

Bare feet on holy ground

A sermon preached at Faith on March 7, 2010.

This morning's reading from Exodus is one of the most thematically rich passages in the Bible. I could probably preach a different sermon from it every Sunday for about three months. When I first read it this week, the thing that jumped out at me was "take off your shoes, you're on holy ground." In an instant a whole tapestry images and song lyrics swirled around me. Two of my favorite women singer-song writers, Carrie Newcomer and Mary Black have songs called Holy Ground. So I hummed for a while and enjoyed their take on holy ground. But in the middle of my musical reverie I realized that the soles of my feet were tingling and I knew why the voice from the burning bush said, "remove the sandals from your feet." When we find holy ground, we need to get everything else out of the way – anything that comes between that thin place and our skin. We are invited to step onto those places in which the divine shines through with nothing to interrupt or muffle the experience. Moses did it and his life was changed. Once his feet came into contact with that holiness he communed with God. He learned what God wanted of him, how he was to do it and apprehended, in a somewhat cryptic way, what God is. Holy ground is the place of heightened awareness and knowing.

The problem for us is that this is Moses, star of Cecil B DeMille and Disney blockbusters and his encounter with God was way beyond the normal so how can we relate to it. Well, I want to share my holy ground/burning bush experience. It's much more mundane. Some of you have probably heard this before, but it's a good story. It begins in November 1992. On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a tornado ripped through northeastern Indianapolis and the neighborhood of St. Alban's Episcopal Church where my family and I had been active members for about fifteen years. I had just rotated off of the Vestry on which I had served as the first woman Junior Warden, which meant that I had been responsible for the building and knew how it responded to storms. I had also just completed the installation of new stained glass windows. The next morning, when I couldn't get anyone on the phone, I decided to go and see what was going on for myself. What I saw as I drove down Emerson Avenue was shocking; it looked like the disaster it was, although mercifully contained. I would learn later that 200 homes had been damaged, 50 completely destroyed and those were mostly within a three block radius of the church. I was worried until I saw the familiar A frame structure of the church I loved so well. When I went into the church I saw that St. Alban's had indeed escaped wrath of the tornado; the power was even back on. Fr. David Musgrave was there but was heading out to drive to Illinois to bring his daughter home for Thanksgiving. He had told the church secretary not to come in so after he left, I was there by myself checking the windows and the usual places that the roof leaked. Everything was ok, although the phone was ringing off the hook. I answered a few calls and was ready to continue on with my plans for the day. I was just about to lock the door when Dave Carlson, a volunteer fireman and member of the congregation walked up and said "Sharon, if you lock this church, there are no working bathrooms in the neighborhood." Believe it or not, that was my "take off your shoes, you're on holy ground" moment. And that's not something that I know in hindsight – I knew it in that instant because I felt it. I literally felt a shimmer of energy run through my body, my arms were tingling, all the way down to my hand that held the key. All I could do was say, "OK, I'll stay and keep the church open." Soon, there was a steady stream of workmen in muddy boots tracking across the carpeting of the narthex on the way to bathroom.

The phone continued to ring off the hook. By the end of the day, the Mayor was involved and with the help of his Assistant for Public Safety, the neighborhood was invited to the church for dinner. I had mentioned in a conversational kind of way as Mayor Goldsmith and I were standing across the street in the mud looking at the mess created by Mother Nature that the neighborhood was going to need a good clean up. When he showed up at the church for dinner that night, the first thing he said to me was, “so, how are plans going for the clean up?” I looked at him and said “Great!”

The Holy Spirit is often depicted as strong wind. First we had the real tornado and then I was caught up in a spirit whirlwind. By the end of week, a massive clean up took place, and one of the people who showed up to help was Bishop Ted Jones and as he signed in to work, I realized, “Ooo, he’s knows who I am now, and I’m not sure that’s a good thing.” Sure enough, soon I had been appointed to chair the diocesan Social Concerns Commission and one thing led to another and here I am, Lord! Holy Ground is not just on a mountaintop with a burning bush; it is wherever and whenever the divine shines through the haze of daily living. It does require something of us – it requires that we stop what we are doing and pay attention. We must allow it to touch us by taking off our shoes or our blinders or how we’ve always thought of something and be ready for something different. Now what’s different doesn’t necessarily mean that you head off to Egypt to free the slaves or end up going to seminary. Once touch by holiness you might simply find yourselves less anxious, more loving, more able to forgive, more interested in what you can do for others and if you say yes to that and give it your attention holy ground will be wherever you step.

I’ve been reading one of Peter’s books – this one is about what makes our genes work and as I’m reading this book, I frequently let out an “Oh wow!” Here’s a simple yet profound finding that is such a holy ground moment; AIDS patients that believe in a loving God as opposed to an angry punishing God, have lower levels of the virus in their blood and higher T-cell counts. Apparently, encountering a loving holy ground brings you health. The electro-magnetic field of love grows healthy things in you and can even undo chronic, incurable disease.

The implications for this and what we think and do are like standing in the presence of that burning bush. In an instant we know how important teaching God’s true nature of love is, not just for us but for those in need of the good news. There is such meanness done in the name of God and some supposed morality that many people are permanently damaged by it. There are those connected to this congregation yet not fully engaged in it because of the echoes of what was drummed into them as children – you are a sinner and God will judge you harshly for any number of things and where is the good news in that.

We are the stewards of holy ground. That means first, that there is something for us to learn and to integrate as a part of us. Then, as faithful, creative stewards, we live it and teach it with our lives and set others free.

So, I guess we’re all Moses after all. So take your shoes off and let the warmth of God’s love touch you and begin works of wonder.