

Beware When Walking on Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-15

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Holy ground...

I'm sure you've seen video or heard of the story of the Houston businessman, Jim McIngvale, affectionately known as Mattress Mack, who opened his 2 Gallery Furniture showrooms to let anyone who needed shelter in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey to come and find respite. He also opened his mattress store to National Guard troops who came to the area to help. McIngvale rented furniture trucks and he and his staff went out to find people who were stranded. Over 400 people quickly made their way to his stores, sleeping on brand his new furniture and receiving breakfast, lunch and dinner. Did McIngvale think about the tens of thousands of dollars of loss of inventory he would incur with such an extravagant venture? We don't know, but probably not since he did the same thing for those displaced when Hurricane Katrina refugees were sent to Houston years ago. McIngvale, a devout catholic says, "I've continued my catholic faith throughout my life, trying to do the right thing, and hopefully, you do the right thing, and help people along the way." There's not a doubt in my mind during this period of time, those showrooms have been transformed into holy ground.

What makes a place become holy ground?

The area where Moses experienced God in the burning bush certainly wouldn't have been called "holy" before this story. This portion of the

scripture occurs in the second part of Moses' life. He is long past the day of growing up in Pharaoh's household. He left that life after finding out his true heritage but not before killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. So he went on the run, with Pharaoh's men after him. He settled in Midian, married Zipporah began tending sheep out in the wilderness. He lived a somewhat ordinary life, a solitary life.

But God had other plans for Moses. Our passage this morning occurs on Mt. Horeb. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, mountains were places which signified a meeting with God, but you can bet that was the last thing on Moses' mind.

Upon seeing a bush on fire, but which the fire did not consume, he went closer. He noticed something out of the ordinary and he paid attention. That's when God spoke and told him to remove his shoes...

So, it's not the place, which becomes holy, but the encounter in which one finds oneself which transforms an ordinary place into a holy place, and where one has an encounter with God.

In mosques, people take their shoes off before walking in because they consider it to be holy ground and they anticipate meeting God there. We set our sanctuary apart as a holy place, we anticipate meeting God here, but we also know that God meets us outside these doors in every day occurrences as well: in an honest conversation with someone who is suffering, in an act of forgiveness and reconciliation, in service where hearts are open to one another.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says that the burning bush was not a miracle, but a test. Kushner writes, "God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something far more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling

asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention.”

When we pay attention. Would this have happened if Moses had been distracted or constantly on his cell phone? Maybe or maybe not.

Contemporary theologian Rob Bell says, "Your life matters: how you prepare your food, how you deal with your neighbor, how you handle conflict. You are on holy ground. This is not a random, accidental phenomenon we know to be you, but your entire life takes place under a wide horizon of holiness and sanctity. Respect the mundane and the everyday because it is there that the divine is found."

Finally, when we stop and listen, we are often also called to do something. To be used in some small or great way.

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning her flight had been delayed four hours, Naomi Shihab Nye heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well— one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was her gate, so she went. What could it be?

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like the type her grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. “Help,” said the flight agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

Naomi stooped to put her arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. “Shu-dow-a, shu-bid-uck, habibti? Stani schway, min fadlick, shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. Naomi told her said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

Together they called the woman's son, and Naomi spoke with him in English. Naomi told him she would stay with his mother till they got on the plane. Then they called the woman's other sons just for the fun of it. Then they called Naomi's dad, and he and the woman spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, of course, they had ten shared friends. Then Naomi thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets she knows and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

The older woman was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting Naomi's knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies— little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts— from her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To Naomi's amazement, not a single traveler declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo— they were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling.

Then the airline broke out free apple juice, and two little girls from their flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar too. Naomi noticed her new best friend— by now they were holding hands— had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And as she looked around that gate of weary ones she thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate— once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies and hugged. (Edited: Naomi Shihab Nye short story from Honeybee (Greenwillow Books, 2008)

In a few minutes, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. It's one of our two sacraments and it transforms the sharing of ordinary bread and juice into a mystical celebration where we remember Jesus, and his love for us. IN the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup with one another, we are on holy ground. By remembering the words Jesus told his disciples that night so long ago, we are also called to love one another. To go to any lengths to love one another, because God has love us first. It's those encounters of loving others where we will find ourselves on holy ground.

Marilyn McEntyre is a writer and professor of medical humanities at UC Davis in an article "Choosing Church" says, "When I walk forward and kneel at the Communion rail, though other ways of receiving the sacrament have their logic and legitimacy, I make, each time, a new act of consent to God's invitation to participate in divine life. I am reminded again of the shocking intimacy expressed in the words 'This is my body. Take. Eat.' The message each time seems to me something like, 'Do you get it now? How utterly I enter into your very being, your body and breath, to make you a Christ-bearer?'"

May your days be filled with encounters on holy ground.

Amen!