

Holy Places
May 6, 2018
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Exodus 3:1-6a (NRSV)

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. There 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. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 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." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Have you ever asked yourself --- what makes a place HOLY?

A number of years ago Nancy and I went out to visit my parents in Arizona over Spring Break.

It is a trip that I will never forget --- mainly because I had shaved off my moustache right before the trip --- as my offering to St. Baldrick's day.

I didn't raise nearly enough money for the sacrifice I made

But what most don't realize that it was the first (and only time in our 32 years of marriage) that Nancy had ever seen me sans moustache

But the real reason that I will always remember the trip --- is because I sunburned my lip the day we went to visit the Grand Canyon

While we were there on our visit, I was encouraged to read a Tony Hillerman novel

What struck me was how Hillerman pointed out that the Navajo people consider their land to be sacred.

He repeatedly makes the point that unless you understand the Holy Ground of the Navajo people --- you cannot understand them.

In modern times, many people consider that Sedona, Arizona is filled with Holy Ground.

If you ever visit there, and it is a beautiful and magnificent place, you find that there are many locations that have been identified as VORTEX's --- places where the separation between heaven and earth is very thin.

In other words --- HOLY PLACES

While there we went to visit a number of the vortexes.

I must have missed the holy ground part . . .

I was told that the track out in Speedway was Holy Ground, but as I slogged my way around it on Saturday it didn't seem very holy to me.

In 1994, Nancy and I traveled to Israel for the first time.

Over the last 25 years I have made (I think) 12 trips to "The Holy Land"

My friend, Archeologist Charles Page, often commented, much like Hillerman, that unless one understands the land of the Bible --- they could never fully understand the Bible

The late Father Bargil Pixner went so far as calling the land of Israel "the 5th Gospel"

Father Bargil Pixner, in a conversation with Charles Page, said:

"You must see Jesus here. If you do not see Jesus in the ruins of Capernaum, you should have studied physics. We are involved in Biblical archeology. Our job is to know him and to make him known. Seeing him helps us to know him. Knowing him leads us to love him. Loving him will help us to serve him and to make a difference in the world."

But what is it that makes a place holy?

As I traversed over Israel, I have visited many places that have been identified as Holy

Nazareth --- the town that Jesus grew up in

Capernaum --- if there was any place that we can identify with Jesus as an adult it is Capernaum --- the city boasts a synagogue that the foundation is from the time of Jesus, and a home that has been identified as the home of Peter's mother in law.

Cana --- Friday was our 32nd wedding anniversary --- and once when we were in Cana we renewed our wedding vows --- Cana is the location of the first miracle in Jesus' ministry --- his coming out party when he turned water into wine at a wedding.

Sea of Galilee --- especially the locations of the Beatitudes and Jesus' resurrection stories

Bethlehem --- the traditional site of Jesus birth

JERUSALEM --- I love Jerusalem --- everywhere in the Old City to me is Holy Ground

Temple Mount --- site of the Holy Temple and the Holy of Holies (today the site of the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock)

Teaching Steps --- steps that led up and into the Temple

It is one of the few places where I can say with confidence --- "Jesus was HERE!"

Thomas Friedman in his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem* tells this story:

When American astronaut Neil Armstrong, a devout Christian, visited Israel after his trip to the moon, he was taken on a tour of the Old City of Jerusalem by Israeli archaeologist Meir Ben-Dov. When they got to the Hulda Gate, which is at the top of the stairs leading to the Temple Mount, Armstrong asked Ben-Dov whether Jesus had stepped anywhere around there.

"I told him, 'Look, Jesus was a Jew,'" recalled Ben-Dov.

"These are the steps that lead to the Temple, so he must have walked here many times."

Armstrong then asked if these were the original steps, and Ben-Dov confirmed that they were.

"So Jesus stepped right here?" asked Armstrong.

"That's right," answered Ben-Dov.

"I have to tell you," Armstrong said to the Israeli archaeologist, "I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the moon."

The Western Wall --- For Jewish people it is the closest that they can get to the site of the original Temple and so has become VERY holy space to them

Upper Room --- traditional site of the last supper

St Peter in Gallicantu --- home of the High Priest Caiaphas --- tradition says that Jesus was imprisoned there

Calvary --- site of the crucifixion

Holy Sepulcher --- site of the resurrection

So let me ask you: Is it because of what happened in the past that makes a place HOLY?

Our Scripture this morning tells about the ONLY place identified in the Bible as HOLY.

It is the familiar story of Moses encountering God.

What does the Bible say makes the place holy?

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."

It really isn't a location --- it is that God is present in that place.

I have come to see HOLY GROUND --- not as some ancient place --- even though I love ancient places and I often --- but not always --- experience them as Holy.

For me the best example of that is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher
For the most part it is **not** Holy to me

The reason it is not holy is because I often feel very distant from God there.
I have seen priests push and shove and yell at each other there --- In this place there seems to be NO peace

However, on the back side of the Tomb there is a little chapel that I find as a Holy Place --- it is a Coptic Chapel.

For most Protestant --- if you were to ask them about the Holy Place remembering the resurrection of Jesus --- they would not point you to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher

Instead they would steer you toward ---- what is called the Garden Tomb

It is beautiful
It is peaceful
It is what one expects then they are looking for the Tomb of Jesus

There is only one problem --- IT IS NOT HISTORICALLY ACCURATE
Jesus WAS NOT buried there
He did not rise from there
Yet for many it is a HOLY PLACE

Historically --- the Holy Sepulcher is much more likely --- it just doesn't feel like a holy place to me.

SO WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOLY?

For me the answer is simple --- PEOPLE and/or RELATIONSHIPS

When I worked for TradeWinds services one of the big events that I was responsible for was the Annual Gala

I, of course, wanted the night to be a success.

Not only is it about raising money (although that is pretty important)

But in my mind there is an even bigger purpose --- and that is raising awareness

In the midst of the chaos of the event --- something changed ---- all of a sudden it became a Holy Place for me

Let me share quickly why:

- We had a choir made up of TradeWinds participants, we named the choir our "Believe and Achieve Choir" and they sang two songs and danced to a third
- We also honored a young boy with autism as our "Youth of the Year"
- And we honored our adult "Participant of the Year"

As the Choir was singing ----
and to be honest they were "wonderfully terrible"
they were awesome

I realized that I was standing on Holy Ground

But, and this is the funny thing --- when I went back to that venue for other events --- it wasn't a holy place for me.

You see: Holy Places really aren't places --- they are relationships

Meridian Street Church --- not the buildings --- but you --- are a Holy Place

And what I have come to understand is that Holy Places are not bound by time or space.

I realized this when I visit tombs --- what we call cemeteries.

The reason we are attracted and often go and visit cemeteries is because they are HOLY PLACES to us

Not for what took place there --- but for the relationship that they have come to symbolize

In other words --- all the world is a Holy Place --- when we open our eyes and celebrate the relationships that take place there

The relationships with each other
The relationships with the divine

M. Scott Peck writes about a concept that he admires that is part of the Roman Catholic tradition it is called the Sacrament of the Present Moment.

It suggests that every moment of our lives is sacred, and that we should make of each moment a sacrament. Were we to do this we would think of the entire world as diffused with holiness. Wherever we might be would be a holy place for us, and we would see the holy, even sainthood, in everyone we encounter.

Psalm 24:1 says:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it

If we truly believed that the earth belonged to God and is holy wouldn't that cause us to take better care of it?

Wouldn't that cause us to do a better job of sharing its resources?

Wouldn't it make a difference in the way we observe and relate to nature --- and each other?

Does it take a burning bush to make us realize we stand on holy ground?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning speaks to me when she wrote:

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

May God give us eyes to see all the Holy Places that surround us.

Let me close with this prayer/poem that I found by Cheryl Lawrie who reminds us that while finding Holy places in extraordinary things is simple, finding God in the everyday takes courage:

Let us pray:

It takes little faith to see the sacred in the extraordinary.

To have faith the sacred is in the ordinary, though,
takes courage to believe the mundane can be enough;
that grace can emerge
even through the dull,
the slightly disappointing,
the not quite right,
not quite as we intended,
not really what we hoped;
the clumsy,

the awkward,
and the imperfect.

Let your act of faith be
to let what you do be enough.

Let what you do be enough...