

HOLY GROUND

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 Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There 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. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When 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.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He 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. ⁷Then 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, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He 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 worship God on this mountain.'

(Exodus 3:1-12, NRSV)

Last weekend my family and I were out of town visiting family. Sunday morning Colleen and I decided to attend a nearby UCC church. As the minister welcomed worshippers it became apparent that something tragic and unusual had recently occurred. She thanked the congregation for their outpouring of love and support the past two weeks for a family in the church and for her personally. References were made to a memorial service that had occurred only the day before and then the minister stated that a body had not been found. Several minutes later during the “meet and greet” time I asked a man sitting next to me what had happened. The story was short and sad. A beloved schoolteacher and church member had been scuba diving in the Caribbean and never came up from a dive. To make matters worse, her body could not be found after two weeks of intensive searching.

I thought about this tragedy as the service continued and then something peculiar happened. After receiving the filled offering plates from the ushers, the minister walked near the altar, took off her shoes, and gently placed the offering plates on the altar. As the offertory hymn concluded, she slipped her shoes back on and the service continued.

Why did she take her shoes off before approaching the altar? Because, symbolically, the altar is the holiest part of the church. From the altar we receive the

bread and wine of Communion. In front of the altar couples exchange wedding vows. Upon the altar we place our gifts in the offering plates, we place flowers to remind us of the beauty and creativity of God, we light candles to remind us of God's presence, and we place an open Bible as a reminder of the importance of scripture in the life of the church.

The use of altars in religious ceremonies goes back thousands of years. Altars played an important role in the life of the ancient Hebrews. The temple contained two altars—one for burning incense and the other for burning various offerings to God including grain and animals. (Being an asthmatic and animal lover, I'm glad our church isn't into burning anything but candles on the altar!) The location of these ancient altars bore significance. The altar for offering burnt sacrifices stood in the temple courtyard. While lay people could gather in the courtyard, only the priests were allowed to approach the holy altar. The incense altar stood even farther away from the people, in the holy sanctuary, very near the veiled entrance to the holy of holies (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, pp. 26-27). Only the High Priest could enter the holy of holies and then only once a year. The place was considered so off limits that a rope was tied to the High Priest's waist in case he died while he was in the holy of holies. The other priests would rather drag out the body than take a chance of entering this place inappropriately.

If we went to Jerusalem today and walked on the same land where the ancient temple once stood, where the altar once burned with sacrifices, where the incense sent holy smoke into heaven, where the holy of holies sat shrouded in fear and mystery, would we sense anything special, anything mystical, anything spiritual? Would we be tempted to take off our shoes because we stood on holy ground? After all many people refer to Jerusalem and other parts of Israel as the Holy Land? I remember when Rabbi Widom spoke in the Parish Hall several years ago and argued that we should not call it the Holy Land because once we do it becomes a place that people fight and die for when in fact it is no holier than any other piece of real estate.

I have to agree with him. What makes a place holy is not the soil or the location per se, but what happens or happened there. Thus every square inch of earth buds with the potential for encounters between human beings and God. It's easy to look around a church and think of all the sacred events that have taken place here—the Baptisms, Confirmations, weddings, funerals, Easter services and the like over the years. But what about when we gaze out into this world of ours, so full of beauty and pain all at the same time. As our eyes soak in the glistening oceans and the dilapidated inner cities, let us hear the words of the psalmist who wrote for God saying, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." In other words—it's all holy ground! I love the words Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
And only he who sees takes off his shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

It was an ordinary day when an ordinary man went out, not to pluck blackberries, but to take care of some sheep. Moses was minding his own business, probably more concerned about the little lamb with the limp than with encountering the Almighty, when he saw a bush on fire. Surely his first thought was to quench the flame lest it spread and threaten life and property. It didn't take long for Moses to notice that this bush flamed brightly but never seemed to die down, and yet never seemed to consume the bush once and for all. Standing in the warm glow, Moses would have had his socks knocked off had he been wearing any, for out of the burning bush he heard his name called. Moses heard the Voice say, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And Moses said...nothing. Moses said nothing as his eyes widened and his jaw dropped. The Voice said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Without hesitation Moses immediately hid his face out of fear. Why? Perhaps he figured he was about to get blasted for the murder he had committed all those years ago back in Egypt while defending a helpless Hebrew slave. Perhaps he thought God was going to nail him for spending too much time worrying about the sheep and not enough time worrying about God. Perhaps he closed his eyes because in reality Moses just wanted to be left alone to live his quiet life as a shepherd and avoid whatever it was that God had up the divine sleeve. Moses didn't have to wonder for long because God reminded the quaking shepherd of the sufferings of God's people, the Israelites, back in Egypt. Then God let Moses in on a little secret, which I'm guessing Moses heard like this: "The good news is I'm going to liberate my oppressed people from that evil pharaoh. The bad news is that I want you to go and tell that evil pharaoh the good news!"

I wonder which was most frightening to Moses at that point, the fact that he was talking to the Almighty or the fact that he might have to face Pharaoh? Probably the latter because Moses' next words to God are, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God's answer, "Don't worry, I'll be with you." Eventually Moses relented and the rest is history. The freedom of a nation all started on an ordinary pile of desert sand that was in fact holy ground as Moses quickly learned. It was holy ground in the first place because it was a part of God's wondrous creation and it was holy ground in a more personal sense as Moses encountered holy God there.

Last Sunday as Colleen and I sat in that white clapboard church listening to a tragic story and watching the minister take off her shoes at the altar, it occurred to me that we too were on holy ground—not just because it was a beautiful church located on a piece of God's green earth, but also because we had the privilege of sharing in these moments of sacred grief. The sense of loss was palatable in that sanctuary because of the congregation's love for this wonderful teacher and friend who died so tragically. The physical space we shared was holy ground as the minister spoke a word of faith and hope in the midst of so much sadness.

And what about this morning, have we been standing on holy ground? Not just because of our time spent in this beautiful place, but because of what we have witnessed and what we have felt. Did you feel your spirits lifted as Claudia was Baptized? Did you feel inspired as you listened to Ladd Jeffers sing "The Holy City"? Did you sense the

still small voice of God in our moment of silent prayer? What about last week—were you on your way to pluck blackberries when the thought of a close friend or family member caused your heart to praise God? Were you reading the paper and taken aback at the world's suffering, then inspired to write a check to help fight hunger or AIDS? Were you stuck in traffic on the LIE when a butterfly landed on your windshield bringing to mind the simple beauty of God's creation? Were you walking the beach barefooted as the waves washed your feet and out of the blue you remembered that the night before he died Jesus washed the disciples' feet? Were you...was I...aware that I am every day and everywhere walking on holy ground?

As many of you know I love being out in nature and often feel close to God in these times. Years ago I took a trip with my family out to the Black Hills of the Dakotas. Yes they were beautiful in their own rugged way, but I wasn't moved with great spiritual insight or anything. I did not have the sense that I was standing on holy ground until last Friday when I read some words by the Lakota Holy Man Nicholas Black Elk. One day Black Elk stood on top of Harney Peak or Pawsapa, the tallest point in the Black Hills, considered by the Lakota to be a holy place. Of these moments Black Elk writes: "I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw. For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit and shapes of all things as must live together like one being. And I saw that the hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was Holy" (chaliceweb.org/uufc/serm/serm-SacredSpace.html).

As we leave this sacred space today, may we begin to see how our lives are interconnected, how holy it is to share someone's grief or someone's joy, how relaxing it is to let the summer surf wash our weary feet, how peaceful it is to stare at the stars with wonder, how good it feels to open our hands to one in need, how fun it is to dance and sing even when we're all alone, how happy it feels to notice the small child ahead of us in the cart at the grocery store, how grace-filled a moment can be when we close our eyes and gratefully acknowledge God's presence, and how profound it is to remember that our feet are ever on holy ground. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, Giver of life, Creator of the universe, open our eyes this morning to your presence in our lives. As we gaze at your glistening seas, as we observe the tiniest wildflower, make us mindful of the blessing of your beautiful creation. As we walk this earth, remind us that every square inch is holy ground because you created it. Remind us as well that every moment buds with potential for a meaningful encounter with you. Fill us with your Spirit and draw us closer to one another, through Jesus Christ we pray.
AMEN.