

**Beware of Burning Bushes, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 15050828**  
**Exodus 3:1-15 and Romans 12:9-21**  
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It probably began like any other day for Moses. Here he was in a wilderness area tending sheep on the side of a brown rocky hillside. What a job! He wasn't raised to have a job like that, you know, chasing sheep and keeping them from harm. He was raised in a palace by a princess. He was used to the finest food and to luxury. He was an aristocrat: part of the ruling class.

Then, Moses' life changed because, it says, "he went out to his people."<sup>1</sup> He knew who his people were. His conscience must have gotten to him, looking out the palace window and seeing his cousins out there hard at work. His people were the Hebrew slaves and their work was to build the cities of Pharaoh. In the hot sun they made bricks and cut stone and hauled them to their places. And we think we have it tough in our job! They didn't get any Labor Day holiday off.

"Moses went out to his people." Things begin to change when the rich and comfortable mingle with the poor and oppressed: when a welfare mother has a name instead of a stereotype.

While Moses was out there, he saw an Egyptian beating one of his people, one of the slaves. He got so mad that he killed the Egyptian. Well, that's an over-reaction, isn't it? If he had grown up a slave, he would have been used to seeing beatings, but he didn't, and he wasn't used to seeing that kind of treatment. He realized what he had done, and ran off so he wouldn't be caught. That's why Moses was now out here in the wilderness with his father-in-law's sheep.

It was a quiet day, a lamb over there by the cliff, all in all a pretty boring day for someone who grew up in the Washington D. C. of his day, where he was used to knowing about the comings and goings of the powerful. Something caught his attention: a glint in the corner of his eye. It was a bush that was burning. He went closer to take a look. It was burning, but it wasn't burning.

The scripture says that this burning bush was an "angel of the Lord."<sup>2</sup> You probably thought that an angel of the Lord was a cute cherub flying around with wings. Those did not come about until the time of the Renaissance and the paintings of the Italian and Dutch masters. An angel is any appearance of God. For Abraham, it was three men. For Jacob, it was a wrestler. For Moses, it was a burning bush and a voice.

If you want to see an angel, it's more important to keep your heart open than your eyes. God appears to us, but we often don't recognize it until later. It may be through a friend who led us away from danger. It may be through a spouse who tells us things about ourselves that we would not have recognized on our own. It may be through the person of a childhood minister or a teacher who invited us to look into a particular vocation.

If Moses had not taken the time to stop and look, the Israelites would still be in slavery and we would not know God's name. God was getting ready to act. The end of Chapter Two of Exodus says that God "heard the groaning" of the Israelite slaves.<sup>3</sup> "God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"<sup>4</sup> God did not want to see slavery and oppression. God was going to do something about it.

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 2:11

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 3:2

<sup>3</sup>Exodus 2:24

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

We get discouraged when we see injustice or evil and no one seems to do anything about it. We get disheartened when we think we are alone, and that even God doesn't care. God does care, and God acts through us to bring about freedom and justice. All around us are examples, but we often do not take the time to notice.

A fire ruined a factory in Massachusetts a few years back. Many owners would have shut down and laid their workers off, but in this instance, the owner whose family had run this business for generations and who cared about his workers, kept them on his payroll for the time it took to rebuild. These workers care about the business, care about the owner, and give their best efforts to see that it produces. That is how labor and management ought to interact. It is the way God intends! When we can see people caring for each other, we see an angel: an appearance of God.

Theologians say this burning bush was a "theophany," an appearance of God. But that is the point: God appears. When we are hard at work at our jobs, God appears. When human beings are oppressed, God appears.

God asked Moses to do a big task. Remember, this was to take place back in Egypt where there was a warrant out for his arrest. Remember that the pharaoh was the most powerful ruler in the world of that day and this was Moses, who was just a shepherd.

Moses was reluctant at first. He kept asking God for proof: "Show me your license and registration. I need some proof to tell people that I saw you." It was out of frustration that God finally said, "Tell them 'I am' sent you."<sup>5</sup> That is what "Jahweh" means in Hebrew: "I am who I am."

The word in Hebrew also means, "I will be who I will be." We cannot limit God to what we want God to be. God is greater than that. God will always be greater than our definitions and expectations. God was going to act to free the slaves, and God chose Moses.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that this story is a nice tale about a distant past. This is your story, and it is my story. We cannot forget our past. We were slaves once upon a time. We were tools for an oppressor. God does not want human beings to be used as tools.

God set us free. Do not let your present condition blind you to what God wants for all people. God will not leave them alone, and God will not leave you alone!

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<sup>5</sup>Exodus 3:14