

Sunday February 2, 2020
Lesson 10: Holy Place
Scripture: Exodus 3:1-12

Context:

The next section of this quarter's lesson focuses on holiness. Over the next several weeks, we will examine how holiness fulfills God's promises for us. God is holy and we are also called to be holy, recognizing the disciplines we can cultivate to give thanks to God.

The first section on holiness begins with the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. Moses is at the forefront of the text as he discovers a holy place where God speaks to him. By all accounts, the fact that God speaks to him in Horeb, which translates to wilderness, is significant.¹ God is usually thought to be associated with temples and priests being the ones God addresses through visions and incense fumes from an altar.

Instead God chooses to speak in the wilderness to a person who is ordinary. Moses is a fugitive, on the run from his life in Egypt. This will not be the last time God chooses a nontraditional, nonreligious setting for a hearing of the word to a person who might be considered mundane.² God is establishing that holy places can be in different forms with different people.

God even makes this revelation a sight to behold. Instead of appearing on a throne or through an angel, God chooses to be revealed through a "burning bush," which appears to be on fire yet does not turn to ash. Fire was known to be associated with ancient deities, yet this one is significant in that the fire does not destroy or consume the bush as an act of power. Instead, it is used to pique Moses's curiosity and lead him to see the bush.

The curiosity of Moses leads him to come closer to the bush. What follows is known as a theophany, God revealing God's self to humanity. God uses the senses to help Moses by showing him the burning bush and then revealing God's voice in a conversation. God wants Moses to know the holy ground he stands on and asks that he remove his sandals as they begin their conversation.

God reveals to Moses the identity of God and tells Moses how he is connected to God via his Abrahamic genealogy. Moses hides his face in reverence as God speaks to Moses. God reminds Moses that God has heard the cry of God's people and the time has come for them to be liberated from their oppressors. God has called Moses on this holy ground to be the one to lead the people. It will be God who helps Moses even as Moses protests that he is not able to do such a task. On holy ground, God makes it clear that God will not give up on Moses and that God promises him the path will be made clear. God will speak through Moses and God will deliver God's people.

¹ Fretheim, Terence E. "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 53.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

Application:

Have you ever felt like you were standing on holy ground? You don't have to see a burning bush to know about the experience. The odds are that every person can recount a time in their life where they have stood in awe and felt the very presence of God. Sometimes, it is the places that we expect the least to be the holy ground where God shows up.

I will never forget the array of experiences I had when I went to the Holy Land two years ago. As a lover of church architecture and of cathedrals, I initially thought that the places I would experience holy ground and God would be the churches that commemorated certain places with our Lord; the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where Golgotha was said to be; or the Church of the Nativity where baby Jesus laid his sweet head; or the Church of the Nations near the Garden of Gethsemane. And all those places were indeed terrific and put me in awe.

However, the very places where I had my highest holy moments of God's revelation were what seemed like the most ordinary places. It was standing on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius (Sea of Galilee) and thinking about Jesus asking Peter: "Do you love me?" It was the top of the cliffs of Nazareth thinking about how Jesus saw the land of his ancestors and continued to go on his way when he was thrown out of his hometown. It was sitting on the mountains of Galilee and thinking about the crowds swelling to see Jesus and hear him teach. In some of those places I did the act of taking off my shoes and simply sitting in awe.

Those experiences have not been limited to the Holy Land though. At home, I have found places where God calls out to us and those places are holy ground. It is reading the story of Abraham to students out on a field in the evening at Blue Lake as we read of God promising to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Holy ground occurs when you sit in an empty church or chapel and see the sunlight stream in as you sit in prayer. Holy ground is when you hear a person tell their story and they find God even in the midst of hardness or strife. Holy ground is going to worship and feeling the Holy Spirit move through the acts of worship in a world that is constantly changing.

We don't have to travel to know that we stand on holy ground. God finds us in all sorts of places to bring us into God's holiness. Better yet, as we go to holy ground we find that there are different ways of responding to God's presence. Just as Moses discovered, God convicts and leads us to different responses as we tread on holy ground.

Sometimes God wants us simply to be in awe of God. There are no words we need to say and no actions we need to take. We are to marvel in wonder and be in praise for such an incredible God who brings us to our knees and has us to the point where we are taking off our shoes as we stand on holy ground. Best of all, those moments are usually serendipitous, catching us by surprise.

At other times, standing on holy ground convicts us. As we experience the holiness of God, we realize that God is calling us to do something. Like Moses we are in the presence of God and God wants us to respond with tangible action. How many times do we hear of call stories of both laity and clergy who were simply going about their day and they experienced some sign that confirmed God had called them to do something? They stand on holy ground and God leads ordinary people to do things that are extraordinary.

When have you felt that you were standing on “holy ground?” Where are the places that continue to be holy ground for you? Where are the places where you’ve been surprised to be standing on holy ground? How has a standing on holy ground experience led you to respond to God? Why do you think it important to reflect on holy ground experiences? How can God’s holiness in sacred spaces lead you to a life of holiness?

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