

## ***Hard Places, Holy Ground***

### **I. Beyond the Wilderness**

Moses did not set out that morning looking for God. He was doing what he always did — leading the flock. One foot in front of the other. Routine ministry in a difficult landscape. He had been doing this for forty years, far from home, far from his people, living with the weight of a past he could not change and a future he could not see.

He had gone 'beyond the wilderness' — and that is precisely where the fire appeared.

Friends, we know something about hard places. Many of our congregations have walked through seasons of loss — the loss of members, of buildings, of confidence in what tomorrow holds. The pews that were once full. The programs that no longer run. The committees that meet to manage decline rather than to dream. We know what it is to go 'beyond the wilderness' — further in than we thought we would go, wondering if there is any ground firm enough to stand on. The United Church of Canada has been honest about this moment.

The data gathered for Toward 2035 makes clear that we face significant challenges on the road ahead: declining membership, fewer financial resources, properties that weigh us down more than they hold us up. And yet — and this is the astonishing thing — the vision for Toward 2035 does not begin with despair. It begins with the same thing Moses encountered in the wilderness: a burning bush.

### **II. The Ground Beneath Your Feet Is Holy**

Notice what God does not say to Moses. God does not say: 'Come back when you have a bigger flock.' God does not say: 'This ground is too ordinary for a holy encounter.' God does not wait for better conditions. God shows up in a thornbush in the middle of nowhere and says: 'The place where you are standing — right now, in this hard place, with your tired feet and your uncertain heart — is holy ground.'

**Take off your sandals.** Not because you have arrived. Take them off because God has arrived — and God arrives precisely where we are.

This is a word the whole church needs to hear. Our hard places are not God-less places. Our struggling congregations are not abandoned congregations. The God who met Moses in the wilderness is the same God who shows up on Tuesday evening in a church basement where seven people are trying to figure out the future. The same God who is present in the conversation between two congregations wondering whether they might find more life together than apart. The same God who breathes on migrant communities, on young adults who don't look like our old photographs, on rural charges and urban clusters alike.

In The United Church of Canada, inspired, resilient, and diverse contextual communities of disciples seek to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world. — Toward 2035 Vision Statement, The United Church of Canada, **Inspired. Resilient. Diverse.** These are not words that describe where we have arrived. They are words that describe who God is calling us to become — together — from within our hard places. The burning bush is not somewhere else. The burning bush is here.

### **III. I Have Heard the Cry**

Listen again to what God says from within the fire:

'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.' — Exodus 3:7–8a (NRSV)

Here is the heart of the whole story: God hears. God sees. God comes down. The divine response to human suffering is not a memo or a management plan. It is presence. It is solidarity. It is God getting into the mess alongside the people.

And then — God turns to Moses and says: 'So come, I will send you.'

The God who hears the cry chooses to act through people. Through communities. Through the whole church gathered around a shared commitment to witness. This is not a burden — it is an honour. We are not solving a problem. We are participating in a divine movement that began long before us and will continue long after we are gone.

Toward 2035 resonates with this same theological impulse. It reminds us that the church does not exist for itself. It exists for the sake of the world — for newcomers and neighbours, for young people who are searching, for communities living with injustice, for a planet groaning for healing. The United Church's call to Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice is nothing less than our answer to God's question: 'Who will go?'

### **IV. We Are Not Alone: A Word About Collaboration**

Moses had an objection, of course. He always did. 'Who am I?' he asked. 'What if they don't believe me?' 'I'm not a good speaker.' Every minister who has ever stood before a shrinking congregation understands Moses. We know the weight of feeling inadequate for the task; the weight of scarcity. It can be worse for Lay Worship Leaders who feel those same things, but lack the resources and authority to make meaningful changes.

God's answer, again and again, is not: 'Don't worry, you can do it alone.' God's answer is: 'I will be with you.' And then — God sends Aaron. And Miriam. And a whole community of people who will make the journey together.

The Scripture shows us that faithful ministry has never been a solo venture. It has always been a collaborative enterprise: God and people, people and people, community and community.

Toward 2035 carries this same conviction at its core. The initiative is explicit that 'no one part of the church can manifest a hopeful future alone.' It envisions Communities of Faith, Regional Councils, and the General Council weaving together their unique voices and visions — not one-size-fits-all, but connexional, cooperative, and connected.

2035 seeks to be a ministry-focused, data-informed vision and strategy for the whole church... Instead of many different uncoordinated, and perhaps even overlapping strategies for renewal, growth, and invitation, we will strive to discern and act more effectively together, inspired by a common commitment to resilient witness. — Toward 2035 Open Letter, The United Church of Canada

What would it look like for your congregation to lean into that collaboration? What if the congregation down the road — the one you've nodded at for decades — became a genuine

partner in ministry? What if your cluster became not just an administrative structure but a community of discernment, where you listened together for what God is doing in your region?

Burning bushes are often found at the intersection of two paths — where strangers meet, where traditions cross, where the unexpected happens. Collaboration is not a management strategy. It is a spiritual discipline. It is the practice of saying: we cannot do this alone, and we do not have to.

#### **V. I AM WHO I AM: The Ground of Our Hope**

Moses asks the question we all want to ask: 'If I go to the people, what shall I tell them? Who sent me? What is your name?'

#### **And the answer thunders out of the fire: 'I AM WHO I AM.'**

Not 'I was.' Not 'I will be, if things get better.' I AM. Present tense. Active. Alive. The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel — this same God is the God of this moment. This hard moment. This uncertain, data-saturated, sometimes-frightening moment in the life of the church.

The name of God is not a doctrine to be debated. It is a promise to be trusted. The God who burns without consuming is at work in the church today — burning with passion for the world, burning with love for the lost, burning in the hearts of ministry leaders who refuse to give up, burning in the communities that are trying new things, failing faithfully, and rising again.

The United Church has known many such moments before. It was born — one hundred years ago — out of the courage of people who believed that more could be done together than apart. It has navigated wars, recessions, cultural upheaval, and its own painful reckonings. And it is still here. Still burning. Still not consumed.

One hundred years ago, this church was formed with great celebration and sacrament. It began with faithful people seeing the possibility God guided them into, right there in the place they called home. We are convinced that God still calls, and that we can respond even more strongly to that call if we truly understand — that even within this church — we are not alone. — Toward 2035 Open Letter, The United Church of Canada

#### **VI. Remove Your Sandals — We Are on Holy Ground**

Moses went back down the mountain. He gathered Aaron. He spoke to the elders. He said what seemed impossible to say: God has seen us. God has heard us. And God is sending us — not away from our hard place, but through it and with it, for the sake of those who are still in bondage.

Friends, we are not the first generation to feel that the wilderness has gone on too long. And we will not be the last. But we are the generation that has been called — right now — to look up from our ordinary work, to notice the fire, and to take off our sandals.

The place where you are standing — your congregation, your cluster, your region, this whole connexional church — is holy ground. Not because it is perfect. Not because it is comfortable. But because God is here. God has heard the cry. God is still calling.

Toward 2035 is one way the church is trying to respond to that call — faithfully, humbly, together. It is an invitation to collaboration. It is a commitment to listen before we act. It is a

trust that the future belongs to communities of disciples who are willing to say: we will not do this alone, and we will not give up.

So let us go together. With our questions and our doubts. With our empty pews and our open hearts. With our spreadsheets and our prayers. With our grief for what has been lost and our hope for what is yet to come.

Go — because I AM has sent us. Go — because the world is waiting. Go — because the hard places we fear are the very places where the holy fire burns.

**AMEN.**

### **Scripture Reading – June 7, 2026 – CSRC AGM Meeting Weekend - Little Current UC**

#### **Exodus 3:1-15    NRSV Ue            Moses at the Burning Bush**

**3** Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. **3** Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” **4** When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” **5** Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” **6** He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

**7** Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, **8** and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. **9** The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. **10** Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” **11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” **12** He said, “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

#### **The Divine Name Revealed**

**13** But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” **14** God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” **15** God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,  
and this my title for all generations.

May God’s spirit shape our understanding of these words.

**And may they awaken in our heart.**

