepherd abiding in the fields, keeping watch over the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, by night. The name of this shepherd was Moses. And behold, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. When the shepherd Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight.

And as he drew near to look, the voice of the Lord came, saying, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.” And the shepherd Moses trembled and hid his face, for the glory of the Lord shone around him. And he was greatly afraid.

And the Angel of the Lord said to him, “Fear not, for I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt, and this will be a sign unto you: this bush that burns with fire and yet is not consumed.”

If this account and the account of Christmas seem a little bit similar to you, they should, because they actually have a lot in common. To start with, it is the same Lord Jesus who is present in both. The Angel of the Lord who appears to Moses is no ordinary angel, after all. In fact, according to the usual definition of the word, this wasn't really an angel at all.

Ordinarily, when we use the word angel, we're thinking of those created, heavenly beings who serve God and do His will. But since the word angel also means “messenger” or “one who speaks the word of God,” it can actually refer to several things. In the Book of Revelation, for example, the term angel is used to refer to the pastors of the seven churches. Because they are messengers of God's Word.

Here in Exodus, the term angel is used to refer to the Son of God Himself, because he is the ultimate messenger of the Father. And we know this angel is far more than just any old angel because Moses consistently refers to this “Angel” as God Himself. This is the Angel of the Lord, the Second Person of the Trinity. This is Jesus Christ before He was conceived and born into this world, sent by the Father to reveal His Word.

St. John expresses a very similar thought in the opening verses of his Gospel. The Word that spoke into the darkness and created the universe is also the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. As the uncreated, eternal, divine Angel of the Lord, Jesus is both the messenger and the message. He is God the Father's Word to us, a Word of love and of life.

So what we have here in this account, then, is the preincarnate Jesus speaking to Moses. Is it so surprising then that it would look somewhat similar when he descends to earth to speak to Moses as when he descends to earth to be born of Mary and appear to shepherds in Bethlehem?

So much of Moses' encounter with God on Horeb foreshadows Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. A flame of fire within the branches of a bush. Didn't Jesus call Himself the Light of the world? The presence of God resting within the wood of a bush. Not that much different than the presence of God made flesh resting in the wood of a manger. The divine and eternal making its dwelling on an ordinary mountainside in Horeb. The divine and eternal making its dwelling on an ordinary mountainside in Bethlehem.

All so that Moses – and so that we – could grasp and receive the message of God's salvation. So that sinful human beings could approach their Creator without fear of being destroyed. The burning bush is not just a story in Israel's history. It's a prophetic event. It foretells the time when Christ would descend to this world again and permanently take on our human nature.

Not only does this event foreshadow the circumstances of our Lord's coming. It also foreshadows the reasons for his coming. The Lord announces to Moses from the bush that He has come to save His people, to rescue them from their enemies, the Egyptians. In the same way, Christ came down at Christmas to rescue all of mankind. Joseph and Mary were told, *“You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”*

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, held under taskmasters who made them bake bricks day after day. Their deliverance was not just to the Promised Land. It was to freedom from their slavery.

In the same way, our Lord descended to deliver us from enemies who had enslaved us. He came to release us from the power of our taskmaster, the devil, and to free us from the bondage of sin and death. By His incarnation, Christ became the new Moses, who leads us out of the kingdom of darkness, through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea, and into the light of the Promised Land of the new creation. The One who appeared in a flame of fire would also one day say, *"Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

So Moses prophesies the circumstances of Jesus' coming. He prophesies the reasons for Jesus' coming. Finally, he also prophesies the nature of Jesus' coming.

When Moses looked at the bush, he saw that it was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed or burnt up. This tells us two things. First, it teaches us that the union between God and man that took place in the birth of Christ is eternal. Jesus is forever both fully God and fully man. Just as that bush never burned up, so the union between God and man in Christ will never end. He is true man even now as He sits at the right hand of the Father, and He will always be true man. He will always be our brother.

Second, the fact that the bush was not consumed teaches us that Christ came into our flesh not to bring judgment to mankind but to bring salvation and redemption. This was not a fire that destroyed. So much of God's fire in the Bible is a fire of wrath. The fire of Sodom and Gomorrah. The fire of Elijah and the priests of Baal. The fire of the End Times. Hebrews 12 says it bluntly: Our God is a consuming fire.

And yet, this was not a consuming fire. This was a fire that didn't harm the bush at all. It's only purpose was to draw Moses' attention. Light his path. Reveal God's presence to Him.

Jesus said, *"God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."* The Bible says that no sinner can see a holy God and live. But in both the burning bush and in the Christ child, sinful men could and did see God. God veiled in earthly, human clothing. And trusting in this God made flesh, man is made holy and not only lives, but lives forever. By taking on our human nature, Jesus did not consume us with fire. Rather, he lit our path and revealed God's salvation to us.

The preincarnate Jesus revealed His name to Moses from the bush. He said, *"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* Our Savior is also the great I am, the one who is, and who was, and who is to come. Jesus is the revelation of that divine name, for He teaches us, "I am the Good Shepherd." "I am the light of the world." "I am the door." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the vine."

He who revealed Himself to Moses in the tangled branches of a bush has now taken on your flesh and blood in order that you might become His branches. That you might be joined to Him and draw your life from Him. Apart from Jesus, the branches wither and die and are burned in judgment. Just as that bush Moses saw should have been burned up. But abiding in Jesus, the branches thrive and live forever.

They live forever strengthened by that same fire that does not consume. For there was another day in the Bible when God's people saw fire that didn't burn that which it touched. On Pentecost morning, God brought His holy fire yet again, this time not to a bush, but to the eleven disciple gathered in the upper room.

And the voice of Jesus didn't come out of the flames. No, the voice of Jesus came out of the disciples' own mouths. In whatever language the people nearby needed to hear it. Because just as a preincarnate Christ once spoke through a burning bush, so the incarnate Christ continues to speak through us. His disciples. His church. His people.

That we, like burning bushes of our own day, might light the way to the Father, speak God's Word, and reveal his saving work for us. Amen.