

Holy Ground Surprises

Exodus 3:1-15

It was a dark night in the middle of the South China Sea. An overcast sky blocked out the moon and stars. Winds were gusty and the sea was heavy with whitecaps. The destroyer bridge watch could barely see the running lights of the other ships in the flotilla. Suddenly, from the speaker, a deep booming voice slowly said, “Whiskey Foxtrot Niner, this is Je-ho-vah. Stand by to execute.” The voice lingered on the name Jehovah, giving it maximum effect. Whiskey Foxtrot Niner was the call sign for the entire flotilla. Jehovah was the call sign for Commander, Seventh Fleet, a three-star admiral. The officer-of-the-deck on the destroyer was a young lieutenant. He and the bridge team had heard Jehovah used before, but never in a *basso profundo* voice. They would later learn that it belonged to the admiral’s new tactical communicator, who was clearly playing his new role to the hilt. The voice of the messenger though had such a startling and dramatic impact that the lieutenant and his team almost missed the message, which came after the words, “stand by to execute,” an order that required the entire flotilla to turn simultaneously.

While not a religious experience, and certainly not a holy ground experience, something like that happened to Moses on Mount Horeb that dark night long ago. Moses was doing what he had been doing for forty years – tending to his father-in-law’s flock. Suddenly he saw a bush on fire, and then observed that the bush was not being consumed by the fire. As he drew near to see it better, a deep voice came from within the bush, “Moses, Moses! Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Pretty dramatic, I would say. As an aside, why do we always ascribe a *basso profundo* voice to God? Is it possible that God could speak with a high, squeaky voice? Of course he could. Personally, though, I prefer to think of God with a deep, commanding voice.

God’s first command to Moses was to remove his sandals. Could this have been a tactic by God to give Moses a few moments to take in what his eyes had just seen and his ears had just heard, so that he didn’t miss the “stand by to execute” that was about to come? Perhaps. But it was much more ethereal than that. The ground was holy because God was present. Taking off one’s sandals is a sign of respect for God. It is practiced today by many religions when they enter their places of worship. Some religions also require head coverings in their worship. But whether heads are covered or not, shoes are worn or not, the principle is the same – the holiness of the space is shown respect.

Many years ago there was a distinct dress code for Christian worshipers. Women wore dresses and hats; men more suits. Things have changed, although in the South and black churches especially you can still find these standards of dress in place. We live in the West and we are not formal people. Our attitude is that what counts is what is on our inside, not on our outside. Thus, we come to church in varying degrees of attire, reflecting our own comfort levels. I do not have a problem with this – up to a point. I am old-fashioned enough to not like men wearing hats in worship. If a gentleman enters and sits down wearing a hat, I will go to them and whisper a request to remove it as a sign of respect for the holy space. The only exception I make to this standard is weddings where cowboy hats are part of the wedding party’s attire. But I do ask them to remove them whenever we pray.

Taking off one’s sandals or shoes also puts aside the dust of one’s normal activities. I believe God wanted Moses’ feet to directly feel the ground of creation. Moses is about to receive an order to change directions and in the process his sandals will accumulate new dust for a new purpose.

The surprise God had for Moses was that he was to go to Egypt, confront Pharaoh and free the Hebrew people from their four hundred years of enslavement. Moses didn’t accept this order willingly, and offered four objections: (1) he was unworthy; (2) he didn’t know what to say when Pharaoh asked him who sent him; and later in chapter four, Moses objected that (3) the Egyptians wouldn’t believe him; and (4) he couldn’t speak well.

God answered each objection. To his unworthiness, God told Moses he would be with him. As to his name, God said, "I am who I am" and later told Moses to say that "I AM has sent you." God cannot be adequately defined by words. "I AM" can mean "I will be what I want to be" and "I will be what I need to be." As to the unbelief of the Egyptians, God changed Moses' rod into a snake and back again, made his hand leprous and restored it, and said these and other signs would be given through him to Pharaoh. As to Moses being slow of speech and ineloquent, God said he would send Moses' brother Aaron with him. The rest, as they say, is history. We know how the story ends. God went with Moses and Aaron to Egypt, brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians, Pharaoh freed the people, only to chase them down. The Red Sea parted, the Hebrews passed, the Egyptian army followed and was drowned, and Moses brought the people back to Mount Horeb as God had directed.

There is not any problem with this story. There is, however, a problem in how we relate to it. Far too many of us have said, or thought, "I've never felt like I was standing on holy ground. God has never called me to do anything. I've never had a burning bush experience."

The issue is not one of magnitude, but of sensitivity to the Divine. Life's holy ground experiences are where we encounter God. We can seek to be on holy ground, such as coming to church on Sunday. But more often than not, we are surprised at suddenly finding ourselves on holy ground. It can occur any place and any time. Whenever we are aware of being on holy ground, we can also be surprised, not just by being there, but at becoming aware of what it is God wants us to learn from the experience, and sometimes do.

To be sure, some holy ground experiences result in radical reorientations of our lives. But in most cases, we are simply touched by God and become better for it. Let me give you some examples:

- You are busy with your day when a child asks you to read her a story. Acceding to her request, you are reminded what a beautiful child of God she is, and your day is brightened.
- You come over the top of a hill in the early morning and are confronted with a gorgeous sunrise. You pull over to take in this orange-red panorama, marveling at all that God has wrought, and you utter a word of thanks.
- You visit someone in the nursing home. With sudden God-felt compassion, you pray with him, and he shares words of gratitude with you for your kindness. You leave a better person than when you entered.

I will tell you this. God wants something of you out of every holy ground encounter. It isn't always to change the direction of your life, although it may be. It is not always to go and do something, although it may be. So often, what God wants is for you to simply "be" something. To be more aware of a person or situation; to be less argumentative; to be more caring; to be more patient; to be kinder; to be less stubborn; to be more grateful to God for your blessings; to love more. This list is endless, but you get the idea. The surprise of the holy ground encounter occurs when you become aware of what it is that God is saying to you, what God wants of you. The shame of it would be to not be aware of it, or to ignore it if you are aware. All of God's holy ground experiences are for one purpose – to bring us closer to God and make us better people.

Do you really doubt that you have had a holy ground experience? God said to Moses, "I am who I am." My take on that is that God is also saying, "I will be what I have already been." Think back on your life. God has been there. You have already had holy ground encounters with God. Because there wasn't a burning bush in front of you, you may have dismissed the occurrence. But your heart has already been strangely warmed. Be in touch with those times in your life and reclaim them as the holy ground experiences God intended them to be. And as God was with you then, God is with you now, and will be with you in your life that lies ahead. At your next holy ground experience, tune into what God wants you to do, or go, or become from it. Then respond in faith. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 28 August 2011