

The Holy Land

Exodus 3:1-6

Where is the Holy Land? That's an easy question to answer. Ask a travel agent! Tourists flock to see the place which we still call the holy land. Tour guides explain all the significant landmarks, and describe the biblical events that took place at each location. For many Christians, a trip to the holy land is one of the most meaningful and moving experiences of their life, for it was the land in which Jesus lived while on earth.

But this question should always come to my mind, "Is the land really holy?" Think about that for a moment. What makes a place holy? Is it a different kind of dirt? Holy dirt? Is it a different form of geography? Or climate? What is the holy land? What makes land special?

The answer which would have to be given by people today who speak of the holy land is that of past history. The land is holy because of its history. And the place which people call the holy land is certainly a land of history. Especially religious history. It is a land of deep significance to three separate religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. But again I want you to consider the question, "Is it holy land?"

I would say no, and I don't use that expression myself. Because I would say that what that phrase means, if it means anything at all, is that holy land is the place where God and his people meet. Holy land is the place of worship the place God's people meet to worship him. Thus holy land is not just the land of the Old Testament people of Israel. It is not just the place prescribed by God then, in that age, the place so readily identified in a modern map of the middle east. In this age, God and his people meet for worship in every place. Not on this mountain or

that mountain, as Jesus was asked by that Samaritan woman at the well.

John 4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24 God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

So the holy land is any place, it is every place, where we worship our God. Therefore this room is holy land, because we come today to meet with our God for worship. This is a holy place, a sanctuary. It is the presence of God that makes a place holy land.

In that context, Exodus 3 teaches us a something very important about holy land, and about worship. Because of that, this is one of the most meaningful passages in this entire book. It is so much more than just a familiar story about a burning bush. So let's see what that story really means. First lesson is that we have here,

I. THE REVELATION OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

Please don't get so enamored with the familiarity of the story to miss this obvious point. This is a revelation of God. It is a theophany, to use a word you might not be as familiar with. It is a visible manifestation of God, a visible appearance of God. Not an incarnation, as happened when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary and born as an actual, physical man, but a pre-incarnate appearance. God is making himself known. God is making himself seen. And he uses a mountain to do it.

A. God uses a mountain to reveal himself.

v.1

Horeb, otherwise identified as Mt. Sinai, also called the Mountain of God. Now what is so important about mountains? The antiquity, the majesty, the power and the height of the mountains all naturally lead people to associate mountains with gods. The heathen nations thought the mountains were magical, and believed that their many gods actually lived in those mountains. The Israelites knew better, understanding that their God lived in heaven and descended to the mountains to reveal himself at significant times. They were instructed to destroy the heathen places of worship on those mountains. For example,

Deut. 12:1 “These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2 “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 “And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. 4 “You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things.”

But Israel was to worship on a mountain, according to God's instruction. This same mount Sinai was the place where Moses would receive the 10 commandments from the Lord. And other mountains continued to be the place where God commanded his people to worship him, as we read in,

Psalms 68:16 “Why do you fume with envy, you mountains of many peaks? This is the mountain which God desires to dwell in; Yes, the LORD will dwell in it forever. 17 The chariots of God are twenty thousand, Even thousands of thousands; The Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the Holy Place.”

And as I began the worship service this afternoon with,

Ps. 24:3 “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place?”

Or,

Ps.48:1 “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised In the city of our God, In His holy mountain.”

His holy mountain. My holy mountain. The mountain of the Lord. The mountain of God. There are more than 40 references with various combinations of those words. They are everywhere in the Bible. The significance of the mountain is that it is the place where God chose to reveal himself. And that place, that mountain, is the holy land.

God also used an angel to reveal himself, but not just any angel.

B. The angel of the Lord.

v.2

We see this angel with Abram and Sarah in Genesis 16, again with Abraham in Genesis 22, then with Balaam, with Gideon, with Manoah, with Elijah, with David, with Joshua the priest, with Joseph and Mary, and with Jesus himself. In the Psalms he is both the protector of God's people and the avenger of his enemies. The angel of the Lord is a revelation of God. And then, most especially, God reveals himself with,

C. The burning bush.

v.2

Fire. Fire that burned, but did not consume the bush. God reveals himself as fire, and as with the image of a mountain, the Bible makes reference to fire as an image of God a lot!

God's very presence was characterized by a flame of fire. God's wrath and judgment is characterized by fire. And the return of Jesus Christ will be with fire.

So fire is a revelation of God himself, and as part of God's own self-definition, particularly with reference to his wrath and judgment. And it is not only an Old Testament definition of God. We read,
Hebr. 12:29 "For our God is a consuming fire."

That's not comfortable, is it? That's not casual nor is it informal. This is serious business, and we must do business with God. He is not a figment of our imagination. He is not a mere philosophy or simply a product of man's religious nature gone to excess. This God whom Moses encounters is our God! This burning bush is God's personal revelation to us. Here Moses came into the presence of God, and the image remains for our instruction and edification. Our God is a consuming fire.

But what is the significance of all of that? What difference does that make for all of us? It is not enough just to understand the images of fire and the mountain. The impact of these verses upon us is related to,

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

Notice Moses' response. It doesn't seem strange or unusual.
v.3

Acts 7:31 "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him."

He wanted to see what it was all about. But God stopped him. Something had to happen first! The first word is, STOP!
v.4-5

This is not a seeker-sensitive encounter, as we would use that phrase to describe so many worship services in our day. We are so often instructed today to avoid anything that might make visitors, seekers, uncomfortable. But that is exactly what God does to Moses. "Stop. Take off your sandals."

That act symbolizes the necessity of approaching God uncontaminated by the world. Most people today, when they take off their shoes in their houses, do it so they won't stain the carpets. Shoes protect our feet, but they get dirty. Take your shoes off to keep the inside of the house clean, keep away the dirt that collects on shoes from walking around.

But it is not merely the idea of cleanliness that might cause you to have the same rule for your own home today--trying to keep the dirt off the carpet. It is also a sign of worship. Removing your sandals meant that you would assume the position of a servant, normally barefooted. Symbolically, this means that we lay aside all our covering and pretense when we approach God.

In some cultures, taking off your shoes is still a sign of respect. In many cultures, it would be a terrible insult to enter someone else's home with your shoes on. Doing so is a sign of disrespect.

So what does all that mean for us? Allowing the literal words to sink deeply into your heart and mind, when you come to God, people of God, you need to take off our sandals. Take off anything that is contaminated by the world. Take off your shoes so you don't stain God's carpet. And do so as an act of reverence, since it is his house. In his house, we must worship God with deep respect and complete sincerity.

A. The need for reverent honor.

v.5

I read a few moments ago,

Heb. 12:29 “For our God is a consuming fire.”

Let me read the verse just before that,

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

That is what is necessary for our worship. That is the direct application of this command to Moses to take off his sandals. The necessary context and attitude of worship is that of “reverence and awe.” Not superficiality and casual comfort. Not glib, insignificant or trite little activities. We are to worship God with reverence and awe, and nothing less will be acceptable to the one who is a consuming fire.

This is glaringly lacking in our day. We are far too casual in our relationship with God, especially when we worship. One of the greatest problems today in our society, and in many churches, is the inability to separate between what is sacred and what is profane. Profane means common, ordinary, normal. Sacred means special, set apart. Thus sacred worship is not a just another common, normal activity of our life. It is not casual. It is the most sacred activity of your whole life. It is far more significant and far more meaningful than any thing else that you do, so you must take off your sandals and worship the Lord your God with the deepest respect. To do that, you must take off your sandals, and approach God with the deepest respect and sincerity. The burning desire of your heart must be to ascribe the glory and honor which God alone deserves, to worship him with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

So it is that when you worship, when you are gathered together as the body of Christ, when you are assembled here as you are this morning, here and now you are...

B. Standing upon holy ground.

Let me give you some practical ideas to help you make some application. First, learn to think in these terms. Think in terms of holy ground. When you enter the sanctuary for corporate worship, think consciously, this is holy ground! Think in terms of the how God taught his people of Israel to worship at Mt. Sinai. Think of Moses’ experience here in Exodus 3. Then, stop talking about the the common things of everyday life. Stop thinking about them. Set your hearts and minds on the worship of almighty God. That takes effort, discipline. It also takes a commitment.

Second, let your actions be consistent with this idea of holy ground. Let your appearance reflect the the holiness of God’s presence. That’s why we dress up, because this is a special occasion. I don’t want to legislate any sort of dress code, because that would inevitably become legalistic. The issue is one of the heart, and the point is to let your appearance reflect the attitude of your heart. This is a holy place!

As a church, therefore, we set apart a time and a place to worship God. That is what we do every Sunday morning and again in the afternoon. We come to holy ground. We come to a sanctuary, a place made holy because it is the place where we meet with God. We set apart the time and the place for worship, that you might stand upon holy ground.

Be sure to recognize the motivation that Moses identifies here. It is not simply some external form of law-keeping. There is not a mere legalistic duty to come to church services! We read instead,

v.6

God uses a mountain to reveal himself. He used an angel. He used the fire in a bush. But he used something else, as well. Something greater. He used his own word, his own promise. And so God's words to Moses climax with,

C. The emphasis upon God's covenant faithfulness.

He reminds his people of his promise to them, to be their God. He speaks that promise to them, again. "I am the God of your father--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

I am the God who promised to be your God. I am the God who promised to love you as my people. I am the God who promised to give you a great land, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the God who promised to make you a great nation. I am the God who chose you.

He is the same God today and makes the same promise to us today. All that we have here in Exodus in the historical manifestation of those promises to us, for we are the heirs of them all. God makes that covenant promise to us, and the blood of the covenant lies before us this morning in the sacramental form. The blood of the new covenant was poured out for us, we who believe in Jesus Christ. And God proclaims to us his own covenant faithfulness as he offers to us this covenantal meal.

Moses responds with godly fear and deep reverence.

v.6

So, surely, this is holy ground. This is his house. This is his supper table, a banquet where we are invited to feast. With the Lord's Supper, we come here to eat and to drink the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, as we did this morning. This is holy

ground, for here we come to enjoy the most intimate fellowship with God that is possible, the richest communion that we will experience with him this side of heaven. Here is where we meet with God. Or, I should say, where he meets with us.

Surely, this is holy ground! You are standing on holy ground, for is here. As he promised. So, stop. Stop, first, and leave the world behind. Leave behind the profane and common affairs of the world behind. Then, understanding the symbolism of these words, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."