

Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-15

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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My sermon this morning is called “Holy ground.” It is taken, obviously, from the divine encounter between God and Moses via a burning bush.

So naturally, in a sermon about holy *ground*, I’d like to begin on the water.

(For any of you that follow me on Facebook or read my blog, you’ll likely have an idea of what’s coming next. This will probably feel a bit like a “what I did on my summer holiday” school report for the next few minutes.)

Last week, Naomi and I were on holidays and we spent a bit of time on Vancouver Island. We didn’t have much of a schedule—we mostly just took each day as it came.

But one day, we decided to make a plan. We were going to go whale watching.

Naomi had to almost drag me along, truth be told. I grumbled that it was too much money and we probably wouldn’t see much anyway. But my lovely wife is persistent and quite a bit wiser than I am.

So, nine of us plus a guide bundled up in our bright red full-body suits on a mild and gloriously calm day and set off from the Sooke harbour in pursuit of whales.

Humpbacks are usually easier to find, our guide said, but there was chatter on the radios of a pod of orcas closer to the American side of the strait. Despite my initial reluctance, even I was getting pretty excited by this point.

After about twenty minutes or so on the water, we found them! A pod of eight or so orcas!

Our guide turned off the engine and we just sat and watched and listened to these magnificent creatures. We saw them go down for a few minutes and then re-emerge somewhere else on the horizon. The sound of their blowholes echoed across the peaceful calm of the day. It was amazing.

After half an hour of watching them from a distance, there was a gap between sightings. Had we lost them? Would they pop up somewhere far away? I had been recording them on my phone for a few minutes and was tempted to press “stop” but I kept it going just in case. You never know, right?

And then, unbelievably, they surfaced mere meters away from us. They were coming straight toward us! Naomi later confessed to being a bit nervous at this point but I was too giddy and clueless to be frightened. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t stop recording!

And these stunning creatures swam within touching distance of the front of our boat. One or two even went right underneath us. You could almost feel the spray out of their blowholes. It was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen.

(If you ever want to see video, I can show you.)

It was one of those “I-can’t-believe-that-just-happened” moments. Our guide was almost as amazed as we were. *This never happens*, he said!

And so there we sat for a while—a group of ten strangers just incredulously watching these orcas swim off toward the horizon.

It felt like a holy moment to me.

It was a moment where I was overwhelmed by the beauty of all that God had made. The orcas, yes, but also the gorgeous sunset over the Pacific I had seen the night before and any number of other things we had seen on our travels to that point.

I was struck again by the simple fact that none of this *had* to be. Beauty is not necessary. It is a sheer gift.

Why should there be creatures as magnificent as orcas in existence and why should I get to see them? Why should there be sunsets with gentle pinkish hues in the clouds over the water or slashes of orange across distant mountain ranges?

Why should there be mountains and trees and seemingly unending greenery? Why should there be valleys that produce grapes and wine to gladden the soul? Why should there be rivers and streams and deer and eagles and winding roads and wheat fields and gentle breezes?

None of this had to exist. And yet it does.

God revealed himself to me once again as the Divine Artist. As we bobbed around the Pacific watching these orcas swim off into the distance, I felt like I should take my shoes off, like Moses.

Even in the middle of the water, I was on holy ground.

Speaking of holy ground, let's talk a bit about Moses, shall we? Moses' encounter with God is one of the more well-known in all of Scripture.

His didn't involve thinking inspirational thoughts in the beauty of creation, though. His took place in the desert with a flock of sheep at the foot of Mt. Horeb in the Sinai Peninsula (modern-day Egypt).

An interesting series of events has led Moses to this point in his life. Most of us know the basic outlines of Moses' story, but perhaps a quick refresher is in order.

Moses is born to Hebrew slaves in Egypt. The Israelites came to Egypt to escape famine during the time of Joseph, but over the course of long years they greatly increased in number and the Egyptians began to resent and enslave them.

But the more the Hebrews are oppressed the more their numbers grow. Eventually, the king of Egypt institutes a policy whereby the male children of the slaves are to be killed at birth.

So, this is the situation Moses is born into. Moses' mother tries to hide him for a few months after his birth, but eventually she puts him in a basket and sends him down the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter sees the basket while bathing in the river, takes Moses as her own, and raises him in the royal Palace.

So, Moses is a Hebrew by birth but raised as an Egyptian. One day, he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and, in a fit of rage, murders the Egyptian and buries him in the sand.

The next day he encounters two Hebrew slaves fighting and asks them how they can be fighting each other? One of them responds with a sneer, "What, are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian?"

Moses realizes that his crime is public knowledge and runs for his life. This is how he ends up in Midian (modern day Saudi Arabia).

There, he encounters the daughters of a pagan priest (Jethro) at a well and saves them from some unsavoury locals who were trying to chase them away. For his heroism, Moses gets himself a wife, one of Jethro's daughters named Zipporah.

They have a child and Moses lands himself a job as a shepherd.

So, we meet Moses at an interesting moment. He is not exactly living his best life.

The boy who grew up awash in the privilege of royalty is off tending his father-in-law's sheep in the desert. He's a Hebrew raised by Egyptians living in a foreign land as a fugitive.

He is perhaps not the most likely character for an encounter with the God of heaven and earth.

(Or, if we know our bibles reasonably well, we might say that he is *precisely* the most likely character for an encounter with the God of heaven and earth!)

At any rate, there, at the foot of Horeb, he sees something incredible. A bush that that is on fire but does not burn up!

Moses is curious, naturally. He hears a voice calling his name. And he responds, probably with no small amount of trepidation, "Here I am."

This is where we hear the famous words, "Don't come any closer. Take off your sandals. You are on holy ground."

And then, Moses is reintroduced to his God. *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*

At this, Moses hides his face in fear.

Interestingly, he's not afraid of the sight of the burning bush or even when he hears his name spoke aloud from within the bush.

He's afraid when God identifies himself.

Is this because Moses knows that he is guilty of murder? Or because he feels like he has run away not only from his people but from his God as well? Or because he doesn't really know who he is anymore?

We're not told. But God has other things on his mind. He has a job for Moses to do. God has heard the cries of his suffering people. He has a rescue mission in mind and Moses will be his chosen instrument to lead his people out of Egypt.

At this, Moses' reverent fear evaporates, and he slides into avoidance mode. *Me? Seriously? I think you've miscalculated here, God! Who am I that I should go to Egypt?*

Moses no doubt has his outstanding arrest warrant on his mind in addition to his perceived leadership deficiencies.

Never mind all that, God says. I will be with you.

Moses still isn't convinced. *Well, what if I go to the people and they don't believe you've sent me? Who am I supposed to say has sent me?*

This is a strange question given that God has just finished identifying himself quite specifically.

God responds rather tersely at this point. I can imagine he is losing patience with Moses.

I AM WHO I AM. Or, more literally in the Hebrew, *I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.* Tell them this is who sent you.

I am not some local tribal god that can be manipulated for a good harvest or a successful military campaign. I don't have to make a case for myself to you, here. This isn't a job interview! I am the source of existence itself. I am possibility promise, I am hope and deliverance. I AM WHO I AM.

Our passage this morning ends with God's speech to Moses. If we were to read on in Exodus 3 and 4, we would see that Moses was about the most reluctant and stubborn leader God ever recruited.

But eventually, he gets there. And Moses does indeed become God's tool to lead his people out of bondage and suffering.

So, that's the story of Moses from our text this morning. There are many things we might take from this story, but I want to focus on one question: What makes ground holy?

I think our answer can only be that "holy ground" is anywhere where God is truly encountered.

I encountered God in an idyllic ocean scene and a pod of orcas. I was reminded of God's creative power, artistry, and beauty.

Moses encountered God as a wandering fugitive with a herd of sheep in the desert. He was reminded of God's covenant with his ancestors, of his identity, of God's desire to loosen the chains of oppression and come to the aid of the afflicted.

What about us? What about you? Where is your "holy ground?" Where do you encounter God truly?

The created world is a big one, I think, for many of us. The top of a mountain, paddling down the river, the vastness of a prairie sky. Holy ground can be where we encounter the beauty and creativity and power of God.

Human relationships can be where we encounter God. Perhaps it is the love of a spouse or the birth of a child or the solidity of a friendship. Holy ground is where we are reminded that God is relational in nature and has created us to love and to be loved.

It can also be where we encounter injustice and pain in the world. There's no evidence to suggest that Moses was thinking much about the plight of his people while he was in exile in Midian. But an encounter with God rerouted him and sent him right into the suffering of his people.

Holy ground can be where God does the same for us—where God seeks to use us as agents of liberation and justice.

We might think of the ongoing scourge of racial injustice that has been dominating headlines recently. I think the church's ongoing challenge is to actively participate in being instruments of hope and change in our communities, not out of reactionary impulses inflamed by the media of the day but out of our unique calling as followers of Jesus and armed with a specifically Christian vocabulary (i.e., the equality of human beings grounded in our common identity as image bearers of God).

Holy ground can also be where we suffer ourselves. I want to be careful how I say this one because I don't want to romanticize or over-spiritualize heartache and pain.

But I have heard too many stories of people who said that they felt like they were on holy ground with someone at the threshold of death. I have heard people speak of times of trial in their lives, times of loss and disease and trauma, as times when God somehow seemed uniquely present.

This should not be a surprise. We who follow Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows, the suffering servant, the one who has promised to be near to the meek, the poor, the persecuted and afflicted.

Holy ground is anywhere that God gets through to us. Anywhere where we are brought to worship God with reverence and awe, in spirit and in truth.

Holy ground is anywhere we come to more fully share God's burden for the suffering of the world, for justice, and for mercy.

Holy ground is anywhere our eyes and ears are opened to the presence of God—I AM WHO I AM, the one in whom we all live and move and have our being.

As we prepare for summer to end and to take our first halting steps into what we hope will be a more normal fall (as normal as anything can be in a pandemic), I want to encourage us simply to pay attention.

God is always present if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Holy ground is all around us.

The nineteenth-century Victorian poet Elizabeth Barret Browning famously 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 and pluck blackberries.”

I don't have a problem with plucking blackberries.

But I do pray that we would be those who see, those who take off our shoes in the presence of the great I AM, the God who—incredibly!—seeks encounter with us, for our salvation and for the healing of the world.

Amen.

