

“Holy Ground”

Exodus 3:1-15

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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We are standing on Holy Ground and I know that there are angels all around. This was the song sung by the congregation at the Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco. I used to attend their Sunday evening services when I served as pastor of Dolores Street Baptist Church in the same city twentysomething years ago. The church was full of the queer community that had lost so many members and friends to HIV. When they sang there are angels all around, they could imagine their brothers lifting their voices to God just weeks before. HIV decimated the gay community in San Francisco, robbing us of a generation of creative and passionate people. We hung panels of the AIDS quilt in our makeshift storefront sanctuary, each 3x6 foot panel covered with names and memories of loved ones. It took me a long time to realize that the panels were grave sized. They became our stained glass and made the space feel more holy.

What makes a space holy? That’s the question with which we are wrestling this academic and worship year. Is it because someone declared it holy? Or is it because of some holy action that happened in the place? Maybe it’s in the memory that lives on. We know that there are angels all around.

Last, Kim and I took a vacation to Oregon. Some friends’ parents had built a house in the shadows of Mount Hood in their retirement. That was over 30 years ago and Kim and I had the chance to visit there many times. In the past year, both parents died and so the family is taking the next two years cleaning out the house and using it for vacations and reunions. We can understand why they built this house and why the family aren’t quite ready to let it go. I woke each morning to the silhouette of that majestic mountain out of the floor-to-ceiling windows. I watched the moon set and heard the silence of nature in the cool crisp morning air. The Mountain reminded us of the majesty of creation and our relative insignificance.

We stand on this day not on a mountain, but by a river. A sacred river. A river that feeds and nurtures species and humans for longer than recorded time. And we live in this dynamic tension of the fact that while we celebrate holy ground, we remember that this land was holy to others who do not believe like us. And there is something about our collective work that we can envision a time when we can all recognize each other’s faith tradition and stories. For in the intersection, we might find hope and direction.

The voice from the burning bush said, “take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground.” That’s one of my favorite passages, God telling us to forsake footwear because we might be in better touch with the divine.

We Minnesotans take off our shoes when we enter someone’s home. We don’t so much do it when we enter into a public space. Our Muslim friends take off their shoes when entering into their prayer spaces. All those shoes lined up at the entrance, reminding everyone to take off that which would pollute the holy space.

I read in the Superior Hiking Trail Facebook page a few weeks ago that someone’s daughters feet were hurting, so they took off their shoes and walked four miles in stocking feet.

No worse for wear. Turns out there is a whole group of barefoot hikers out there. Those are my kind of people.

You know that if I had my druthers, I would forsake footwear altogether. I hear tell that my grandfather, who was a missionary kid in what became Oklahoma, used to run barefoot, just like his Arapahoe classmates. Maybe I inherited that trait from him. I don't know. But I like to think I am passing it on to my daughters.

There was an article in the Star Tribune yesterday about archeologists finding footprints in Mexico that dated back 26,000 years—earlier than most thought humans had walked this continent. And they could see their toes, their heels, their gate the instep, the difference between fleet footed children and lumbering old folks like me. Our native friends often eschewed shoes because it put a barrier between them and the divine who is this earth. I know when I am barefoot, I am more attuned to the rhythms of my surroundings. I have better balance and I am much more aware and intentional about where I step. I am in touch with the holiness of the ground.

Take off your shoes says the voice from the bush, for you are on holy ground. But the voice does not stop there.

The voice from the bush said, "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and 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."

Tell Old Pharaoh to let my people go.

What is holy ground to you? Think about it. Is there someplace where you feel really safe? A place where you can let go and just be, without the need to put on airs? Someplace where you recognized God and saw your place in the divine order of things? It doesn't have to be a place here in this stage of your life. It could be a place from your childhood. Perhaps it's a room in an apartment building or a patch of grass under a tree in a park somewhere. Maybe it's among favorite people in this church or a church from your past. Maybe it's somewhere over the rainbow that you only dream about and bluebirds fly.

Holy Ground places are where something miraculous happened. It is often connected intimately with memory or ceremony. Mecca is like that for our Muslim sisters and brothers. On the Hajj, they encircle the temple supposedly made by Abraham seven times and then kneel down and pray in unison.

Jerusalem is holy ground for at least three religions, with all of the controversy that it entails. It's holy on many levels of consciousness, and it's hard to let go of our holy places.

Some of my sacred harp friends would call the center of the square holy ground, and it remains holy no matter where it is. A mobile holy ground, where God is revealed, where the sound is directed, where spirits soar and something that you can't quite articulate occurs. Such is the way of the Spirit.

"We are standing on holy ground and I know that there are angels all around," says the old gospel song. The work we do is to create and respond to the holiness that surrounds us.

I am doing something new in you and for you, says God. I've seen your plight and I'm offering you something new.

We're going to the land flowing with milk and honey.

The place where we may all come together and worship the one who made it holy after getting free from Egyptian oppression and slavery. I AM has made that ground and this ground holy.

We know the story of how Moses indeed led the people out of Egyptian slavery. But they did not go directly to the Promised Land. In fact they spent the rest of the book of Exodus on or near the Holy Ground where God had spoken to Moses out of the burning bush. They waited in the valley while Moses went up to the mountain to have more conversations with YHWH. Moses came down with a shining face and, the Ten Commandments and sacred instructions about what life outside of captivity might look like. They camped there. They fought there. They married people from the land of Midian. They had their children, raised sheep, planted crops. This became their home, their holy ground. God even said in today's scripture: "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."

I sincerely doubt that the Hebrew people wandered for 40 years. I bet they fled Egypt and made a beeline for the Mount Horeb, which would later be named Mount Sinai. And they stayed there until they were sufficiently ready to move to another land. We'll talk about the journey to Promised Land in a couple of weeks.

What made them stay? Was it their newfound freedom? With freedom came starvation and lack of infrastructure. Some wanted to go back to Egypt, the devil you know being more attractive than the angel you don't. Was it hope in a better future that might come not for them but for another generation?

We think of caravans leaving economic slavery or hurricane debris to seek another life in another country. Inspired perhaps by the book of Exodus, they fled in hopes that they would find safe harbor across another river. It's supposedly safer to travel together. But you may not be welcomed in the promised Land. You may be sent right back to Pharaoh even though you have been gone from your homeland for generations. It must have been very bad for you to risk life and limb in an unknown, only the hope of someone on the other side who might offer you sanctuary.

And so the people stayed in relative safety at Mount Horeb.

But eventually, they outgrew their little encampment. And they made plans to set off again. They put their shoes back on for the journey, trusting only that God would be with them. And the hope that there would be another place where they could land that would feel as holy as the slopes of the mountain.

I recently read on social media of a friend who was in Oklahoma to finalize the sale of his childhood home after the passing of his father. As he reluctantly entered into the first generation, he had to deal with all of the accumulation of his parents' life, which was also his life. What do you do with the pictures you sent them of your family in another state? Do you really want that favorite chair that was more comfortable in memory than in the present?

Holy are our memories and the places that marked our time in that place.

Next week, we're going to use our forum time to do a little tour of the places in our neighborhood that used to house our church buildings before landing here a hundred years ago. There were at least seven buildings before this one. What was it about those spaces that made them holy? What urging caused them to move to another place? How long did it take for it to feel like holy ground?

The Promise of the Biblical narrative is that we are to make our homes into holy places where we can live out the ideals of a worthy life. And that will be called Holy Ground.

Holy Ground: Where the wolf lies down with the lamb and the fatling and the calf together and where the soldiers bang their swords into ploughshares and bend their spears into pruning hooks, and they ain't gonna study war no more.

Holy Ground: Where people feel safe from the powers and principalities of this world.

Holy Ground: Where people don't need to be afraid of walking the streets.

Where people trust each other.

Where people can gather in pew and around cups of coffee and say, yes, this is somewhere where I can be important.

It is holy because God is here with us and the bush is not consumed.

It is holy because we dare to step forward and say to the world, No I will not put up with racism.

No I will not put up with sexism.

No I will not put up with brutality or bullying.

No I will not put up with homophobia and compulsory heterosexism.

No I will not put up with lies and deception in my personal relationships.

No, I will not put up with economic injustice.

This is holy ground and we say no to all of that, but we also say yes.

This is holy ground and we say yes to Jesus Christ and his message of peace and liberation for all of God's children.

We say yes to healing and the commitment to bring reparations to those we have harmed.

And we say yes to a world in which justice reigns with peace.

We say yes to love.

We say yes to compassion.

We say yes to mercy.

We say yes to struggling with things and people we don't understand. Why? Because this is holy ground.

We say yes to spreading the good news to others and letting them know about the holy ground. We need to be grounded somewhere, don't we? We need holy ground.

So celebrate the Holy Ground sisters and brothers. Recognize when God speaks. And do the continuing work of setting people free. It's how the Bible starts, it's what Jesus' mission was all about and it's what the church is for. If the church is a proving place for refining our spirits and inspiring us to be better, then it is holy ground indeed.

Take off your shoes, remember the call of God, celebrate the holy ground on which we stand, and then put your shoes back on and go about the work of the Gospel to set people free. That's what it's really all about.