



“Communing with the Divine”

a sermon by

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Our scripture reading comes from Exodus 3:1-12. The first 2 chapters of Exodus introduce us to Moses- a Hebrew that had been adopted and raised by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses fled to Midian to escape the wrath of the king of Egypt, who sought his life for killing an Egyptian. There he was married and had a child. Though the king of Egypt soon died, the plight of the Hebrews continued, and their cries reached God's ears and God remembered His covenant with the people. Here begins our text.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" and he said "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who send you; when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God

As you have been going about your business this morning, be it settling in to work, jumping in to tasks at home or for family, checking voicemail, negotiating piles of paperwork, anticipating work to be done, thinking of people you hope to encounter or avoid in your day, I would venture to guess that the farthest feeling place on earth was anywhere that any reasonable person would consider holy. Working in the church, even I feel this way- no matter how much some pastors would love for you to think, regardless of how much they may themselves believe it, even the minister's office doesn't glow with the energy of sanctified space. This feeling of distance from the divine would almost certainly characterize Moses' sentiments in our passage- tending his father-in-law's sheep, those smelly bovine creatures that aren't exactly known for their witty conversation or depth of spiritual insight, Moses guides them to the wilderness- far from his center-city church, well out of earshot of the temple priests' sung prayers, and where his minister's words from Sunday couldn't seem farther away. He is out in this wilderness going about his day when suddenly he finds that he has stumbled upon holy ground.

It was not that Moses passed over any special invisible dividing line it was that this ordinary land was transformed by God's presence, was made holy by God's use of the space for something special<sup>1</sup>, for on this ground God would speak to Moses and to change Moses' life and

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Interpretation Bible Commentary: Exodus*, New York, John Knox

the life of his people forever. God calls Moses in the first episode of its kind in the Bible and shares what would appear to be good news for Moses: 'I have heard the cry of your people and have come down from my throne to deliver them out of the hands of the oppressors and into the land of milk and honey.' God announced this news to the right man- Moses was passionate about his people, even killed for his people in an effort to fight against the abuses they endured and now, finally, there is a word of hope for a people that have struggled since their birth. This ground on which Moses now stood was risen from obscurity to a place of prominence, a place where God revealed himself, where God planned to do great things. For Moses, up to this point communing with the divine meant fear and wonder, seeing the extraordinary, he hides his face, removes his sandals, jumps at God's voice "here I am!" He does not recognize this ground as holy ground, but he recognizes the holy within it, and he knows that this changes everything. This commands reverence, respect, humility and wonder.

And then God throws him for a loop- Moses is clearly on board with God's liberation of his chosen people when a sobering phrase comes from God's holy mouth: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Ah, excuse me? What? Because for a second there, God, I thought you said you were going to send *me*- that's a good one. Now seriously, what are you doing in that bush? Poor Moses, because now communing with the divine, stumbling onto holy ground, is not only an experience of mystery, of awe, requiring prostration to be sure, but now is also a source of danger as well. A place that not only requires submission but demands action. For Moses, fear in the presence of God is not new, fear was there from the start, Moses new if he looked at God's face he would be struck dead, but there is now introduced a tangible, living breathing, confront the man that beats your people into servitude kind of fear. In one breath, God's agency becomes human responsibility and Moses' "here I am" is transformed into "who am I?" "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Sure, God promises to be with Moses and tells him that he will send Moses a sign of his presence...*after* he has brought the people out of Egypt. Is it any wonder then that the text goes on to show Moses giving a list of lousy excuses as to why he cannot go until finally, after an entire chapter of Moses running every possible scenario of failure before God and God consenting to give Moses a helper, does Moses go forth in his call comforted and assured of God's promise and his presence. When we are caught off guard by God's call, when we suddenly find ourselves on holy ground, sometimes fear and trembling is all we are immediately capable of.

It was reported<sup>2</sup> that a fistfight broke out among Greek Orthodox and Franciscan priests at Christianity's holiest shrine in Jerusalem this week. The clergymen started brawling over whether a door at the church should be open or closed and the squabble had to be broken up by club-wielding Israeli riot police. There are Holy sites and lands to be sure, but those holy places are filled with our humanity as well. And as Moses can attest, there are times when that which seems the most human and mundane can be filled with the presence of the divine. We have funny ideas about what it takes to consecrate space these days- I didn't have the heart to tell you last week, but I saw my first display of artificial Christmas trees at a department store that shall

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Press, 1991, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>*The Week*, Oct. 8, 2004, vol. 4, Issue 177, p.6

remain nameless the other day. But inviting God and God's call into our lives does not require a special ritual or set of circumstances. The joy of Christ can no more be kindled within us by a Christmas tree in October than Pharaoh's heart can be softened to the Israelites by the simple request of a Hebrew refugee. What Moses finally perceived, what led him to take on perhaps one of the most daunting tasks in human history, was God's promise of his presence, not just in a flame that does not consume, not just in a temple with high priests, but in God's own intimate watchfulness, participation, and provision, "I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, I come down to deliver them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." In short Moses, after much protest, accepts God's seemingly impossible call because of Emmanuel- God with us. God interjects his Word into the ordinary, he requests the extraordinary, and what is carried out by his faithful disciple changes our understanding of our relationship with God- indeed changes the world- forever.

Some traditions create a sacred space by drawing a red circle around a stone in a metaphor for mystery that is present in everyday tasks. Other traditions seek out the most beautiful spot in nature and call it sacred. When Christ died on the cross the temple curtain, denying the people access to the holiest of holies and shielding God from our humanity was torn in half, the boundary dividing divine and common was breached, and the chasm of sin and death separating us from God was bridged forever so that we might freely claim God's call for our lives without fear of abandonment, no matter how terrible the oppressor, how daunting the task, or how broken the sinner. For in Christ God enters our messy and imperfect world, he observed our lives, heard our cry, came down to deliver us to freedom. And now God commissions us with the wonderful and terrifying task of proclaiming this good news to those who are bound by grief, or fear, or poverty, or success, or hate that they too might be liberated to the land of milk and honey that our joy in life in Jesus Christ.

Author Suzanne Guthrie writes about the ways God's presence transforms even the most unexpected spaces using the example that the God of the church is also the god of the sterile and often fearful hospital corridor.<sup>3</sup> The God of life and health is also the God of sickness and dying. When I was serving as a hospital chaplain this was particularly meaningful to me. But now, literally in the middle of corporate America I cannot help but rework her thoughts in my own mind for our context here today. So as we gather together in this space to preserve our sense of the holy mid-week, to reconnect with our belief- our knowledge- that the God who calls us to all tasks is also the God that is profoundly with us in Jesus Christ, as we strive to keep our eyes open to the possibility that we tread each day on holy ground, let us approach this communion table in full assurance that the God of quiet sanctuary and stained glass window is also God of glass tower, cramped cubicle, and homeless shelter. The God of bread and cup is also God of empty stomach and parched spirit. The God of table and font is also God of wireless network and broken copier. The God of communion fellowship is also God of broken hearts and injured relationships. The God of sacred music is also God of crying children. The God of stewardship is also God of the bottom line. The God of abundance in Christ is also God of "where will we find the money?" The God of all creation is even God of the bull and the bear. As Moses can attest, the God of the call is also God of provision. And in Jesus Christ the God who asks you to

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<sup>3</sup> Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*.

remove your sandals is also the God who washes your feet. Come to the feast for the table is set. Be nourished that you might have strength to receive God's Word with courage, expect his voice among the familiar, and respond to God's call, "here I am."