

In the Midst of Holy Ground

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Exodus 3:1-15 Common English Bible ¹Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. ²The LORD's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. ³Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up. ⁴When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses said, "I'm here." ⁵Then the LORD said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground." ⁶He continued, "I am the God of your father, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. ⁷Then the LORD said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. ⁸I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey.... ¹⁰So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."
¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"
¹²God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."
¹³But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?"
¹⁴God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.
- Mark 9:2-8 Common English Bible ²...Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, ³and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. ⁴Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. ⁵Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines — one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

On the Nightly News I'm left speechless by the pictures of California's wildfires. I can't comprehend the vastness of grasslands and woodlands burning out-of-control. The flames advance without heed to barriers like roads and rivers and hills and valleys, much less property lines. A resident returned to her home the other day to find nothing remaining but a fireplace chimney and a six-inch layer of ash where her house used to be.

Total devastation is what we would expect from a brushfire... which is why Moses was puzzled upon encountering a bush on fire that was not being consumed by the flame. I remember a seminary professor suggesting that the burning bush was God's test: Was Moses attentive enough to notice that the flames weren't destroying this bush?

Indeed, Moses did notice, and when a voice spoke to him from the bush, Moses understood that he was encountering God – in ancient times everyone understood that “fire was conceived to be the form of the divine appearance.”¹

Moses replied to the voice from the flame, “Here I am.” That’s when the voice of God stopped him in his tracks: “Take off your sandals – you’re on holy ground.”

“Holy ground?” A patch of sandy, rocky soil on a mountainside? That’s certainly not what we picture when we think of “holy ground.”

Different people imagine different places as holy ground.

Right here in the sanctuary of this church is an area many of you regard as “holy ground.” I know that many of you never walk up the four steps from the main floor to the stage called the chancel. This raised platform holds the communion table, the pulpit, the baptismal font, the cross, the choir loft. You might regard this as a special space reserved for those who lead the worship service – you regard this area as “holy ground.”

For some people, the solemn memorial at the U.S.S. Arizona honoring the service men and women killed at Pearl Harbor – that soul-stirring memory of tragedy and loss is an experience of “holy ground.” Others experience those feelings as they walk through Gettysburg’s battlefields, or the American Cemetery and Memorial perched on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach in Normandy, France.

A different spirit of “holy ground” is experienced by some who travel to rural Iowa to experience the baseball field made famous in the motion picture “Field of Dreams.” They feel a profound connection with the spirit of the game that they appreciate as an embodiment of all that is good in America. Others have that “holy ground” feeling toward The Horseshoe on the campus of The Ohio State University – feeling a connection with their alma mater, perhaps, or simply pride in being an Ohioan.

When you travel with me on my next trip to the Holy Land, you may be like many Holy Land pilgrims who sense they’re on “holy ground” walking through Jerusalem. In particular, the city’s ancient Church of the Holy Sepulcher contains very, very old chapels and monuments to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Millions of Christian tourists and pilgrims go there every year to see and experience the “holy ground” where Jesus walked the final minutes of his earthly life.

For me, however, the strongest sense of “holy ground” in the Holy Land was, ironically, while we were on a boat cruising across the waters of the Sea of Galilee. You see, most land-based sites of biblical events had been buried under meters of dirt and rubble by centuries of civilization. But out on the waters of the Sea of Galilee I could look around at the shores and hills and realize that Jesus had looked upon the same panorama – I felt a keen connection with Jesus as I sailed on that watery “holy ground.”

Special places and spaces can evoke a sense of being on “holy ground.” Perhaps it’s the cottage your family had as a getaway when you were a child. Maybe it’s the grave of a dear one. Maybe where you met your life’s partner feels like “holy ground” whenever you think of it.

Celtic spirituality uses the term “thin places” to describe an encounter with the holy in a particular place or situation. Thin places “are locales where the distance

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, Roland E. Murphy, eds. New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books – New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 72 (note).

between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the divine, or the transcendent..."²

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John away from the other disciples for a brief mountaintop retreat, they had the stunning experience: Jesus was transfigured – his appearance changed before their very eyes. Matthew's gospel reports that Jesus' face shimmered, and his garments glowed with a brightness that the strongest bleach couldn't achieve. Not only that, but Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared with Jesus, the three engaged intently in conversation. I bet that's the last thing the three disciples expected from this little outing with Jesus. Bible scholars believe that this story is intended to signal that Jesus will rise from death to new life.

Witnessing that indescribable event, being in that "thin place," that delicate moment of intense revelation, the disciples didn't know what to do. Feebly, Peter suggested they carry out a Jewish harvest tradition: erecting three little shrines to mark the occasion. But before they could even begin they were stopped when God's voice sounded from heaven, telling the disciples to listen to his own dear Son. The message? There was nothing the disciples could do to make that moment holier than it was.

How might we encounter "thin places" in our daily lives?

The reality is that our daily responsibilities may press us to rush through our days without taking time to notice the "holy ground" around us, and appreciate it, and respond to God's presence in it. After all, there are so many things to distract us:

- Our health concerns may occupy our thoughts with or without a pandemic.
- Our children's needs seem to fill every waking hour.
- The peculiar pressures of the workplace right now eat up our time and energy trying to figure out new ways of operating.
- Our society is experiencing labor pains as we try to give birth to a new norm of respect for all people, not simply the majority .
- Our eyes and ears are filled with the messages of political campaigns.

Yes, there are many things that can deny us the time and patience and peace to be able to look for and listen for "thin places," to notice signs of "holy ground."

We may discover that what we presumed to be ordinary can be "holy ground" when we try to view what's before us as God would see it. That's how a pastor named Vince Amlin came to understand that the ground he was standing on was "holy ground," although it didn't seem like it at all at first blush. When he was in seminary Vince interned at a Mennonite church in Chicago. He described

...the congregation [occupying] a corner storefront in a rougher neighborhood in Chicago.

A couple weeks after I started, I came into worship to find one of the large plate-glass windows in the sanctuary boarded up. Someone had thrown a rock through it.

The congregation took it in stride. A little plywood and duct tape, a call for repair, and it was good as new.

Then, a week later, another rock.

² Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer." New York Times, March 9, 2012, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html> accessed 8/26/2020.

I got upset. This was the room where the VBS gathered to sing songs and play games; the room where neighborhood kids flooded empty-handed into the weekly potluck (and the intern was sent out for pizzas). This was the room where we worshipped God! Sacred space. Holy ground.

But no one [in that storefront Mennonite church] seemed to share my indignation.

Then I remembered how the congregation had come to worship in that place. Ten years before, a small group had gathered to pray at that intersection after a drive-by shooting. And they prayed there every week until the building came up for sale.

Their sacred space had not been violated by the troubled neighborhood as I assumed. They had claimed that space as sacred because it was troubled. They had eyes to see holy ground shining through the brokenness.³

As we heard from scripture today, God graced Moses with the chance to see the flame and feel the heat and hear God's voice. God graced the three disciples with the opportunity to see their master continuing the line of service to God's people previously borne by Moses the great leader and Elijah the great prophet.

God has given us eyes to see "holy ground" in the paths of our day as well. God's presence in our lives in Jesus Christ puts us in the middle of "holy ground." And as the disciples learned when they saw their master joined with Moses and Elijah, when we sense God's intimate presence in our lives, we may not need to *do* anything. Encountering "holy ground" is a gift of God's grace, reminding us that our lives unfold within the care of God's constant and compassionate love.

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³ Vince Amlin, "Sacred Space." StillSpeaking Daily Devotional, June 8, 2015 at ucc.org