

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 30, 2020 (Proper 17A)

This morning, I'm going to ask you to do something a bit unusual. I'm inviting you, right now, to take off your shoes. Now, I realize some of you aren't even wearing shoes. That's one of the advantages of online church, right? But I want you to go ahead and take off your shoes, your bunny slippers, your flip flops, your clogs, whatever you may happen to be wearing on your feet. And stand up. Yes, get up off the couch or the bed or wherever you tune in from and stand up.

And know that wherever you are at this very moment, you are standing on holy ground. It is ground — or floor or carpet or grass — that has been blessed by God. Just as Moses was standing on holy ground when he came across that burning bush, so are you standing on holy ground right now.

And I think this is so important to remember, especially at this time when we can't be in those places that we traditionally set apart as holy. Like churches. You can sit down now, by the way. Unless you prefer to keep standing. Again, one of the advantages of online church is you get to choose your favorite posture for worship. You can sit or stand or kneel or lounge. God's good with all of it.

So what does it mean to stand on holy ground? The word "holy" simply means set apart. Something or someone or someplace is holy when it has been set apart by or for God. So the holy ground in this story of the burning bush is a place set apart by God specifically for this encounter with Moses. And as such Moses is commanded to treat it with respect — which is what the whole removing of the sandals thing is all about.

One of the reasons humans, throughout the entire arc of history, have built houses of worship is quite practical. Churches and temples are gathering places for the faithful. But there's also something that transcends the mere practical. Our churches aren't just warehouses of holiness. They are places of beauty that draw the eye toward the divine. Stained glass windows catch the sunlight in ways that make the heart soar. Stonework and flying buttresses point toward the stability and solid nature of God. Carved woodwork demonstrates the skill with which humans have been endowed. Good acoustics allow us to hear sacred music in ways that deeply touch our souls.

Your home may not have stained glass windows or statues of saints or uncomfortable pews. But that doesn't make the space in which you daily live and move and have your being any less holy. You are standing or sitting or lounging on holy ground. Because, as this pandemic has made so abundantly clear, God doesn't dwell exclusively inside churches. Your home, if you treat it as such, is a house of worship in a very real and tangible way.

One of the amazing realizations of a life of faith is that, because this entire world has been created and set apart by God, there is literally no place you can go that is not holy. Jesus entered the world as God in human form and in so doing, sanctified the whole earth. Which is why you can worship God at church or in your bedroom or on a mountain. It is all holy ground.

Now, I know this holy ground we're standing on feels particularly shaky these days. It's been a tough week. Between hurricanes and wildfires and civil unrest and the shooting of yet another unarmed black man, and deep political division, not to mention an ongoing pandemic and all the inherent uncertainty

that goes with it, this holy ground feels as if it's moving under our very feet. And not just a slight tremor but an earthquake. It's hard not to feel fearful and helpless and hopeless as the emotional and spiritual ground trembles beneath us.

But I'm pretty sure Moses felt the same way in the days leading up to this encounter with God. Remember Moses didn't start out as *Moses*. We know him as the greatest figure of the Hebrew Bible. The one who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt; the one who parted the Red Sea; the one who received the 10 Commandments up on Mount Sinai. Basically, we know him as Charlton Heston.

But before the burning bush, before the major motion pictures, Moses was just a regular guy. A guy who had fled Pharaoh's reach, got married, had a child, and was tending his father-in-law's flocks. He didn't even have his own sheep! *That's* the Moses we meet this morning. A poor, hesitant, kind but rather inarticulate shepherd who can't imagine what God wants with him.

In fact, he wasn't even looking for God as he wandered the wilderness with that flock. But God sought him out. God reached out and grabbed his attention. Through the burning bush, God speaks to Moses, telling him to go down and set his people free. And Moses' first response is "Who am I?" "Who am I to go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Why would you choose *me* for such a daunting task? Surely, there must be some mistake.

But this was no accidental encounter; no case of mistaken identity. God sought Moses out. And God seeks you out, wherever you are and wherever you go and wherever you may be. However inadequate you may feel to answer God's call, God has faith in you. And just as it's important to remember that we're all standing on holy ground, it's also important to recognize that we often fall into this same unworthiness trap. Who am I to make a difference in the world? Who am I to serve God in this community? Who am I to heed the call to love and serve the Lord?

But if the events of this week show us anything, it's that God is calling upon you to make a difference in the world. It may not be to part the Red Sea but we can all help move people from bondage into freedom. By loosing the bonds of emotional anguish or spiritual pain, especially during difficult or heartbreaking moments, we can make a difference in the lives of those around us.

The message of holy ground isn't to build a wall around it and claim it as our own private haven. It is to share the ideal of holiness with others. To invite friends and strangers alike to walk with us upon the life-giving ground that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. To point out the often surprising ways in which God is revealed in our midst. The message of holy ground is one of invitation and welcome; it's a message that unites and encourages; a reminder that when some among us are suffering, we all suffer.

Wherever you are, whatever your situation, remember that you are standing on holy ground. Incorporate that holiness in your life. Share that holiness with others. And be that holiness in the world.