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Our Pulpit.

The Story of Moses.

No. 6

THE BURNING BUSH.

SERMON PREACHED BY
REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Fredericton, Sunday evening Feb. 10th, 1889.

"And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed."—EXODUS III. 2.

How much depends sometimes on one man, the strength of his arm, the wisdom of his words. And perhaps he does not know it, is quite unconscious of it. Indeed, for him to know it too well, to be conscious of it, would spoil him for what he is to be and the work he is to do, and so he has to be left to grope, stumble, blunder, his way up to the high place of usefulness and greatness it is his to occupy.

Yonder is a shepherd leading the sheep of another from pasture to pasture amid the wild passes and wadies of the Sinaitic peninsula, and the hope of the world, of coming ages, depends, in an important sense, upon him and he does not know it, is quite unconscious of it. He has, of course, his aspirations, his great thoughts, his ardent longings, or he has had them. He feels sometimes doubtless that he is made for something better than feeding sheep, but he bows to the decree of Heaven, and grows to be contented with his lot, almost too contented with it. He yields to what he regards as the inevitable, quenches the fire of his ambition, and tries to make up his mind to be only a shepherd the rest of his days. But God has other and higher work for him to do, and I am to show tonight how He calls him to it.

I. THE BURNING BUSH.

Moses had ventured, it would appear, to lead his sheep farther back into the interior of the wilderness than the rest of the shepherds. It is hinted that the shepherds had a superstitious dread of Mount Horeb. Its towering peaks and awful grandeur awed them. Even then, it would seem, it was known as the mount of God, and nothing could prevail upon them to approach too near its front even, that is, the side that looks out upon the sea, much less to go away round to the back side of the mount. They would have marvellous stories to tell of what had been seen and heard there, and of the fearful doom that had overtaken some one who had dared in his reckless venturesomeness to go too near the sacred mount. Moses had listened to those tales of the shepherds, and he had resolved to unravel the mystery the mount or perish in the attempt. The very things which deterred them from going excited his curiosity to go. He knew that, at least, there must be good pasture for his sheep back of rugged Horeb, for it had never been fed on. And then, the love of adventure and exploration was a strong incentive for him to go. And he went.

I see him at the head of his flock slowly penetrating the defiles of the mountains, venturing far into the rugged region untrodden as yet by the foot of man. We cannot today follow him in his windings in and out and among the mountains of the region, but we are sure his way would lead him into awful solitudes, dark ravines with great overhanging mountain-cliffs rising thousands of feet above him, terrible to look up at, and filling his soul with a strange awe. He may have led his flock ten or perhaps twenty miles into this lonely region. His sheep had confidence in him, and followed where he led. He probably found his way to the plain of Er Rahab or rest, which lies back of the awful peak of Ras Sulsafah, which is now believed to have been the peak whence the land was given to God's people. As he was crossing along at the head of his sheep close to the foot of the mountain, his attention was suddenly attracted to a desert thorn-bush, up the mountain-slope a little way, all on fire and yet unconsumed, yea blooming away all the more beautifully.

He stands, and looks, and wonders. He has never seen anything like that in all his ramblings among the mountains. Then he ventures nearer. I see him clambering up the mountain side where the burning bush is, so that he might have a better view of the strange sight. But before he is able to get as near to it as he wants to get, a voice, like the voice of an angel, seems to come out of the midst of the flame. The voice addresses him thus, twice repeating the name the Egyptian princess gave him: "Moses, Moses."

You can imagine his surprise to hear his name called in this desolate region. But he is not mistaken. The voice is quite audible and distinct, and he answers: "Here am I."

The voice then warns him not to come any nearer than where he is, and tells

him to take off his sandals, according to eastern custom, because he is on holy ground. This he does, and waits reverently for the voice to proceed.

He is then told that the God of his fathers is speaking to him out of the burning bush. Upon hearing that, the shepherd of Midian is awestruck, and covers his face, for he is afraid to look. The Lord then proceeds with His message to Moses. He tells the shepherd how wretched the state of Israel in Egypt, how ground down under the iron heel of oppression. Their cry, however, has come to His ears, and the day of their deliverance is nigh. He is going to bring them up out of Egypt and put them in possession of Canaan, and He wants Moses to go to Pharaoh for Him on this mission of mercy. "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt."

How clear and loud the call. No danger of any mistake being made here with regard to this call. But Moses hesitates. He is appalled at the stupendousness of the undertaking, and he asks with questioning faith: "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

The Lord then meets his objection by assuring him that He will be with him, and to confirm his weak faith. He tells him that right here where they are will the people worship Him. "Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be the token unto thee, that I have sent thee: when thou shalt have brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain."

But Moses still objects. The people will not believe he is sent, and they will ask who sent him, and he will not be able to answer.

This objection the Lord also meets. He is to tell the people that I AM THAT I AM sent him. He then goes on to explain very fully and particularly how he is to proceed in the business. He is to return to Egypt, and assemble the elders of the people, and lay the whole matter before them. Then with a deputation of the elders at his back, he is to go to the king, and request permission to go a three-day's journey into the wilderness to worship.

But Moses still objects. He is sure the people will not believe he is sent. To help him the Lord turns his shepherd's crook into a serpent, and back again into a single rod. Then He makes his hand leprous, and then as simply heals it for him. And besides these two miracles, the Lord instructs him how to turn the Nile water into blood. But Moses still objects to his call. He complains of his unfitness for the work. He is not a man of words. He has no gift of speech as a speaker, lacks the orator's eloquence. He is slow of speech, has a limping, hesitating utterance.

It has been said that Moses found great difficulty in pronouncing certain letters, and the words they were in. Others think the defect he speaks of is a want of readiness in expressing himself. He blundered, hesitated, was in danger of breaking down, when he attempted to speak. But so many of the greatest preachers and orators have experienced the same difficulty, such as Paul, Knox, Luther, and many others.

The Lord then rebukes Moses for the way he runs down his gifts, and especially that of speech. He asks him sharply who made man's mouth, the gifted tongue or the dumb tongue, the seeing eye and the hearing ear? And then He promises that He will be with his mouth, and tell him both what to say and how to say it.

And now he feels himself cornered, and accepts his call. But he accepted it with a very bad grace. Perhaps it was diffidence on his part, humility, that made him so reluctant to accept. He had a poor opinion of his own abilities. But, at all events, he did wrong. He showed much weakness. He had almost to be dragged by main force out of his obscurity, and sent to the work the Lord had been fitting him for and calling him to all through the eighty years of his life. "Oh Lord," he said, "send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send," as much as to say, "I suppose I will have to go because I am sent, but I am not the man to send."

The way he accepted his call made the Lord angry, and He told Moses that since he declined to take the responsibility upon himself, he might have, if he chose, his elder brother to share it with him. He was not wanting in words. And Moses agreed to this. But it was one of the great mistakes of his life. And he found it out when it was too late. It would have been better for himself, and better too for the enterprise he was sent on, if he had done as the Lord wanted him to do, and accepted the sole responsibility of the exodus. It is worthy of remark, that the two greatest mistakes of his life for himself perhaps were made, the first because of his diffidence, the second because of his over-confidence, and both because of his weak faith. You think diffidence is better than over-confidence, but the one may be as wrong as the other for the one as well as the other may stand in the way of duty, God's call, our responsibility; and, moreover

diffidence may grow to be over-confidence. Over-confidence may be said to be diffidence grown up. Let us be afraid of both, for their root is lack of faith in God.

II. PREPARATIONS AND DELAYS.

Moses returned at once from the wilderness to the encampment to Jethro. It would appear that a new man was now sheikh. Probably Raguel had been dead for some time. Some indeed think that Jethro was an official title, and that Jethro and Raguel refer to the same individual. But we can easily understand how that forty years would bring its changes, and a younger man may now be sheikh and priest in the place of blind old Raguel. To this it is objected that Jethro is spoken of as Moses' father-in-law instead of his brother-in-law. But the word in the original is so indefinite that it may be brother-in-law, or father-in-law, or even son-in-law.

To Jethro therefore Moses returned, and asked permission to go to Egypt. It is not stated whether he told him of the call he had received. Perhaps he deemed it best to keep the matter to himself. It might not help the cause to make it public as yet. So he simply requested Jethro to allow him to return to Egypt to see his people. It was a very natural request, for he had been long years away from them. And the good sheikh at once gave his consent in these words: "Go in peace."

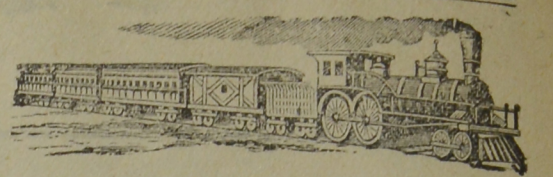
Preparations were then made for the long journey. His wife decided to go with him, and that may have been a detention. She was not willing that he should go without her, and she may not have been very willing, or perhaps able to go at the time. And the season may not have been favorable for travelling. At all events there were delays, delays that at first were necessary, but which afterwards came to be unnecessary. We can understand how it would be with regard to his wife, for it would seem that the delays were in some way connected with her. She was in the way. Her friends may have been against her going, and they may have done all they could to dissuade her from so great a journey. And then Moses himself was not over-anxious to go. He did not push things. And so the time was passing, and the return to Egypt had not begun. He was afraid to meet Rameses II, who was still, for aught he knew, on the throne of Egypt. He knew what sort of man he was, and we need not wonder that Moses was not anxious to meet him.

But as delay after delay was occurring, and there seemed to be no likelihood of the return to Egypt being effected within a reasonable time, if it was left to Moses and his wife, the Lord again appeared to him. Perhaps indeed he was waiting for instructions. At all events the Lord appeared again to him in Midian, the same voice that had spoken to him out of the burning bush, and He told him to return without any further delay to Egypt. And then to let him see that the way was clear, the Lord told him that Pharaoh was dead, and all indeed who had wanted to slay him forty years before. His word was: "Go, return into Egypt; for all the men are dead who sought thy life."

The old tyrant was at last dead, the Pharaoh of the oppression, Rameses II, the great Sesostris, the might of whose arms had reached out to all lands and made the world tremble. He had at last met a conqueror, a grimmer tyrant than himself, and he had yielded to him. After an eventful reign of well nigh seventy years, a reign full of conquest, a reign full of glory for Egypt, he had succumbed to the inevitable. It is said that becoming blind in his old age, the calamity so wrought upon him that he committed suicide. But whether or not, the Pharaoh of the oppression died, of whom it has been said that every stone in his monuments cost a human life. It was then between the death of Rameses II and the coronation of his son and successor Menephtah, that Moses was sent to Egypt. The time was seasonable, for there was a lull in the oppression, and the slaves and captives had a brief respite.

While the slaves are waiting and wondering what next for them, and praying and hoping that the new king may not be so harsh and hard as his father had been, yonder in Midian a shepherd is helping his wife with her two children to the saddle of their sole ass, and setting out for Egypt with help for them. In his hand he carries the staff that is to play so important a part in the deliverance that is to be wrought out, and he steadies his steps with it as he walks along leading the ass. He is a poor man. For forty years he has toiled, and one ass carries away from Midian all he is worth. Jacob had grown rich in half the time. But Moses had not the faculty to do for himself, to make a bargain, and make things pay, that the shrewd Jacob had; and so after years of toil, he finds himself a poor man. He has a wife and two sons—that is about all Midian has done for him. And yet, the hope of Israel, indeed we might say, the hope of the world, is in that humble shepherd. Look at the little cavalcade making its slow way Egyptianwards, and you do not see, and he does not see, what so poor a man can do for

Continued on third page.



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11.35 A. M.—From Fredericton Junction, St. John and points East.

3.10 P. M.—From Fredericton Junction, Vancorbora, Bangor, Portland, Boston, and points West, St. Andrew's, St. Stephen, Houlton Woodstock and points north.

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