

Sermon – Holy Ground  
Sunday, August 30, 2020  
Scripture Readings – Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-26  
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Our first scripture is Exodus 3:1-15, where we read about Moses' encounter with Yahweh in the burning bush. The miracle of the bush that burned but would not be consumed is one of the Bible's great symbols for the presence of God.

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.<sup>7</sup>*

*Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> God said, "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." <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is God's name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. <sup>1</sup> God said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" <sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations. Amen.*

In our second scripture, Matthew 16:21-26, we see in the incarnate God the same willingness to embrace suffering as we witnessed in the uncontainable God of fire. Hear now God's holy word.

*<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." <sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Holy Ground”

*The text: Then God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. Exodus 3:5*

Let us pray. Loving God, thank you for those moments in our lives when we turn aside as Moses did and recognize your holy presence in our midst. As we reflect on your nature, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I can still hear my father’s voice the first time he told me the St. Peter joke about Pope John Paul II standing at heaven’s gates and learning that God was displeased with the Roman Catholic Church’s stance on the ordination of women. My dad told it with a glimmer in his eye because he knew how much it would please his ordained daughter. As the joke goes, John Paul is genuinely surprised that God would be annoyed and responds, *He’s mad about that...* to which St. Peter replies with pleasure, *She’s furious!*

We laugh not because we think God is a woman, we laugh because we are reminded that we assume God is a man. Indeed, God is neither male nor female. God is beyond our comprehension, uncontainable in the burning bush and intangible in the Holy Spirit.

We laugh because as Mark Twain once said, “Humor is the soft edge of truth” and this simple interaction reminds us of the truth that when we become too confident in naming and knowing God, we also become too confident in naming, categorizing, and labeling God’s people.

When we refer to God only as He, there is a powerful suggestion in its subtlety that God is male, reinforcing the traditional, patriarchal, and hierarchical structure of power that Jesus, the incarnate God challenged continually.

Professor of Old Testament at Louisville Theological Seminary, Dr. Joanna Van Wijk-Bos, reminds Christians of why Yahweh’s name is unpronounceable in Judaism. She writes:

*Jewish believers would not entertain the notion of trying to pronounce the sacred name.... The insight that the name of God must not be pronounced arose not out of superstition but out of an appropriate understanding of the power of naming and of the impossibility of humanity’s pretending to exert this power over the Holy God.*

That God is unknowable and cannot be named may be summarized in the word “holiness.” Holiness is difficult to define. It has a mysterious quality. The presence of holiness may inspire awe, strike fear, or evoke amazement. For the Ancient Israelite community, the Holy One, the “I Am that I Am” was not remote, but mysteriously present in their midst.

Moses’ encounter with the Holy One at the burning bush reveals the God in their midst; the God who is not like man, especially in God’s ability to save and forgive. Moses gets a glimpse at the heart of this Holy One who burns but is not consumed. Moses learns that God cares about the suffering of God’s people, hears their cry, and will save them.

Moses also cares about the oppression of his people, so much so that as a young man he took the life of an Egyptian he saw brow beating another Hebrew. That’s why Moses was out there

in the wilderness. He had run for his life—to save his life, yes, but he also ran away from a part of his life he had not yet resolved. He ran from the pain and anger he felt toward the injustices within his world. He ran from his helplessness to change the situation. He ran from the inner conflict of living a privileged life as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter in the midst of so much pain and suffering among his own people.

Surely Moses was happy and astounded to hear that the “God of his ancestors,” the “God of the burning bush,” the “I am that I am,” the “I will be who I will be,” heard the cries of Moses' people and would save them. Moses' objection came only when God asked him to enter into their suffering by being a part of the saving and the leading. (pause)

If our scripture from Exodus reminds us that God hears the cries of those who suffer, our gospel reading reveals to us that God is also willing to enter into suffering. The mystery of the Holy One in our midst is that redemption flows, not only from God's willingness to enter into another's suffering, but also from our own.

Peter's objection is not the same as Moses, however they share a perspective that we all understand. None of us welcomes suffering. We want to believe, like Moses and Peter, that there is a way to freedom other than by confronting power, a way to gain life other than by losing it, and a way to Easter other than through Good Friday.

The “God of the Burning Bush” and “Jesus of Nazareth,” each in their own way, gently yet firmly, remind us that if we are to be faithful, if we are willing to take off our sandals and to stand on holy ground, if we are willing to be true to ourselves and to who God calls us to be, we must embrace the suffering that is a part of life and confront the injustice and oppression within our life together.

Steadfast on the shoulders of our abolitionist founders, we join Presbyterians across the country in a renewed advocacy for racial justice as the Holy One in our midst, the God who set the Hebrew people free and who embraced the cross, calls us, along with Moses and Peter, to risk, to act, and to lead.

May we hear the cries of those who suffer in our world and may we respond with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love... advocating on their behalf and entering into their suffering as our loving and holy God has entered into ours. Amen.