

“God’s Grammar”

Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler

Pastor, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

September 3, 2017

---

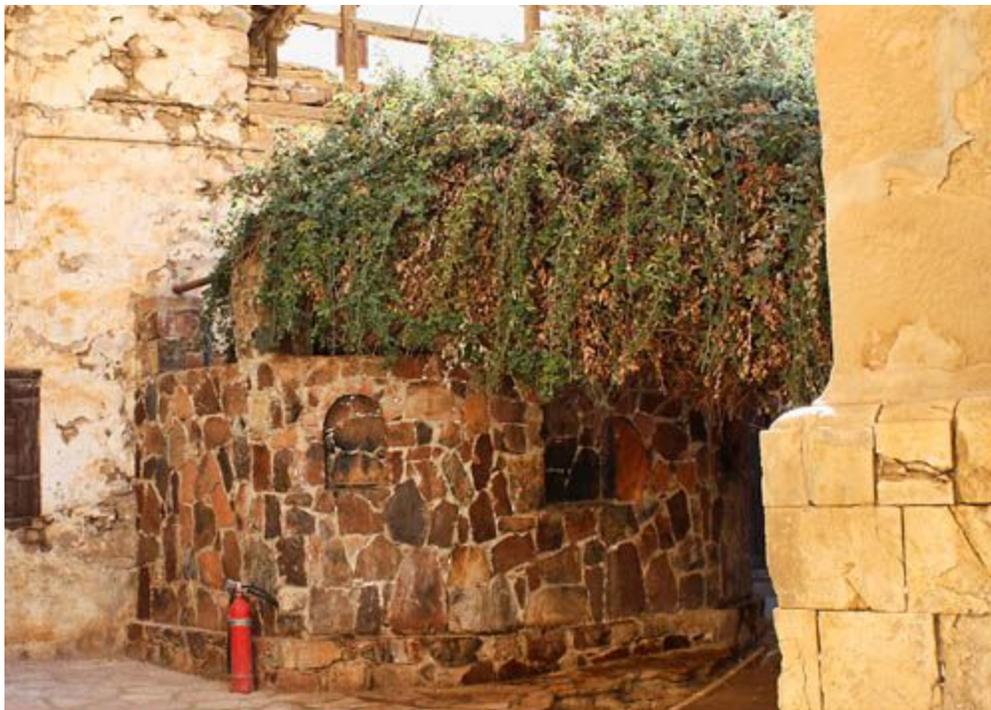
Exodus 3:1-15

I have visited the mountain where God visited Moses, according to the Bible. We began our journey at 2 in the morning, climbing out of our bus into the black night. The dry desert earth scraped beneath our feet. Out of the pitch dark we saw small glowing orange lights coming towards us, then smelled the cigarette smoke in the air. One by one we were told to “Come,” as teenage Arab men led us each to a camel. After being hoisted into the seat, my foundation was shaken as the camel moved from a sitting position to its full, leggy height. My college friends and classmates and I then began our journey up the supposed peak of Mount Sinai, also known in scripture as Mount Horeb, where the bible tells us that Moses encountered God in the burning bush and where, later on, Moses received the Jewish law from God. In our group of young adults, some believers and some skeptics, we began our journey to see if we too might find holy ground.

Two-thirds of the way up the mountain the trail became too steep and rocky for the camels, so we were told to dismount and to climb the rest of the way to the top of the mountain. Once we reached the top, out of breath, we sat, watched, and waited... and waited... until the sky turned colors and that first ray of sunlight beamed from between the mountain peaks surrounding us. We watched in silence

and wonder as we tried to feel whether this indeed was the holy ground on which Moses encountered God.

Scholars debate where the actual site of the ancient Mount Sinai stands, but as for me, I decided that the historicity of the site did not really matter. What mattered to me, where the impact really hits me, is in the meaning of the story—not where and when it might have happened. Indeed, on our way back down the mountain we stopped at Saint Catherine’s Monastery, where they claim to hold the actual bush that burned without being consumed, the bush through which God spoke to Moses. As I looked at what was supposed to be a three or four thousand year-old plant but



really looked like my hair on its frizziest bad-hair day, I must admit that it brought out the skeptic in me. So, more important than the when and where this event actually took place is *what* happened—which is

that God chose to speak to Moses, face to face. God told Moses that he was standing on holy ground. God the Liberator called Moses to free the Hebrew people from slavery.

For Moses, there was no ambiguity, no question that something magnificent had happened. He had a direct vision, with fire and calling voice: “Moses! Moses!” For most of us, we probably do not have such a clear sense of when—or if—we are standing on holy ground, before the face of God.

Is it possible that God can speak to us, as God spoke to Moses on that mountain, thousands of years before? Or does God’s voice stop speaking when we shut the cover of the Bible?

The comedian Gracie Allen once said, “Never place a period where God has put a comma.” As you have already learned, or maybe about to learn if you are younger, a period ends a sentence. A comma continues a sentence, usually with a new idea or more information. I have a feeling that God continues to speak to us, and continues to teach us. One reason I believe that is because of God’s name: Yahweh, which translates to I am what I am, or I will be what I will be. God’s name is unlike any other name because it is not a noun. In elementary school grammar, we learn that a noun is a “Person, place or thing.” But the way God tells it to Moses, God’s name is a verb: a word that describes an action or state of being. I AM. God’s name is not I AM NOT. So, I believe God continues to be, to do, to move, to speak, and to show us who God is, and how God acts in the world, and how God calls *us* to be in the world.

But that does not answer the question of why we cannot hear God. As I considered that question, I noticed in this



picture of the burning bush a fire extinguisher that would be easy to miss if you are focused on the bush:

What does a fire extinguisher do? Put out fires! And mostly, that is a good and important thing!! But when we are talking about the fires God uses to get our attention and speak to us, there are many tools that try to act as fire extinguishers, whether we want them to or not.

**There is the Pharaoh model of fire extinguisher.** The makeup of this fire extinguisher is power and greed. Pharaoh, as we heard in last week's worship, wanted to be the most powerful and have the most money. We may know some leaders like that today. As for Pharaoh, he used the Hebrew people as slaves to keep his position of power and wealth. By trying to kill all the Hebrew baby boys, he tried to extinguish God's fire. But it did not work.

**There is the Moses model of fire extinguisher.** The makeup of this fire extinguisher is self-doubt. When God called on Moses, Moses replied "*Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?*" He probably thought he was not good enough, or strong enough. Maybe he thought that no one would listen to him. I can totally understand Moses' self-doubt. I still find it unbelievable that people actually listen to me preach for 10-15 minutes! And like an anxious student or teacher worried about the start of a new year, I also have plenty of fears before a new church program year begins. But Moses' doubt did not extinguish God's fire.

**Another kind of fire extinguisher is busyness.** This fire extinguisher has become most popular in modern times. This fire extinguisher keeps us so scheduled that we have no time for God. In those rare moments when we have gaps in our schedules, we never allow ourselves to be in that bored place that sometimes leads to complete relaxation or to our most creative and inspired thinking. What do we do instead of letting ourselves get bored? I can tell you because I do it too! We are on our phones, or watching TV, anything to decompress from our busyness. And so we miss that evening playing games with the family, or the walk outside listening to the crickets chirp, or that crying sob we have kept from rising to the surface so we can share it with God. And in missing all those opportunities, we miss a chance when God may be trying to speak to us. We may be extinguishing God's fire.

Instead of reaching for the fire extinguisher, let us make moments when we can, like Moses, take off our shoes and find that we are standing on holy ground. We don't need to ride a camel in the night up to Mount Sinai. To position ourselves to follow Jesus and to even see and talk to God, the message Paul gives us in Romans is an excellent start and even gives good instructions for school.

“Hold on to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>1</sup> “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; overcome evil with good.”

These are faith values that can be practiced in the home, as much as in school.

When we make ourselves ready to meet God, we can be ready to find God no matter whether we are on Mount Sinai or along the Palisade cliffs or even across the street in Wood Park. Living ready is worth it, even if we do not get a glimpse of God like Moses did. Because if we live like we are ready to meet God, our lives become more holy, and we may reflect God's light to others-- even if we have not seen God ourselves. This matters more than whether we make A's or C's in math, whether we win the band competition or get last chair, whether we are the teacher's favorite student or get detention, whether we are the most popular kid or the one others make fun of.

God loves you. God calls you; your life is important and no one can live God's call in your life quite like you can. God is going to try to let you know these things, but there are many fire extinguishers around that will try to put out God's light. Take off your shoes anyway, and get ready for God's holy ground. Amen.