

## **HOLY GROUND**

**Scripture Readings:** Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

**Texts:** Exodus 3:4-10; Romans 12:12-18

Alex Jones—not the former Indianapolis Colt—but the British filmmaker living in Shanghai, China decided to go barefoot for a year. He found challenges ranging from the blistering heat (especially on blacktop roads) in Shanghai to a film shoot in Norway during the winter. What he discovered is that when walking barefoot outside, he became more sensitive to the world around him while also finding himself looking down a lot (especially in urban settings.) Bare feet bring us to a different connection to the world and also create vulnerability. When we walk with bare feet, perhaps we begin to connect with this story about Moses.

Moses had been born during a time of oppression in Egypt. Four centuries had passed since Joseph brought his family to Egypt; during that time the “Israelites” had grown into a huge community. The Pharaoh saw this “foreign” community as a threat to the Egyptians so he responded with slavery, oppression, and finally genocide. He ordered two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah to kill Hebrew male babies when they were born; of course, Shiphrah and Puah resisted the order. When the Pharaoh wanted to know why Hebrew baby boys were surviving, the two midwives relied on stereotypes to cover their disobedience. The Pharaoh resorted, then, to infanticide by ordering his soldiers to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile.

One Levite woman hid her baby for three months and when he grew too large, she constructed a water proof basket. With a bit of irony, she gave him to the river by placing him in the basket and hiding it among the reeds. Her older daughter hid nearby to watch. The Pharaoh’s daughter came with her maids to bathe in the river only to discover the baby boy. When it became obvious that the princess would not kill the boy, the boy’s sister came and offered her mother as a wet nurse. When the boy was weaned, he was returned to the princess and she adopted him by naming him Moses (which means drawn out of the river.)

After Moses is grown, he sees an act of oppression by an Egyptian against a Hebrew slave; in a fit of anger, Moses murders the Egyptian and hides the body. The next day, when a Hebrew wonders if Moses is going to murder him, Moses runs away and becomes a fugitive.

In Midian, Moses comes to a well and rescues the seven daughters of Reuel—a priest—from other shepherds who were bullying them. When they get home early, Reuel wonders why and they tell him the story to which he urges them to fetch this man home. That’s how Moses ends up marrying Zipporah, one of Reuel’s daughters, and working for Reuel as a shepherd.

Back in Egypt, the Pharaoh dies and a new one replaces him; the new one also oppresses the “Israelites”, so much so that the “Israelites” call out to God. The storyteller tells us that God remembers the covenant made with the patriarchs, and looks upon the “Israelites” and understands.

So when Moses brings his sheep to the holy mountain, God attracts his attention with a burning bush that is not consumed. When Moses comes near the bush, God calls out to him and tells him to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground. I would imagine that shoes are important to Moses as a fugitive; when one is in the wilderness, one can’t run far or fast without them. So when Moses removes his shoes, he makes himself vulnerable, and at the same time he connects with God even more closely while standing on this holy ground. The unspoken question in this story is: how far does holy ground extend?

God answers the question when God tell Moses that Moses’ people suffer in Egypt; God has been moved by this suffering and calls Moses to act. God lets Moses know these people stand on holy ground and should not live in subjugation and oppression. God’s children must be released from their suffering and slavery. God sends Moses because God knows that this call falls within Moses’ wheelhouse—Moses has acted in his life to defend and protect others. God sends and Moses goes to find new holy ground.

Over the next few weeks, the lectionary readings from the Hebrew Bible will follow the story of Moses’ journey, the release of the slaves from captivity, and their journey back to the holy mountain. When Moses stands upon that holy ground once again, he will receive the Law, or better translated, the Instruction. Because the people stand on holy ground, they receive instruction on how to live holy lives. Even the most mundane task is transformed into holy activity. In every aspect of life, we can discover connection with God and we are reminded in our activity that we continue to stand on holy ground.

Paul was raised in this tradition, so he would naturally connect the idea of holy lives in relationship to Christ. Whenever we stand on holy ground, we are to connect with God by living lives of love and grace. We remember this connection by remembering that all of us dwell on holy ground. So Paul writes what he knows best; here is how

we live holy lives: we practice compassion toward all people—not just the good ones or those we feel deserve our kindness, love, and justice.

Because all ground is holy and all people dwell on it then even those we might call evil must not be responded to with evil but with love. We do not seek revenge against evil; rather we are called to feed and provide for even those we might call enemies. In Paul's mind, when we stand on holy ground we can only overcome evil with good.

Over the last couple of weeks, we experienced this new reality in at least a couple of ways.

When neo-Nazis decided to march on the Boston Commons they were countered by a crowd of nearly 20,000 people who came to respond to hate with love. Those proclaiming love and justice so outnumbered those spouting words of hate and segregation that the alt right group left. They stood on holy ground.

Over the last week, we have seen an outpouring of compassion and care for those who suffer from the flooding around Houston. People were rescued without regard to age, race, or ethnicity—the rescuers didn't even ask if the people they helped were good people. Simply they opened their arms and welcomed these souls to safety. Churches that were not flooded opened their doors to provide care and safety to those seeking holy ground. PDA was on the ground as soon as they could get there to provide further aid and I am so glad the deacons want to donate their offering for that work.

Sadly, there were some who did not respond with compassion and care at least initially—but those of hard hearts remind us that we are called to overcome evil with good. We stand on holy ground and God calls us to a new way of being.

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