

# HOLY GROUND

August 31, 2014

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary

Time

First Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28



## **Exodus 3:1-15**

Moses stands in awe before a bush that bursts into flame but is not consumed by the fire. From the bush comes a voice, calling him to lead his people out of slavery.

## **Romans 12:9-21**

Paul speaks of the radical nature of Christian love and the behavior that arises from that genuine love.

## **Matthew 16:21-28**

At this time Jesus shocks his disciples by telling them that "he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed."

Maybe you know about the woman who went out to Von Maur just to look at the new store and in the process found the most gorgeous dress. The only problem was that it was pretty pricey and it consumed several months' worth of the family budget for clothing. When her husband came home she was eager to model it and receive his approval.

Upon his arrival she slipped into the dress and asked that question that commonly doesn't ask for honesty, but rather approval. "Well, what do you think? How does it look?"

"It's lovely," he said and without additional hesitation continued with, "and how much was it?"

After she offered the price he sort of scrapped his eyebrows from the ceiling and added, "Well, as lovely as it is, you should have just have reconsidered the purchase and said, 'get behind me Satan.'"

To which she responded, "Well, I did and Satan said, 'It looks gorgeous from this side, too.'"

While in Kenya last week several of us began to develop a litmus test of sorts with a corollary question to the interrogative, "If a man is alone in the woods and no one hears him say anything is he still wrong?" The corollary is, "If a husband agrees with his wife is he still wrong?"

Those "Get behind me Satan!" words uttered in the direction of Peter by our Lord rather grab our attention as the words of scripture wash over us this morning, do they not? "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." And I think to myself, "Yes, Lord, I set my mind on human things all the time! I love the human beings you have placed them in my life, my family, my friends and those in this congregation. I enjoy many things that are quite human. Are you suggesting now that this is all wrong?"

Then our Lord moved along to say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." His expanded explanation tells us that there is an expectation that the disciples of Jesus are being asked to make sacrifices. This is

where we encounter one of the deterrents to Christian faith. Following Jesus is an honorable thing to do, but we aren't all into the idea that we will then be expected to make sacrifices of our resources, our convenience, our time and our freedom. We are asked to become humble and offer ourselves. It is a stumbling misconception of faith if we think that we can become Christians without a cross, our own cross, to carry. And when the message of love suddenly becomes intertwined with the concept that salvation without sacrifice may not be an option we feel empty that a pathetically pallid self-congratulating pride isn't sufficient.

Maybe you clipped out the same account by Lt. Commander J. P. Wilkins his life as a Navy aviator. Pilot Wilkins watched as his maintenance crew worked feverishly to repair his plane for an important mission. They declared the plane ready to fly, but on a pre-flight inspection, Commander Wilkins reached behind an equipment box and skewered his finger on an exposed safety wire. The cut bled profusely. Sticking his head out of the plane to ask for a first-aid kit, he noticed two crew members studying a small red pool beneath the aircraft. "That's my blood!" he called out. Both faces immediately brightened. "That's a relief!" one said. "We thought it was hydraulic fluid!" Far be it from them to worry that he was bleeding.

This week I have been reading through God's word, focusing more really on our Old Testament text than the gospel. In some ways we have the urgent nudging of Jesus to discipleship, a call to follow him to Jerusalem. And in the Old Testament passage we have this mysterious, burning bush call of God to Moses. In the contrast of the two for some reason I can't explain has been the haunting lyrics sung by Tevye and his wife Golde from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. I know, my mind is always making these non-sensical leaps. I don't know why.

Tevye and Golde are a deeply devout middle-aged Jewish couple. They live in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their lives are hard, but filled with devotion. A

complicating factor in their lives is that they have all daughters and finding proper matches for their girls is major theme in the musical. The setting is within a community in which marriages are arranged by the parents. This is complicated by the emerging desire of Tevye's daughters to follow their hearts and not the wishes of their parents. In other words, they fall in love with young men who are not suitable matches.

Tevye and Golde are themselves in an arranged marriage. Romantic love was not a factor in their union. But the experience of his daughters has Tevye wondering. And so he asks Golde this provocative but basic question, "Golde, do you love me?"

Startled, Golde asks, "Do I what?"

Tevye repeats that emotion-filled question, "Do you love me?"

Golde suggests that perhaps stress is getting to Tevye--that he ought to go inside and lie down. "Maybe it's indigestion," she says.

Tevye says, "Golde, I'm asking you a question . . . Do you love me?"

Golde says, "You're a fool."

Tevye says, "I know . . . But do you love me?"

Golde answers in this way: "Do I love you? For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?"

But Tevye will not let the matter drop. He reminds her that the day they met was their wedding day. And he was scared, but that his father and mother said they would learn to love each other. And now he was asking, "Golde, Do you love me?"

Golde says, "I'm your wife."

Tevye: "I know . . . But do you love me?"

It is a touching scene. Most [of us/you] who have been married for many years can relate.

This is a question that hits at the heart of Christian discipleship. Beside the Sea of Galilee Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times he asked, once for each time Simon Peter denied him. "Simon, do you love me?" And, I think it is a question that pierces not only the heart of Peter, but of each of us.

When it comes down to it, this is the most critical question anyone can answer, "Do you love him?" When Christ speaks of taking up a cross daily and following him, he is not establishing a requirement for entrance to heaven. Heaven is a given for those who believe in him. But there is a difference in believing in Jesus and loving him. He is saying this is how people will live who truly love him. They walk as he walked, they talk as he talked, and they are his presence in the world. And so I ask this day: Do you love him?

I suppose that if we loved Jesus we would have his heart, his courage, and his faith. If you are like me, then you have days when you are pleased that Jesus died on a cross in your behalf, but then, some of us studiously avoid taking up a cross of our own. Crosses are painful, dirty things. They clash with the image we are trying to develop among our peers. Those who simply believe Jesus existed want to stay as far away as possible from taking up a cross. But those who love him . . . that's a different matter all together. A cross is a necessary part of following him. Do you love him? Do you have his heart? Do you have his courage?

How will we know that God has called us to be followers and live out this sacrificial approach to human life? Surely it would be a lot plainer if there was some sort of burning bush experience! Maybe if we had an encounter like Moses, it would all fall into place.

As we read the account, Moses was on that mountain tending his father-in-law's flock when he saw the bush blazing but not burning. He

moved toward it and God spoke to him out of the bush, saying, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

That's the point at which this story starts to make me queasy, for if I'd been in Moses' sandals, I'm not so sure that I would have been convinced enough to obey. "Yeah, right, this is holy ground. Who's kidding whom here? This is just the surface of Mt. Horeb. And whatever is going on with the bush, it's liable to start throwing off burning embers at any moment, so I'm not taking off *my* sandals." And if I had responded like that, there's a good chance I would have missed an encounter with God.

Where is there Holy Ground? Is it in church? Well, yes, this has been holy space for many events that are meaningful in people's lives and those experiences have made it feel ever so holy. This week a couple came to the office door. They were from Ramsey, New Jersey and had been members here more than twenty years ago. She had worked in the Christian Education department and they were eager to see how things looked. We talked until we got to this room in which we worship and when they came inside, they became silent. It was if they had entered holy ground where children had been baptized, communion received, commitments made, hymns sung and prayers offered. You could sense how this space was for them, holy ground.

Yes, people have been here and pledged themselves to do ministry and mission in other parts of the world. Others have knelt and received affirming prayers of confirmation, and ordination and healing. But this is not the only holy ground.

\* You are taking a walk when an idea occurs to you about some change you need to make in your life.

\* You are reading a book when something you have read suddenly comes alive for you.

\* You are in the midst of an argument with a

family member and are quite angry when something clicks inside your head and you remember that you love this person with whom you are being so angry. That realization can cause the ground to shift under you, and there is suddenly a holy opportunity regarding your relationship with that person.

\* You are snowed in and unable to get to your workplace. You are frustrated because you've got so much you need to accomplish, but then it suddenly dawns on you that you have been given a gift - a day to find yourself again.

\* You are busy with the responsibilities of the day when a child asks you to read her a story.

\* You are in the midst of trouble or are depressed over the course of life, and receive one of those "I'm thinking of you" cards from a friend.

\* You go off to college, but you are not self-supporting. You may call that opportunity, but then it comes to you that your presence on campus is only possible because of financial sacrifices made by your parents and by those who set up scholarship funds.

These may not even seem religious, let alone Christian, but you may have had encounter with everyday holiness that goes beyond the ordinary, the routine, and the mundane. There is something about these experiences that, if we are alert, tells us not to let the moment slip by without giving thanks, or apologizing, or saying, "I love you" to someone, or changing our attitude, or taking an exploratory step in a direction we think God might be pushing us, or at least appreciating the moment.

Our world is seemingly filled with strange but normally unessential facts and insights. These are the quirky kind of truths that can catch you off guard when we first hear them, but are somehow legitimate enough to warrant a bit of space in our brains. For example, we're not sure when the data that coconuts kill more people every year than sharks do will come in handy. But it is good to know.

We take such inane truths and store them away, digging them out of the recesses of our cerebral cortex to rescue a struggling conversation at a dinner party or for that moment when we happen to be a contestant on *Jeopardy!* And the category is "19th century medicines now used as condiments." Good to know.

Scripture, as well, is full of "good to know" truths -- insights that are applicable even if we can't immediately find an application for us. Take the book of Proverbs for example. "Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing" (Proverbs 27:14). In other words, wait until your neighbor has showered and eaten a bagel before you shout blessings over the fence. Good to know.

Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 16 are packed full of "good to know" insights. They come at us -- no matter how many times we've studied them or preached them -- with a tone that can feel harsh when read and seems to lack context for the stark picture they paint. After all, prior to this moment the picture Matthew paints has been largely positive for Jesus and his followers.

*Jesus doesn't need us to protect him or defend him, but to follow him. We're his disciples, not members of his entourage.* In an entourage, there's the star at the center, the one around whom all the others orbit and who live off of his or her awesomeness. Part of the job then is to protect the shine of the star, to help her or him perpetually look good and in doing so to protect the glow that you get to live in. This is, in essence, what Peter's attempting to do in his famous attempt at talking Jesus out of the cross in verse 22. He assumes there must be a better, shinier path for his man, Jesus -- and therefore the rest of the entourage to travel. But Jesus reminds Peter, and us, that our task is not to protect Jesus, but to follow him. Good to know.

*To "find" ourselves, we must be willing to "lose" ourselves.* This is also very good to know.

*There will be a reward in the end even when Christ returns.* See verse 27. This is good to know. Sure, we're not told what the vindication will be for those who die to self through faith in Christ but there *will be* vindication. Will it be some kind of parade around the pearly gates? Will it be a monetary prize? If so, what currency will be used in the new creation? Euros? Dollars? Bitcoins? The lack of detail would be bothersome if Jesus hadn't proven himself so trustworthy.

The world we live in is filled with strange and painfully obvious information. For example, dumbwarnings.com is a website that compiles the world's dumbest warning labels found on everyday products. For the warning on a bottle of Bayer Aspirin that says, "Do not take if allergic to aspirin." And while these may be obvious to most sober individuals, the sad fact is that the only reason such warnings are placed on products in the first place is because someone, somewhere, wasn't wise.

A regulation golf ball has 336 dimples. John Lennon's first girlfriend was named Thelma Pickles. The plastic bag in which you brought home your groceries is not normally not a toy. This is information that might be helpful and when the dinner conversation drags, maybe you

can blurt out some tidbit of trivia that will make things more lively like "Jimmy Carter was the first U.S. president to be born in a hospital." All things that are good to know for the next time you are on a quiz show.

Do you love me?

Tevye, good-hearted Jewish man that he is asked it of Golde, "Do you love me?" And as the scene fades she says that she does they sing together, "It may not change a thing . . . But even so . . . After twenty-five years . . . It's nice to know."

It is the question for us, "Do you love me." For it leads to will you go for me? Will you carry my message? Will you be my disciple? Will you show my compassion? As we embrace the Master's heart, his courage, his confidence – even so after a single day, it's nice to show for it's nice to know that this God is like no other. This God loves me and loves you as if there were no other. This God made the earth and can make all ground holy, the rocky soil in which you struggle to plant flowers, the red clay found in western Kenya, the turf on Oak Hill's 18<sup>th</sup> green, and the sand along the shore in Irondequoit. It is all holy ground and made especially so when we have experienced God's call to be his agents of change and love on it. It's nice to know.

## OTHER THOUGHTS AND IDEAS FOR THIS SERMON

**The Moses Principle.** Moses has had a remarkable life, going back to when he was an infant bobbing in a basket on the river Nile. He obviously showed promise as a lad in the pharaoh's court, and he wasn't afraid to act on behalf of his people. When an Egyptian abused one of his countrymen, he killed him and buried the body in the sand. Unfortunately, there were eyewitnesses to the murder and Moses took decisive action. He flees for his life. And so, decades later, we find him living as a shepherd. He wanders to the "mountain of God," Horeb, or Sinai where someday he will return as the leader of his people. But right now, at the Burning Bush we see one of the qualities that made Moses such a great leader: Impertinence. Or, call it Audacity. Chutzpah. He was not afraid to ask questions. Don't laugh. Think about it. We have a bush that won't burn. It's so extraordinary that Moses stops to investigate. We have the voice of Almighty God coming from the bush. Moses *knows* it is Yahweh. He "hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (v. 6). And yet, when God gives Moses his assignment, one that will get him out of the wilderness and back among his own people, Moses starts to argue: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" (v. 11). Who am I that I should "bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (v. 11). God answers. But Moses won't stop: "If I

come to the Israelites ..." (v. 13), and he goes on to say that he doesn't know what he will say when the Israelites ask him who sent him. God has an answer for this, too. Can you believe how Moses is giving God a hard time about this? This is GOD! Dude! Shut your mouth and do what God says! How can you even think about arguing with GOD!? But he does. So what do our conversations with God sound like? Perhaps the next one might be, "God, why am I not clear about what you want ME to do? Give me something to do? What is it?" Or perhaps, "God, I am really not too happy with this assignment. Could you move me to California instead?" Or perhaps, "God, things are not working out the way I thought they would. Where have you been? I thought you were going to be with me!"

**Holy Sights.** Do you remember that November when President Barack Obama stopped in India? One of the places he did not visit there was the Golden Temple, one of India's most popular tourist attractions (seen here in the artwork on this page and the PowerPoint slides). In one sense, it seemed like an ideal location for a world leader to make an appearance. Although it's the spiritual center of the Sikh religion, Indians of all faiths revere the Golden Temple. It's a cherished emblem of India's religious diversity, and some other world leaders have visited the site.

But there was a problem. According to Sikh tradition, all who enter the temple must remove their shoes and cover their heads, and it can't be with just a hat or a cap. Men must tie a piece of cloth on their heads because the act of tying has spiritual significance for Sikhs. Most Sikh men wear turbans. For Mr. Obama, the shoe removal wasn't a problem, but wearing anything resembling a turban would likely feed the false but persistent rumors that he is secretly a Muslim. The Sikh religion is different from Islam, but many Westerners confuse the two. So though a visit to the Golden Temple was considered for the president, it was not put on his itinerary.

The requirement for a head covering and shoe removal is to mark the sacredness of the temple, and similar practices are maintained for the houses of worship for some other faiths as well. If you tour Eastern Europe, you'll find centuries-old Orthodox cathedrals and churches, which are both popular tourist attractions and sacred places. The specifics of what attire is acceptable vary - in Orthodox churches men must *not* have their heads covered, but in some, women must. Men must also wear long pants and keep their hands out of their pockets, while women need long skirts or pants and a shirt with sleeves. Some cathedrals even post security officers at their doors to prevent anyone from entering whose sartorial choices are off-code. Sometimes there are specific conduct requirements as well. For example, visitors to Buddhist temples must always walk around in a clockwise direction and feet must never be pointed toward the altar or an image of the Buddha. And in many temples and churches, photography is prohibited.

But whether it's heads covered or uncovered, shoes on or off, some other dress or behavior requirement, the principle is the same: The holiness of the space is to be shown respect by adherence to dress and conduct codes.

That's not difficult to understand, and most of us would cooperate with such rules when visiting places that others have designated as holy. It's not as clear that we would recognize the holiness in some other locations that have not been so designated - such as the site of the burning bush on Mt. Horeb.

As the story goes, Moses was on that mountain tending his father-in-law's flock when he saw the bush blazing but not burning up. As he moved toward it, God spoke to him out of the bush, saying, "Come now closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

That's the point at which this story starts to make some of us queasy, for if we'd been in Moses' sandals, would we have been convinced enough to obey? Some of us might have thought, "Yeah, right, this is holy ground. Who's kidding whom here? This is just the surface of Mt. Horeb. And whatever is going on with the bush, it's liable to start throwing off burning embers at any moment, so I'm not taking *my* sandals off." And if we'd responded like that, there's a good chance we'd have missed an encounter with God.

There's this guy we know - let's call him Rick - and he says that he may have already done that - missed an encounter with God. He attended a worship service where the preacher was talking about his personal conversion to Christ. In telling that story, the preacher got a little weepy. As soon as he did, Rick lost the thread of the sermon by wondering if the preacher had the words "weep here" written in the margin of his sermon notes as a theatrical cue. They might have been on holy ground, and there might have been something important that God wanted Rick to hear from that sermon, but if so, he missed it because he had the shoes of skepticism securely laced on his feet.

**Lyrics** from "Good to know" (by Jason Walker and Francesa Battistelli)

I'm covered by your love  
It's good to know, it's good to see that you won't change  
'Cause when it's said and done you'll always be enough  
To know that I can always come back home  
To know that you will never let me go

It's good to know, it's good to know  
It's good to know, it's good to know

--metrolyrics.com. Retrieved March 10, 2014.

**Closer Look at the Text.** The revelation of the proper name of the God of Israel to Moses at the burning bush, in today's reading, is not the first revelation of the deity in the Bible (God appears to Abraham more than once in Genesis, among other revelations), but it is certainly one of the best known. It is part of the story of Moses' commissioning (Exodus 3:1-4:17) which is, itself, part of the cycle of stories attached to Israel's greatest religious figure. The life and trials of Moses provide the organizing framework for much of the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. His birth and childhood, well known to contemporary readers through children's stories, take up a mere 10 verses in Exodus 2 (vv. 1-10). As is true for most narratives about biblical figures, Moses' adulthood makes up the vast majority of stories about him. Only two incidents - Moses' killing of an Egyptian taskmaster (Exodus 2:11-15a) and his marriage into the Midianite family of the priest Reuel (2:15b-22, named Jethro in our story and Hobab in Numbers 10:29) - precede his commissioning as the agent of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The variations of the name of Moses' father-in-law is one of the several indicators that the canonical version of the story of Moses' life has been derived from a variety of oral (and perhaps written) sources.

Moses, described by Reuel's daughters in 2:19 as "an Egyptian," bears an Egyptian name (cf. Thutmose, "Thoth Is Born"), explained in a folk etymology in 2:10 as his having been drawn (Hebrew *mashah*) from the waters of the Nile (his name in Hebrew is *mosheh*). Neither his speech, dress nor physical appearance suggested to his Midianite (or Kenite, according to Joshua 4:11) family his Hebrew origins, and today's narrative makes clear that he was not originally a worshiper of the God of the Hebrews.

The passage opens with a Hebrew grammatical construction, lost in the NRSV (but noted in some study Bible notes), that indicates that Moses' commissioning occurred contemporaneously with the preceding

events (the crying out of the Israelites to be delivered from slavery, 2:23-25). The effect is to say, "God took notice of the Israelites in this way: Moses was keeping the flock. . ." (2:25b-3:1). Moses' occupation as a shepherd (3:1) foreshadows his role as the pre-eminent earthly shepherd of the chosen people. Transhumant nomadism (or nomadic pastoralism), the seasonal shepherding of herds from depleted pasturage to fresh food supplies and shelter, was the traditional *modus vivendi* of the Israelites prior to their sedentization in the city-states of Canaan (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5, "A wandering Aramaean was my ancestor. . ."). This traditional view only partially comports with the philological identification of the name "Hebrew" with the *Hap/biru*, depicted in sources from the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. as, at least in part, brigands.

The mountain to which Moses led his father-in-law's flock was, quite literally, out back of beyond (the Hebrew of 3:1 says "behind the wilderness," i.e., a location even more remote than the wilderness itself). Horeb is one of the names for Sinai, and has been identified as a term favored by the Elohist and Deuteronomic Pentateuchal sources. The phrase "the mountain of God" is an anachronism, indicating the perspective of a writer for whom Horeb's status as a spiritually liminal place had already been long recognized. The same perspective is indicated by the use of the definite article in verse 2 to identify the bush; "the bush" (NRSV's "a bush") clearly shows that the bush was known to the writer's contemporaries as a sacred object.

There is no significant difference between an "angel of the LORD" and the LORD himself (v. 2), and fire was a common accompaniment of the divine presence (e.g., Genesis 15:17; Judges 13:20).

The Hebrew word translated bush, *seneh*, is rare, occurring only here and at Deuteronomy 33:16. The root is assonant with the name of the mountain, Sinai.

The command for Moses to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground is found almost verbatim also at Joshua 5:15 (which includes the note, not said of Moses in our passage, that "Joshua did so"). The verse indicates that the sacred nature of the ground predates Moses' encounter there with the divine.

The deity identifies himself (and the God of the OT is depicted in overwhelmingly male imagery) first as "the God of your father" (v. 6), probably not referring to Moses' biological father but to the patriarchal deity, i.e., "the God of Abraham, etc." The construction, with the singular "father" rather than the plural "fathers" (as in vv. 13, 15) is uncommon (occurring six times *simpliciter* and twice referring to a biological father; the form here was amended by various ancient versions and in its quotation in Acts 7:32). The most ancient deity worshiped by the Hebrew people, El, was a kinship deity, whose intrinsic identity provided the essential theological identity of his devotees: They were his kin (people) and kin to one another.

The deity explains his presence in the burning bush as the result of his having "come down" to deliver the Israelites from their Egyptian taskmasters (v. 8), reflecting the three-storied cosmology of the Bible (underworld, flat earth, heavenly abode of the gods above the blue sky).

The promise of a land "flowing with milk and honey" (v. 8) uses a cliché for Israel that appears here for the first time. It will recur nearly two dozen more times (cf. the poetic variation in Job 20:17, "flowing with honey and curds"). The expression denotes fertility and abundance (the milk from healthy herds), as well as luxuriance (honey being something of a luxury item in the ancient world).

The divine name revealed to Moses is deliberately enigmatic. It is based on the verbal root *hayah*, "to be," and the Medieval vocalization of the Hebrew consonants *yhw* was meant to discourage pronouncing the



proper name of Israel's god, which was probably Yahweh. The initial response to Moses - *`ehyeh `asher `ehyeh* – can be translated as "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be," or "I cause to be what I cause to be." The name Jehovah, devised during the Renaissance, is an artificial Christian form occasionally used in the Authorized Version (e.g., Exodus 6:3; Psalm 83:18; Isaiah 12:2) and regularly in revisions of it. Biblical scholars have generally avoided it (but cf. the *Commentary on Genesis* by S. R. Driver [1903, 1920], e.g., p. xi, and the comments of B. S. Childs on the New English Bible in his *Commentary on Exodus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974], p. 50; compare Driver's *Excursus I*, "The Names of God in Genesis," pp. 402-409, esp. p. 407 n. 1). In modern editions of the Bible, the Tetragrammaton YHWH is represented by "the LORD" in small capital letters (as distinct from "the Lord" in upper and lower case, which translates the common Hebrew noun *adon*).

From this point on in the OT, the name revealed to Moses will be used, with relatively infrequent exceptions, to denote the God of Israel.