

March 24, 2019 Burning Bush Homily: In his classic motion picture *“Love and Death”*, filmmaker and actor Woody Allen plays the part of a hapless, high-strung nineteenth century Russian of noble origin, Boris Grushenko. His character takes every opportunity to poke fun at religion and, especially people of faith. In one memorable scene, Boris remarks to a friend that for him to be a believer, he must witness first hand a miracle. “If only I could see one miracle”, he cries, “just one miracle like a burning bush, or the seas part, or my uncle Sasha pick up the check!” Sometime later, he states, “If he would just speak to me once, just once, anything, one sentence, two words. If only he would cough.” Like his fictional character, Boris, Allen himself is “God haunted” and would not mind embracing the faith of his ancestors if only God would intervene in his life, just as he intervened in the life of the Chosen People over three thousand years ago. If we identify with Allen it is only because we, like him, have questions, too. Every so often we want to see concrete evidence that God indeed cares and is mysteriously active in our life. Sometimes we flirt with unbelief.

Evidence of God’s intervention is found in today’s Old Testament reading. “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, as I know well that they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey”. (Ex. 3:7-8)

There are few passages in the Old Testament as crucial as those found in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus. Truly, the biblical verses reveal some of the greatest moments in the history of the Jewish Scriptures. As a shepherd tending his flock on Mt. Sinai, Moses meets God for the first time. A thorn bush burns with a strange, unearthly fire, but is not consumed (Ex.3:2), and God chooses to reveal his Holy Name, “I Am Who Am” In doing so, he distinguishes Himself from the many pagan gods that existed at that time. To this very day, Jews treat the Name of God with great reverence.

In the bible, fire is a common signal of God’s mysterious presence. A column of cloud guides Israel through the desert. A fiery smoke indicates God’s presence on Mt. Sinai when Moses receives the Ten Commandments. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples as tongues of fire on Pentecost.

In Jewish folklore, there are some inspiring stories about the bush that burns but is not consumed. In one such story, Moses is curious about this strange sighting and addresses God, who then tells him to remove his shoes for he is on holy ground. Moses wants to know why God chooses such an odd way of revealing Himself. The answer Moses receives from the Almighty is that even though Israel may be subjected to the fires of hatred, persecution and cruelty like the bush, it will never be consumed.

Another tale suggests that the bush also shows that God is willing to lower Himself to man’s level, for nothing is more lowly than a bush on a hillside and by dwelling among the thorns of the bush, God expresses his participation in the sufferings of Israel

The Knesset is the national legislature of Israel. At the entrance of the Knesset courtyard in Jerusalem a monument now stands. It is the master work of David Palumbo, an artist of Turkish decent, who offered it to the Jewish state as a gift in 1965, a mere twenty years after the horrors of the Second World War, in which the massacre of six million innocent Jews occurred. Palumbo’s work was aimed at creating a memorial for the destruction of European Jewry. Inspired by the biblical burning bush, the sculpture is hewn of rock and glass, and is a poignant reminder to all legislators and visitors that the God of Israel is always the Guardian of His people and whose Holy Name is to be honored whenever Jews gather to legislate for their people.

Let us consider our relationship with the God of the burning bush. May this heavenly fire burn within each of us as we daily bear witness to the mystery of his Divine Presence.

Amen!