

Exodus 3:1-6

Transfiguration, February 19, 2023
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Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "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.

Have you ever visited holy grounds? Stepped foot on someplace hallowed or sacred? I suppose that depends on what I mean by "Holy Ground." Up in Wisconsin, if you say "Hallowed Ground," most people will think of Lambeau Field, the home of the Green Bay Packers. So, to some, storied sports stadiums qualify as holy ground. Or, if you've ever visited Gettysburg or maybe Arlington National Cemetery—those places sure feel like sacred ground too with the men who died there or were buried there fighting for our nation. Then, of course, there is the hallowed grounds of temples and shrines, places where people will go to kneel in awed silence and reverence. Regardless of what you consider to be holy ground, these are often places that people like to visit. They're bucket list locations that people will travel great distances to see and experience, maybe even pay money to enter.

I've had opportunities to visit all sorts of these types of holy grounds in my life. Yes, Lambeau Field, along with Gettysburg and Arlington National Cemetery. I've even had the opportunity to visit Buddhist Temples and incredible Catholic Basilicas. But none of these places are really holy grounds, not truly, according to God's definition.

Holy Ground as the world often thinks about it is a far cry from actual Holy Ground according to God. And in our text this morning, as in our Gospel reading, we read about various locations which were properly described as Holy Ground. But they weren't sacred or hallowed because of any of the reasons that many people might think. Rather, in our text this morning, we learn, in the words of our theme:

How to Identify "Holy Ground"

- I. It's a place where God reveals Himself
- II. It's a place to depart *from* and not arrive *at*
It's a place where sinners are sanctified

How do you know when you're standing on "Holy Ground"? Well, first and foremost, Holy Ground is anywhere that **God Reveals Himself** to us. In our text, the Lord calls out to Moses and tells him to take off his sandals, for the place on which he was standing was holy ground. Historically, in Middle Eastern cultures, people would take off their sandals when entering into a temple or mosque as a way of protecting it from the outside dirt, so as not to defile a sacred place. And many cultures in the Middle East and Asia still do the same thing to this day. Moses did something similar; the place of the burning bush was sacred, so Moses takes off his sandals as a way to show reverence to a Holy God.

That place was sacred, because God had revealed Himself there to be, ***“The God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”*** And then Moses not only stood barefoot in his reverence, He would not even look at the bush out of reverential fear of the Lord.

Imagine how that moment must have felt to Moses. Like any good Hebrew, he likely looked fondly upon the patriarchs, his ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yes, he had been adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter when he was still very young, but Pharaoh’s daughter had also hired Moses’ mom to be his nurse and raise him. And what do you think Moses’ mother used that time to do? Undoubtedly, she was teaching him about God, the promises that God had spoken to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob. Promises to send a Savior. And *now*, that same God that he’d heard so much about growing up was speaking to *him!* That was what made this place “Holy Ground,” that God was speaking to man.

God does the same for us today, and we ought to have that same reverential reaction that Moses had. When God speaks to us as His Word is being read, when He reveals Himself to us through Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—showing us His grace—when a family gathers around the dinner table to read a devotion—these things are sacred. These are just more examples of God revealing Himself and speaking to sinful people. But isn’t it true that these things often seem rather ordinary to us? Don’t we find it troublingly easy to ignore these things? During the sermon, during the Scripture readings, how easy is it to doze off, or to let our mind wander to what’s going on the rest of the day, as if the church service is just something we have to get through? How often do we simply neglect to read our Bibles on our own since we have so much else we have to get done instead!

We see then that we’re a lot like Peter. Consider our Gospel reading: Jesus had revealed His glory as God to ordinary sinners there on the mountain of Transfiguration. Peter, not really knowing what he was saying, remarked, ***“Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”*** (Matthew 17:4f) But then the text says that *while he was still in the process of speaking*, God interjects and says, ***“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.”*** Yes, we often act like Peter rather than Moses—quick to speak, focusing on our own ideas, obsessed with our own plans, minds frequently wandering. But God simply says, ***“Listen to Me.”*** I pray that the Lord would give to all of us true reverence for His Word, so that when He speaks, when He reveals Himself to us in the Sacraments, we *listen*. Because, when God is speaking thus, we are standing on Holy Ground.

Now, many people think of “Holy Ground” as a destination. It’s a place to make a pilgrimage to, a place to finally arrive at after a long journey and stay for a while. That’s what Peter was thinking on that mountain when he said, ***“Let’s set up tents and stay a while!”*** But God indicates in our text this morning that Holy Ground is much more about the departure than it is the arrival. The Lord used this encounter with Moses to prepare him to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. He was equipping him with the words to say and strengthening his faith. And can you remember all the arguments Moses used to try to avoid following through on his task? In Exodus chapter 3, he had said, ***“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”*** (v.11) The next chapter, he said, ***“They will not believe me or listen to my voice, they will say, the LORD did not appear to you!”*** (4:1) A few verses later, ***“I am not eloquent, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”*** (4:10) And then he even said, ***“Lord, please send someone else!”*** (4:13)

Like with Moses, when God speaks to *you* through His Word, He also is preparing you. When you come to church, God is preparing you, strengthening your faith so that *you* can go out and carry His Word to others, so that He can use *you* to lead people out of their captivity to sin by pointing them to Christ. And *we*, in return, like to use a lot of excuses! “*Who am I to carry this message?*” “*I’m slow of speech, I don’t know what to say.*” “*Lord, just send someone else.*” This lackadaisical attitude when it comes to spreading God’s again shows our lack of reverence for when God speaks. Here is the Word which has given us life, the Word which has assured us again and again that we have peace with God!—and yet, we’re often fine with just keeping that to ourselves.

Holy Ground is not a place to arrive at and simply enjoy while you are there. God uses Holy Ground to prepare individuals to depart and go out to the world. We see that in our Gospel reading as well. Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, and Peter, James, and John witnessed it. This was Jesus’ way of preparing them for His departure, to show that He was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. They needed that, because soon, as He told them, He would suffer at the hands of men, and die, and be buried. But if they could remember what they saw on that mountain, Jesus, in all His glory, then they would be assured that He was *indeed* God in the flesh, their Savior from Sin, and they’d depart from their homes with the Word of Christ ever on their lips.

And the transfiguration also prepared *Jesus* for *His* departure. There He was at the peak of the mountain, speaking with Moses and Elijah. Which I find interesting when comparing our Gospel reading with our sermon text—in both, we find Jesus on a mountain speaking with Moses. In Luke’s Gospel, he writes that “***two men were talking with Him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.***” (Luke 9:30-31) The Greek word for “departure” in that passage is “exodus.” So, Moses stood on the mountain of Transfiguration speaking with Jesus about His coming exodus from this world, which is fascinating, because in our sermon text, Jesus is speaking with Moses about *his* exodus from Egypt.

And, we can see that the two events are closely tied together. Moses would lead the people of Israel on an exodus out of their chains in the land of Egypt. And this serves as a picture of what Jesus would do later. He would head down from the mountain of Transfiguration and soon after be led away captive as a prisoner taken to His death, and then He would rise from the dead and be freed from the chains of death. And by *doing* this, He was leading you on an exodus of your own. He was setting you free from the chains of death and your slavery to sin. He was doing what He declared through the prophet Isaiah: “***The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.***” (Isaiah 61:1) Yes, on that Holy Ground of the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus was not preparing to stay, He was preparing to depart. And through *His* departure, one day you will *arrive* at a place to stay, in paradise.

Now, when most people visit Holy Grounds, like religious hallowed grounds, it is often in an attempt to earn something from their god. When a Muslim visits the Kaaba in the city of Mecca, it is done so because it is mandatory for every Muslim in their lifetime to make that pilgrimage if they want Allah to save them. When a Catholic visits a shrine to kiss a relic, it’s done as a way to earn a little more grace, done to earn a little more favor with God. But, in truth, Holy Ground is not a place to approach

God in an attempt to *earn favor* with God. Proper Holy Ground is a place where God calls sinful man in order to give free grace.

Notice how in our Exodus reading, Moses is unworthy to stand on the Holy Ground of the mountain, because God is present there. And yet, the Lord called out to Him to *draw him near*, **“Moses, Moses!”** Jesus invited Peter, James, and John up to the mountain top knowing that they would be witnesses of His transfiguration, even while knowing that later Peter would fail to bear witness about Jesus. In both cases, God called sinful men to see His Glory, to hear His Word. And both times, we see the same reaction from these men: **“Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God,”** and the disciples **“fell on their faces and were terrified.”** (Matthew 17:6) That is the proper reaction when a sinful man approaches Holy God. And that really *should* be our reaction when we hear God’s Word here in church. We ought to be trembling and afraid, since Jesus has said, **“where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,”** (Matthew 18:20) and we are sinners! We don’t deserve to stand in His presence!

And yet, just as Jesus reached out to His disciples, so He reaches out to you: **“Rise and have no fear.”** (Matthew 17:7) For, as God says through Isaiah, **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by my name, you are mine.”** (Isaiah 43:1) We need not avert our eyes this morning, for God instead instructs us, **“Fix [your] eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”** (Hebrews 12:2) We *can* look at Christ, we *can* stand in His presence today, all because of what He did on that cross. And now, when God’s Word is read here in church, when it is announced that your sins have been forgiven, *that* is God speaking. The same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who spoke to Moses from the burning bush—He is speaking to you here today. And today, He announces that you are forgiven. That your warfare against sin is over, for your iniquity has been pardoned. (cf. Isaiah 40:2)

So, have you ever visited Holy Ground before? Yes, you have. Because there’s another plot of Holy Ground that I’ve been to many times before, and you have too. It’s located at 1183 Big Bend Rd. in Manchester, MO. That’s this place. It might not look like Holy Ground, and I don’t know of anyone that’s flown across the world just to come see this place. Nevertheless, this is Holy Ground. We know that because this is where God’s Word is revealed to us. This is where God comes to us in His Body and blood. This is Holy ground, because this is where God invites sinners to come and stand and be near Him and be at peace, because here He reassures us that our sins have been removed from us, our guilt nailed to the cross.

But Holy Ground isn’t a place to stay. No, here God is preparing you to depart, to go out of these doors, to see that sign, “Now entering the mission field,” and then to treat it as such. He’s preparing you to go so that you can tell others how they can have peace with God too. It won’t come through their good deeds, it won’t be granted by their visiting relics or temples. But they can have peace with God, through Jesus Christ, the true Son of God who once showed who He was on the mountain, and now you can show Him to others to. May God help us, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.