

You Are Standing on Holy Ground

Exodus 3: 1-6

September 12, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Yesterday we commemorated the 20th anniversary of Nine Eleven; that day 20 years ago when terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and flew them into the Pentagon, the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and the fourth plane was destined for Washington DC – the exact target unknown because brave passengers overtook the terrorists and crashed the plane into a field in Pennsylvania. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on that morning of September 11, 2001 when the news broke about these tragedies? I can still remember the terror and confusion which gripped our nation on that day. It was indeed a day when a systemic shift occurred in our American perspective of global realities.

I read a story a few years ago about the Survivor Tree. Almost a month after the 9/11 attacks, a survivor was found in the ruins. A lone tree which had been buried in the rubble of what was the courtyard/plaza in front of the Twin

Towers. Extensively damaged with its roots and limbs snapped and its trunk blackened and burned, rescue and recovery workers pulled a Callery pear tree from the rubble. The tree was placed in the care of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and was nursed back to health. In 2010 the tree was taken and replanted at the 9/11 Memorial Site. Today it is known as the Survivor Tree and it stands next to the South Pool as a living reminder of resilience, survival and hope. In 2013 a program – the Survivor Tree Seedling Program – was established and each year seedlings from the Survivor Tree are sent to communities around the country which have been deeply wounded by some tragedy – communities impacted by mass shootings, hurricanes, wildfires. Each of the communities faced the unimaginable but the seedlings are sent as a reminder that healing is possible with time, hope and unity.

A few weeks ago, I pulled a book off my shelf to re-read – my mother gave me this book not long before she died. It is a book written by Barbara Brown Taylor – my mother and I shared a love of her writings – entitled “An Altar in the World.” When Barbara Brown Taylor left professional ministry as an Episcopal priest to serve as a Religion Professor at Piedmont University in North Georgia, she was anxious about where she would experience God if not in worship in a

sanctuary each Sunday. She began to pay attention to all the places outside the church walls where God draws near to us – where we might experience God’s altar in the world. One of my favorite quotes in the introduction is “Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. It is gained by practicing what is right.” I would like to take that insight one step further. Our faith is not simply in knowing God, but we come to know God, experience God, by practicing our faith. This is a lesson I have gleaned - or been reminded of during our Covid19 experience – that faith is a way of life not just what you believe and certainly not contained within the walls of a church building. For the next several weeks, we will explore in worship, those foundational truths about God when we practice, “put feet” to, our faith. We will explore what it means to practice kindness, generosity, humility, forgiveness. Today we will consider the practice of “paying attention” to God’s presence in the world. I like the word “practice” because it is a verb which is open-ended; never finished or accomplished. And what better biblical story to consider this practice of paying attention to God than Moses’ encounter of God in a burning bush.

As this morning’s story begins, you will remember, Moses is a fugitive from justice. He has killed a man in Egypt - one of the Pharaoh’s taskmasters, who was

beating a Hebrew slave. Forced to flee from Egypt in order to save his life from an irate Pharaoh, Moses flees some two hundred miles across the Sinai Peninsula to the land of Midian, where he has married a Midianite woman and plans, presumably, to hide himself for the rest of his life. It is a comfortable exile. He has everything he wants, including a wife and a son, and his father-in-law Jethro, who is a well-to-do priest with plenty of land and livestock. Moses goes to work for Jethro and he adjusts to the peaceful, country living. Gradually his bad memories of Egypt fade.

And this is where our story picks up.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Exodus 3: 1-6

As the story goes, one day Moses is tending Jethro's flock in the desert country around Mount Horeb, which by the way means "wasteland". Moses is in the wilderness or wasteland – literally, but also, maybe spiritually. It is here – in this wasteland – that God will choose to encounter Moses. Not in a Temple or some religious event; but in the wasteland. God is the initiator of this encounter!

Moses seems to be minding his own business, going about his daily, ordinary tasks, when he sees a bush out in the middle of nowhere, burning for all its worth. Moses does not seem to be frightened by this freak of nature. Rather, curious, he considers the possibilities: a bolt of wayward lightning? Spontaneous combustion? Perhaps one of the sheep's hooves struck a flint. Or maybe it only looks like it is burning: it could be some kind of fake, rigged up with foil and red lights, some Midianite's idea of a joke. But no, he can smell it and he can see the column of heat rising into the air above the bush. The odd thing is that it does not quit; as long as Moses stands there watching it, he never sees a single twig turn to ash. Glowing like a coal beneath the flames, the bush is not diminished, and finally, his curiosity getting the better of him, Moses has to take a closer look. Something extraordinary seems to be occurring within what appears to be an ordinary bush.

When the Lord sees that Moses has turned aside to look, really look, practice paying attention to the miracle right under his nose, then and only then does the Lord speak to him out of the bush, calling him by name and telling him to take off his shoes. Watch out – curiosity may lead to call. Slipping his shoes off, Moses listens as the Lord identifies himself. He is not one of the local, lesser

gods; he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses' ancestors. He identifies himself by his relationship to those people – Moses' folks - and his history with them. God has heard them crying- has witnessed their oppression and God has seen how badly they have been treated in Egypt. And now God wants Moses to do something about it - arrange for their escape from the injustice and cruelty of slavery.

Standing on holy ground. Paying attention. Moses has encountered God in a way that will change his life forever. Before, he was a young man running from the consequences of his actions in Egypt and now God is sending him back to the very place of the conflict/the tragedy/the crime. A place where Moses will lead his people through redemption to a new land of God's own choosing. What Moses comes to understand is that the divine could erupt where and when we do not choose, but of God's own choosing. Barbara Brown Taylor says: "The divine can happen while I am busy doing something else. I do nothing to make it happen. And all I can do is respond. I can stop what I am doing long enough to see where I am, who I am there with and how awesome this place is." It is called "reverence". Knowing that you are standing on holy ground.

I've never seen a burning bush. But I can remember a late summer evening

some years ago when my father invited us to grab a flashlight and follow him to an open field around the corner from our North Georgia mountain home. We all knew that it had been an old corn field which had long since been harvested. What in the world could my father possibly be wanting to show us? We thought he was a bit off his rocker and there were other things on our schedule, our plan for the evening. But we followed, curious. When we arrived at the field, he instructed us to turn off our flashlights and look. We were greeted by thousands of fireflies hovering and blinking just above the ground. It was an incredibly beautiful sight. We all, adults, children, grandchildren, were mesmerized. God was surely in that place as we stood silent, connecting with each other and with the glorious sight before us. To this day, my children and grandchildren refer to the event often as the Night of the Fireflies. We've tried to revisit the fireflies but with no success.

Reverence requires a willingness to take detours, even side trips, which are not part of the original plan. It is a time out. To turn aside. And see, really see God in the people and places around us. Reverence can also heal. And Moses decides he can wait a minute. God cries out to Moses. God warns Moses to come no closer but to remove his shoes. To recognize that he is experiencing the

sacramental in the bush. We are taught in seminary that Sacraments are an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection. Like a burning bush. Like bread and cup. The practice of paying attention is as simple as looking twice at the people and things you might just as easily ignore.

Holy Ground. Paying attention. Practicing reverence and encountering God in the world. That was how Moses began his journey.