

# *Holy Ground*

A Sermon Expositing Exodus 3:1-15

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Is that what Holy Ground is?

I was at one of those alternative haunted houses that some churches used to put on at Halloween time. As part of the fright we were treated to scenes of hell – with loud, so loud, rock music, harsh red lights emblematic of flames, chains clinking, people shrieking. We can save discussion of the problems with such a literal and personified understanding of the ends God has for humankind for another day. For the moment I want you to know how they depicted heaven – ostensibly a holy place. The bright and brilliant lights were intensified by the fact that every item in the room was pure white. There was a soft, angelic singing voice emanating from somewhere, from everywhere, seemingly from the soft fog that covered our shoe tops. We were walking on a cloud. At the center of the room there was a single, white throne lofted on a platform above all else in that place. It was calming, soothing. I suppose anything would be if you'd just literally walked through hell, but that particular space was intended to create awe – a calm, comforting, quiet sense of awe – they were trying to convey the holiness of what being directly in God's presence might be like.

Is that what holy ground is? Is that what a holy place is really like, do you think?

I suppose the answer depends on whether you interpret the question as about the place depicted – an otherworldly place entirely set apart from the realms where human history has played out in physical space, in culture, in ethos, in spirit; a place where God's undiluted essence may be experienced – is that what a Holy place is? Or we could accept the question as about the place where the depiction was happening – a church building, a place where people gather for worship and where a creative (I'm being generous) and narrative depiction of God's ultimate reality was on display for people to see, stand in awe of, and respond to right here on earth. So foundationally, part of the question is, "Are there holy places we can go here and now?" And another part is, "If there are, what do they look like? How will we know when we're there?" and "If we find ourselves there, what should we do about it?"

The writer of Exodus answers our questions for us in the story of Moses being called into the role he would eventually assume as the great liberator of the Hebrew people. In the coming chapters Moses will stand up to the king of Egypt and demand the emancipation of the Hebrews who were held as slaves and will lead them on a great Exodus out of that land, through the wilderness for 40 years, and right up to the cusp of a new land flowing with milk and honey. Moses is not only a central figure in the Bible and this is not only a central narrative in the Bible, the kind of liberation he leads is a central theme in the theology and practice of the great religions who still hold Moses and his story as sacred to this day. And that liberation begins we are told, on holy ground found right here in the world we're currently living in.

There are some things about Moses's encounter of God in, through, and around the burning bush that ring true of our expectations for holy places. If Moses's encounter at a holy place is emblematic of others that may exist today in our world then we might be on the lookout for moments and places where God reveals God's self to us more fully than before. Tradition holds that Moses was given the name of God – not one of the many

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

monikers used to *describe* God, but the closest thing we have to a proper noun by which to label a particular being with particular attributes. Some of those particular attributes become known on holy ground. Moses learns of this God has *known of*, but now *knows* that God listens to mortals like us. God has heard the cries of the people in bondage, but not merely heard. God has *felt* their cries, “knows” their suffering. God is revealed on holy ground to be empathic, moved by mortals, especially mortals in suffering. Holy ground is a place where God makes connection with God’s creation. God listens, but God also speaks, converses even, with those who are gathered there. If Exodus has it right holy places are places where God calls those who were there into faithful and fearless service.

So these are things we might expect in a holy place. If we set the scene ourselves we might think of a place of connection, of transcendence, a place where God could speak and we could listen and vice versa. But there are some things about the holy ground upon which Moses stood that are surprising, that we likely would not include in our minds’ staging of a holy place.

If Exodus has it right then even though God reveals God’s self there, God remains in mystery. Moses was given a name for God, but that name has been subject to interpretation for millenia. We don’t even know how it was pronounced because we don’t know what the vowels were originally, but we’ve settled on Yahweh. Translated it means *something* like “I am who I am.” Perhaps that means something like what we mean when we say, “It is what it is.” It’s a final reality, something that will shape rather than be shaped by our efforts. Maybe it means that God is our ultimate reality by which all things are shaped. Or maybe it doesn’t. Even in self-revelation God is mysterious. Holy ground may be a place of clarity, but it is sometimes a place of an ounce of clarity when we’re looking for the full pound. Does that seem familiar at all? When events and circumstances around you help you see better than ever what God is for or what God is opposed to or what God might have for us to do, but the fullness of who God is and how one serves God faithfully is still so far beyond our grasp? Does that kind of place seem familiar to you? It’s possible you’ve visited holy ground.

You wouldn’t think it, but holy ground is a place of argument. God calls Moses into action, Moses says, “I’m not your guy.” God says, “This is the way it should happen,” Moses says, “That’s never going to happen.” I think that may be why, at this critical juncture, God called Moses onto holy ground in a solitary place. One could only imagine what might happen if there were more than one person at that holy place to disagree with the way God sees it. Soon enough there would be disagreements about how to disagree with God. Conflict is a characteristic of holy ground. Sound familiar? It’s possible you’ve been there.

Holy ground, quite contrary to that depiction thereof that I saw, is a place of agitation. The conflict between human and the divine sparked off when God got Moses’s attention by burning a bush. The aura of the place is more like the depiction I saw of hell – flaming, abrasive. If God’s call were to be followed that would put Moses before the highest power in his land saying the kinds of things that do more than spark arguments, the kinds of things that could change or end his life; the kinds of things that could escalate a conflict from the local to the national; the kinds of things have a tremendous down side and the upside is wondering in the desert for 40 years! No, it wasn’t the fire of hell, it was the fire of God, sometimes just as frightening and agitating, but somehow not incinerating. You ever get a sense that the nagging feeling that you have to be involved in the work of liberation and justice might eventually burn out? You ever think if you just look away from the news, ignore the events around you that eventually it’ll run out of fuel and the protesting and the calls for change and calls for liberation will just burn out? That’s the thing about the call of God from holy ground: it agitates and it’ll never burn out. Sound familiar? You may have been there before.

Yes, if Exodus has it right, holy ground is a place where God speaks and where God listens and where God calls, where God responds to the plight of the suffering, where human and divine connect through God’s own empathy, where the divine arrives with particular clarity. But holy places are also places of confusion, and conflict, and resistance to God’s call. Holy places aren’t always calm, peaceful locales. The fires that burn there just keep burning until they are heeded, heard, and followed.

Does any of this sound familiar? If it does, it’s possible you’ve been to holy ground before. It’s possible you’re standing on holy ground right now. And if we are, what do we do about it? Moses’s perfectly imperfect

response might be a good model. He uttered one word to begin with. It's translated into three words in English. When Moses found himself on holy ground and experiencing the call of God he said, "Here am I."  
Amen.