

Sacred Ground, Sacred Calling

August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-6

Who are you called to be? What are you called to do with your one sacred and extraordinary life? Everyone has a calling. Everyone is uniquely gifted by God – teacher, lawyer, warehouse worker, grocery clerk, sanitation worker.

There is no division between sacred and secular vocations. Every endeavor is sacred, and offers the chance to fulfill a sacred calling. It just depends on what you see and what you do with it. Chances are, you're standing on sacred ground right now.

The Bible contains many stories where someone receives a call from God, or people experience a divine encounter unexpectedly. In the Old Testament, a number of people were called to serve as prophets or leaders among God's people, such as Abraham, David, Isaiah and Ruth. The New Testament contains many call stories as well. These include Mary's call to be mother of Jesus, Peter, Paul, James, John. In every case, there is a sacred encounter with the divine.

Why are there so many call stories in the Bible? Why do people experience God at so many twists and turns in everyday life that in hindsight, were directed by God? Are they simply narratives of rare events, or do they suggest something that is happening in our lives as today? To address questions like these, let's take a look at one such story.

Today's Old Testament reading recounts one of the most famous call stories: that of Moses. Moses has fled from Egypt to escape punishment for killing an Egyptian. He has married and settled down and now cares for his father-in-law's flock. One day he's out in the wilderness, tending the sheep as usual. He notices a bush some distance from him that is on fire, but is not reduced to ashes. Sorry about the reference to fire these days. It is figurative.

Moses decides to take a closer look. This becomes a turning point in his life. The Lord addresses him by name from the heart of the fire and commissions him for the seemingly impossible task of leading the enslaved Israelites out of their servitude in Egypt.

I said it seemed like an impossible task, but it was also a sacred task that was given to Moses. Chances are he didn't always feel the exhilaration of that divine undertaking. After all, who would get excited about wandering in the wilderness for forty years with a legion of people constantly grumbling and threatening their leader? Nevertheless, he did God's bidding.

Do we have anything in common with Moses today? The very next step you take is on sacred ground. Like Moses, we must turn aside from preoccupation with the past or future, and entertain the difficult task of being truly present now so that we may meet the God who awaits us. It is simple, but not easy. Yet it does happen. It happens to Moses near Mount Horeb. It occurs in our lives as well.

The sun breaks through to illuminate fields of grain. A majestic redwood captivates us and grows to the sky as if it is reaching for the divine. Where is God waiting to be discovered by you? What is the bush trying to convey to you? Where would you find it today? Perhaps in your garden, during prayer, or hiking in the mountains? After reading the story of Moses, I can never look at bushes or trees the same.

Could it be that some flee the mystery out of fear of being consumed, which seemed like the first inclination of Moses? How can we put out preoccupations and anxieties aside so that we don't miss the sacred before us? Some may think it preposterous to even think about looking for the sacred in the midst of a pandemic. However, don't we need such experiences now more than ever? During this time of pandemic, I have heard people say that they are drawn closer to the divine because they have more time to clear their minds and get back to the basics that matter. Others feel driven to prayer because these times are more than they can handle on their own.

It is good to be reminded that God is right here in the midst of the pandemic with us. God is with patients in the ICU who feel alone. God is with healthcare workers who are ready to sacrifice their lives in order to care for others. God is with the teachers who give their all for their students during these days. God is with the firefighters who battle the blaze. Could it be that God is present in every detail if we know where to look? Could it be that the God whom scripture says lost an only son can be with those who have lost loved ones today? We are standing on sacred ground. Every bush, every breath is holy.

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The word spirit comes from the Greek word "pneuma," which is the basis for the word breath. Could it be that every time we take a breath, we are breathing in Holy Spirit? Jesus often says, "Let those who have eyes see, and those who have ears let them hear." Not everyone will. The more we are aware and prepared, the more we can see; the more we can recognize that God is in our midst. I would have no use for a God who is remote or distant.

I will always remember a time when I was living in Indiana, over twenty-five years ago. I was alone and going through some challenging times. One day I went out for a jog on country roads surrounded by cornfields. As I came to a clearing and looked up at the sky, the clouds formed a perfect cross. It was a *perfect* cross.

Did anyone else see it? I don't know. But it was undoubtedly a message for me. Is it any wonder that writers as diverse as Carl Jung and Dostoevsky tell us that the universe was created in the shape of a cruciform?

In the story you heard this morning, Moses is told to take off his shoes, for the ground on which he is standing is holy. He is told to uncover the soles of his feet, so they may touch the holy ground directly. No shoes or sandals needed here.

The Celtic author John Philip Newell reflects on his encounters with the holy: Think of walking barefoot in the grass, Newell writes. Think of placing your bare feet in the coolness of a refreshing stream. When we do so, we see in a new way. Doors of perception are opened to us.

He gives an insight from a rabbi named Rabbi Nahum who was teaching on the story of Moses and the burning bush from the Torah. He likes to say that the important aspect of the Moses story is *not* that the bush is burning, but that Moses notices. For every bush is radiant. Every bush is alive and signals the presence of God.

Where will you encounter an epiphany today? Will it be when you step outside in the morning on a beautiful sunny day? Will it be when your husband or wife does some act of kindness for you, or a child or grandchild does something to make you laugh?

There have been many radiant bushes and sacred encounters in my life -- When I met my wife for the first time; at the birth of our two boys; their first day of school and their graduation. There was the first time I set foot in Sequoia national forest, or the time our family was walking down the street in Edinburgh towards the castle, and I turned around, and saw a double rainbow.

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Nearly every day it is my great joy to take long walks with our wonderful Golden Retriever Sophia. During those walks, she has heard more of my prayers than most priests have heard confessions! It is a time to walk the dog, but more importantly, it was a time to walk with God.

Celtic spirituality that emanates from Ireland and Scotland teaches that God is everywhere, and can be known through God's creation. There is something of God in everything. Sometimes it's almost like the trees talk, and the stones shout out. Sometimes it seems like someone or something is trying to get our attention every time we step outside. As the pastor and writer Ken Wilson wrote in his book, Mystically Wired, "Prayer is not just something you do, it's also a place you go, a place where your feet take you."

Where are your feet taking you? What do you see? What do you feel? May you be of good courage during these challenging days. May you find the sacred at every turn, and may you stand on holy ground for all of your days. Amen

Exodus 3:1-6

Moses and the Radiant Bush

1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him like flames from within a bush. Moses saw that the bush was not consumed.

3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush is not consumed."

4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"
And Moses said, "Here I am."

5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.