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The Third Sunday of Lent (C)

[*Brief discussion of the "discovery of the tomb of Jesus"*]

Today we hear of the encounter of Moses with the burning bush. Moses is tending the sheep, looking after them lest one of them stray from the flock, just as Jesus does with us. As he does so Moses sees a most bizarre sight, indeed: "There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2).

This tells us something about the nature of God: unlike ourselves, he is not competitive. He neither destroys nor rejects whomever comes to him. The fire of God's love is present, but the bush is not burnt; it continues in its existence because it yields itself to God's own purposes.

We naturally expect fire to destroy whatever it touches; candles, paper, forests, houses: all of these are destroyed in the encounter with fire. We expect the same to happen with the fire of God - even more so! - and yet his fire does not destroy; it purifies and cleanses.

Moses sees this flaming bush and is attracted by it. His curiosity gets the better of him and he wants to know what is happening. "So Moses decided, 'I must go over to look at this

remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned'" (Exodus 3:). Moses goes to learn more of this wonder; he freely chooses to go. As he looks upon the bush Moses do so in control of the situation, or so he thinks. The bush does not draw Moses to itself; Moses draws himself toward it. At this point Moses will not allow himself to be conquered by God.

Do we not try to do the same? We experience God's presence and love in our lives and we look on from a distance. Slowly and cautiously we begin to walk toward the Lord but we will not relinquish our control. Often enough we circle around the presence of God, never willing to get too close. We refuse to subordinate ourselves to the Creator and Master of all. We, like Moses, do not want to let him be in charge because we are afraid of his power.

As Moses comes toward the bush God yells out to him, "Come no nearer" (Exodus 3:5)! Moses attempted to get too close to the Lord because he did not recognize the holiness of God. This God cannot be manipulated or controlled. The Lord calls us to himself - as he did Moses - but we must always remember who we are and who he is.

Now, we might wonder why the Lord commands Moses to do what no one else had previously been instructed: Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). When we walk about outside with sandals or shoes

on our feet we can walk around easily enough; we are still in control. But if we walk around outside without sandals or shoes - especially on rocky and sandy ground - walking becomes much more difficult and we are no longer in full control. So it is in the presence of God.

We have a natural attraction for God because, as Saint Augustine says, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Drawing near to him we come to realize that we cannot be in control of our relationship and encounter with him. How often do we say: "No Lord, it should happen this way;" or "Lord, I want to do this, not that;" or "Lord, this isn't fair."

In his encounter at the flaming bush Moses learns that he is not in charge because "the place where you stand is holy ground" and God himself is holy. But Moses also learns that this God who is in charge and is attractive, this God to whom one cannot draw too close, is also relational and not to be feared. Though Moses does not know with whom he speaks, he knows Moses and calls out to him by name (cf. Exodus 3:4). Even when Moses is fearful and hides his face, he does not run away; something keeps him there: it is the attraction of love.

The Lord then says to him, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are

suffering" (Exodus 3:7). Although the Lord is supremely holy he also wishes to be among his people because he loves them and has great compassion for them.

The Lord draws each of us to himself during these sacred days. He shows himself to us in unexpected and curious ways and he invites us to approach him. As we do, the fire of his love enlightens the darkness of our sin. The Lord then cries out to us: "If you do not repent, you will all perish" (Luke 13:3).

What is sin if not the deliberate and free choice of my will over God's? Whenever we sin we reject God's will and turn our back on the one who first loved us and came among us to tend his vineyard that we might bear good fruit. Through his prophet Isaiah the Lord asks, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes" (Isaiah 5:4)?

The Lord has given us everything we need to attain salvation, to be holy as he commands us. All we need do is make good use of what he has given us. In these holy days of Lent he calls us to reflect on our sin and on our own coming death that we might turn back to him to live forever with him. In his merciful love, Jesus says to his harvesting angels: "leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down" (Luke 13:8-9).

Through these days of Lent the Lord fertilizes us through our penances of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. He wants to make us holy but we must cooperate with his grace. We must recognize that we are not in control of our lives. We must accept this reality, and lovingly entrust every aspect of our life to the Lord alone. Only in this way will grow in love and become perfect. Only in this way can we follow the wisdom of Saint Augustine: "Love God, and do what you will." Only in this way will we bear good fruit during this Lenten springtime and live.