

## YOU ARE STANDING ON HOLY GROUND!

(09/04/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-6  
Joshua 5:13-15  
John 4:7-24

*“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.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’” (Exodus 3:4-5)*

*“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24)*

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

If the church building was special, the sanctuary was even more special. That was where grown-up people went to worship God. I always felt it was special when we children were allowed to be upstairs for worship instead of in the little chapel where we met before our Sunday school classes began. Not that the little chapel at the Maple Street Congregational Church in Danvers isn’t special; it is beautiful and has always been special to me.

When I was in high school, I attended a midnight mass on Christmas Eve with my Roman Catholic girlfriend and her family. It seemed to me that for Roman Catholics, the church, especially the sanctuary, was even more special than it was for us Protestants. I could smell the incense as I entered the sanctuary. Catholics made the sign of the cross on their forehead every time they passed by their church. They blessed themselves with holy water before they entered the sanctuary, a reminder of their baptism, and they genuflected, they bowed down on one knee and made the sign of the cross 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 the priest was saying, I had the sense that he 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, the language we use every day.

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 people were about losing our church, the place that held so many memories for them. We met in the Masonic Lodge in Danvers for a year or so while we were rebuilding our church. I have noticed an outpouring of community feeling whenever a church burns down. Not long 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 told me that people, even if they were atheists, would not move into a town if there were no churches in the town. There is something about the presence of a church, symbolized in the church building, that is special to many, if not all people.

We know that the church is more than the building. We know that the church is the people, that we are the church together, but we also know that the church building is important. I like it when visitors to our church remark what a beautiful church we have and what a beautiful sanctuary. We know that a lot of people, some still with us and many 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 not only to maintain it but also to constantly seek for ways to improve it. I would be very sad if there came a time when this church building and this sanctuary no longer existed, or when they were no longer special to the members and friends of our church.

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 Latin in our ecclesiastical tradition, we do use special words; we refer to God at times as "Thee" or "Thou." We stand when we sing the hymns and bow our heads when we pray. 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. Across all religious traditions, it has been considered a sanctuary, a safe place.

In the Hebrew scriptures, as we heard this morning in the 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. There the angel of 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, "Do not come near; put off your shoes 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 mosque. Corey and I took off our hiking boots and, trustingly, left them outside when we entered the Taj Mahal in Agra. To remove one's hat or shoes is a sign that one is entering into a special or sacred place. Men take off their hats when they enter a church. Interestingly, women in many church traditions cover their head or their hair. I'm not one to suggest that this is sexist, but . . .

Moses knew that he was on holy ground. He had a sense that he had come face to face with God's tremendous power. This response of Moses, this mingled sense of wonder, reverence, and awe is a special dimension of religious experience. Religion is more than adhering to common sense 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, more than a moral code. 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, something that can shake us free from our small, limited, egocentric lifestyle.

It was not considered possible in ancient times to come face to face with this tremendous creative power of the universe and still live. This is the reason why God tells Moses to hide himself in the cleft of a rock as God passed by. This explains 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. The traditional ways in which we have experienced this mediated presence or experience of God has been through the Law, through the prophets, through Jesus, through the church, through the scriptures, in worship, and in the sacraments. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is just such a mediated presence of God. Its purpose is to help us experience God in Jesus, to bring Jesus alive for us today that he might become more fully a part of our daily life.

So, from the passage of scripture in Exodus, we learn that God can be experienced on Mt. Horeb, that Mt. Horeb is holy ground. In the second scripture lesson, from the book of Joshua, we read that Joshua is camped near the city of Jericho, a walled Canaanite fortress that Joshua must overthrow. Suddenly a man with drawn sword appears before Joshua. Joshua at first mistakes him for a human soldier; he asks the man whether he is on their side or the side of their adversaries. The man, who is obviously an angel, then 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 shoes from his feet, for the place where he stands is holy ground. So, Joshua, just like Moses, removes his shoes 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. We might recall how Jacob set up a stone pillar at Bethel, the place where he had had the dream of the ladder that connected heaven and earth, for he considered it holy ground, the place where he had encountered God. Remember how, when he awoke from his sleep, 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, Bethel was also a sacred place or holy ground.

The Gospel reading this morning, taken from the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John, is the account of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Because of Jesus’ ability to tell the woman about herself and her life, including what she needed to straighten out in her life, the woman begins to realize that Jesus is someone special. She then asks him 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 to God on Mt. Gerizim. The Jews, of course, believed the temple should be 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.” So, 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. However, in his answer to the woman, Jesus provides us with a different perspective. 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 is 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 limited, cannot be contained in a location! This church sanctuary is 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.

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 that they regarded as holy ground, 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, which seems to give us one more sacred, one more holy place. But then Black Elk adds what I believe is a very profound insight, an insight that echoes what Jesus said to the woman at the well. Black Elk 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. It is on Horney Peak in South Dakota, on Mt. Gerizim, in Jerusalem, and on Mt. Horeb. But if the center of the world is everywhere, it is also inside you! You are the center of the world! Your very being is holy ground! St. 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 inside you, and you, and you, and you. The center of God is in all of us, is all throughout the universe, and the circumference, the boundary of God's presence is nowhere. If the center is everywhere, there can be no outer boundary!

Think of this as you celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This church, and especially this church sanctuary is holy ground. But you are also holy ground! God is in the bread and in the cup. But God is also inside you! Every place becomes holy ground, every moment an epiphany, an experience of God's presence, if only we open ourselves to receive it. Share in this sacrament knowing how special you are, and then carry this sense of God's presence with you throughout the week to come.

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