

## THE WISE OLD FISH JUST LAUGHED!

(09/22/19)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-6  
Joshua 5:13-15  
John 4:7-26

*“Then he [God] said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’”* (Exodus 3:5)

My earliest memory of church was that it was a special place. I learned that children should not run in church, that it was not a playground. I learned that children should not yell or make a lot of noise in church; it didn't need to be as quiet as I was told the library had to be, but it was clear that we were to use our “indoor voices.” We wore special clothes to church; we wore what my mother called our “Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes.” A Saturday ritual in my house involved shining our shoes so we would look nice on Sunday morning.

If the church building itself was special, the sanctuary was even more special. That was where grown-up people went to worship God. They had symbols there like candles and a cross. They had sacred music, played on a magnificent organ, sung by a choir or by the congregation. I always felt it was special when we children were allowed to go upstairs for worship instead of in the little chapel where we usually met before our Sunday school classes began.

Later, when I was in high school, I attended a midnight mass on Christmas Eve with my girlfriend, who was Roman Catholic. It seemed that for Roman Catholics, the church in general and the sanctuary in particular were even more special than they were for us Protestants. Catholics made the sign of the cross every time they passed by their church. They blessed themselves with holy water before they entered the sanctuary, and they bowed down on one knee and genuflected before they entered their pew. The mass back in the late 1950's was in Latin. Although I felt I missed something because I couldn't understand what was being said, I had the sense that the priest was speaking a special language, a sacred language, and that it gave more power to the ceremony than if he were to say the mass in the vernacular, in the same language we use in our everyday life.

When I was about six years old, I had another experience of how special the church building was. Our church burned to the ground. I remember how upset my parents and other church people were about losing a place that was so special, that held so many memories. We met in the Masonic Lodge across town for the year or two while our church was being rebuilt. I still observe this outpouring of feeling whenever a church burns down. Several years ago, in a town near where I live, a Baptist church burned to the ground. The response from the community

was not only heartening, it was overwhelming. People who were not Baptist, were not Protestant, or were not even believers gave donations to help the church rebuild. A real estate broker once told me that people, even if they were atheists, would not move into a town that had no churches. There is something about the presence of a church, a community of faith, a keeper of religious tradition--symbolized in the church building--that is special to many people.

I confess a sense of pride when visitors or guest preachers remark about what a beautiful church we have and what a beautiful sanctuary. We know that a lot of people, some still with us and some no longer with us, are responsible for making this church building what it is, and we know how important a charge we hand to the Board of Trustees to not only maintain it but constantly seek ways to improve it. I would be very sad if there came a time when our church building was no longer special to our members, and even more sad if there came a time when our church closed, when it no longer existed.

The church building is a sacred or holy space, a place to come apart from the world to encounter God or to be encountered by God. Even though we don't use a lot of Latin in our worship service, we do use special language--referring to God at times as "Thee" or "Thou." We stand when we sing hymns, and we bow our heads when we pray. Because we are New Englanders, we don't wave our hands and shout "Amen!" or "You rock, Pastor!" when the preacher says something with which we agree. But we approach the Sacrament of Holy Communion with reverence. The church is one among many places throughout history that have been designated as sacred places, as holy ground.

As recorded in this morning's reading from the book of Exodus, Moses is tending his father-in-law's flock. In the course of his duties as shepherd, Moses leads the sheep to Horeb, which was known as the mountain of God. Suddenly the Lord appears to Moses from the midst of a bush which, though burning, is not consumed. At first out of curiosity and later out of awe and reverence, Moses approaches the bush.

God then calls to Moses out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses replies, "Here I am." God then tells Moses, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

The place on which you are standing is holy ground. In Moses' time, to take off one's shoes was a sign of reverence. You would take off your shoes even today if you were to enter a Buddhist or Hindu temple or an Islamic mosque. To remove one's hat or shoes is a sign that one is entering into a special or sacred place. (What an antiquated custom it is for men, especially young men, to remove their cap or when they enter a sacred place or even a college classroom.)

Moses knew he was standing on holy ground. He realized that he had come face to face with God's tremendous power. Moses' response, a mingled sense of wonder, reverence, and awe, is characteristic of religious experience. We need to remember that religion is more than adhering to commonsense rules of decency; it is an experience of the Holy, the sacred, what the German theologian Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*. There is more to religion than theology or church law, more than a set of beliefs. There is a sense of encountering or being encountered by something transcendent, something greater and more powerful than we are, something that forms the very ground of our being.

In biblical times, it was not considered possible to come face to face with this tremendous power, this tremendous energy, and still live. This is why God tells Moses to hide himself in the cleft of a rock as he passes by. This is why God tells Moses not to come too near. This is why Moses' face shone when he returned to his people following his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. This God was so powerful, human beings could not experience him directly. His presence had to be mediated in some way. In our religious tradition, we experience this mediated presence in the prophets, in Jesus, in the church, in the scriptures, in the rituals and symbolist of worship, and in the sacraments. Prayer, interestingly enough, is an unmediated experience.

From this passage in Exodus, we learn that God can be experienced on Mt. Horeb, that Mt. Horeb is holy ground. At the time of our second scripture lesson, from the book of Joshua, we read that Joshua is camped near the city of Jericho, a walled Canaanite fortress which he must overthrow. Suddenly a man with drawn sword appears before Joshua. Joshua at first mistakes him for a human soldier, asking whether the man is on their side or the side of their adversaries. The man, who is obviously an angel, tells Joshua that he is "the commander of the army of the Lord." Joshua immediately responds to the revelation by falling on his face to the ground in reverence and awe. When Joshua asks for instruction, the angel tells him to remove his sandals from his feet, for the place where he stands is holy ground. Joshua, just like Moses, removes his sandals as a symbol of reverence.

So now we learn that God does not just dwell on mountains, like Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai, but on the plains of Jericho as well. The Bible mentions several places that were experienced or designated as special or sacred places. In our Sunday morning Bible study last week, we read that Jacob set up a stone pillar at Bethel, the place where he had the dream of the ladder which connected heaven and earth, for he considered it holy ground, the place where he had encountered God. When he awoke from sleep following his dream, Jacob said, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." And Jacob was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this

place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” So, in addition to several sacred mountains and the Jericho plans, Bethel was also a sacred place.

The Gospel reading this morning was taken from the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John, the account of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. On the basis of Jesus’ ability to tell the woman about herself, including how she needed to straighten out her life, the woman realizes that Jesus is someone special. She then asks Jesus to comment on a running dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans over where the divinely appointed site for the worship of God should be located. The Samaritans had built a temple on Mt. Gerizim. The Jews, of course, believed the temple should be located in Jerusalem. The woman asks Jesus what he thinks, saying, “Sir, I perceive you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you, a Jew, say that Jerusalem is the place where people should worship.” From this passage of scripture, we learn that there are at least two other holy places: Mt. Gerizim and Jerusalem, each claiming to be the one and only sacred space.

Many places throughout history have been either identified as sacred places or designated as such. Jesus, however, in his answer to the woman, provides a different perspective on sacred space. He tells her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship God. . . . The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and in truth, for this is the way God wants to be worshiped. God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.”

This is what was so revolutionary about Jesus’ teaching, and it was probably why he incurred the wrath of the religious leaders of his time. Jesus is saying that *every place* is a sacred place, that *every part of our life* is holy ground. God cannot be contained in or constrained by a location. This church sanctuary is indeed holy ground, but so is your home. Bethlehem and Golgotha are sacred places, but so is the place where you work. We cannot limit sacred space; we cannot put boundaries around holy ground. Every space is sacred because it is filled with the presence of God. Every piece of land is holy ground if we encounter God there, if we become aware of God’s presence there. For God is always present; in the encounter, in the religious experience, we simply become aware of this presence in a way that changes our life.

The poets have witnessed to this truth. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, English poet of the Victorian era, wrote,

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only those who see take off their shoes.*

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins echoes this when he says, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

In *Black Elk Speaks*, the story of a Sioux shaman, Black Elk has a vision. In the vision, he is standing at the sacred mountain of his people, the place where our manifest world and the spirit world meet. For the Sioux, this sacred space was Horney Peak in South Dakota. Black Elk tells us that Horney Peak in South Dakota is the center of the world, but then he adds what I believe is a very profound insight. He says, “But of course, the center of the world, the sacred space, is everywhere.”

If the center of the world is everywhere, it is in this sanctuary. To be sure, it is also on Horney Peak in South Dakota, on Mt. Gerizim, in Jerusalem, and on Mt. Horeb. It is on Mt. Sinai and also on my beloved Mt. Kailas. However, if the center of the world is truly everywhere, then it is also *inside you*. *You* are the center of the world! This means that *you* are holy ground! Augustine, in the fourth century, described God as a circle whose center is everywhere but whose circumference is nowhere. If the center of God is *everywhere*, it is not only in this sanctuary, but it is also *inside you, and you, and you, and you!* The center of God is in *all of us*, is throughout the universe, and the circumference, the boundary of God’s presence is accordingly nowhere. If the center is everywhere, how could there be an outer boundary?

This past week, in our study group, I shared a little story. It is a Zen story, a Zen teaching, but I believe it is congruent with our Christian faith. It goes like this.

A little fish in the ocean was swimming back and forth, looking quite perplexed. A wise old fish, noting the little one’s distress, asked him what was troubling him. The little fish replied that he had heard so much about the great ocean, the source of all life, and he wanted to find it, to see it with his own eyes. This had become an all-consuming passion for him—the search to find, to witness, to experience, to come into the presence of this great ocean.

The wise old fish just laughed. Why did he laugh? I think he laughed because there was no way to answer the question that the little fish asked. The little fish was trying to locate the ocean in the realm of space and time, when it was not only all around him, it was also within him. It had no beginning and no end. Without the ocean, the little fish would not be. It was not in a certain place, a very special place, it was everywhere!

The wise old fish tries to tell the little fish that his search is not only doomed to failure; it is unnecessary. He already has that for which he searches. But the little fish doesn’t believe him. He swims away, troubled in spirit, still determined to find the great ocean about which he had heard so much.

This little Zen story reminds me of a saying by the philosopher of religion, Huston Smith.

Smith says:

*To the monotheist, there is one god.*

*To the polytheist, there are many gods.*

*To the atheist, there is no god.*

*To the mystic, there is only God.*

You see, my memories, my experiences as a child were correct. My church growing up was indeed a sacred place. This church and this beautiful sanctuary are holy ground. But you are also holy ground. Like the little fish, you are in God and God is also inside you. When you realize this, like the mystics, every place becomes holy ground; every moment becomes an epiphany, an experience of God's presence. All we have to do is open ourselves, open our hearts and minds to receive it.

If we truly know why the wise old fish laughed, we will carry this sense of God's presence with us throughout the week to come.

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