

KICKING STONES
Pentecost 14 8/31/14
Exodus 3:1-15 Rom 12: 9-21 Mt 16:21-28
GUALALA

One my favorite childhood pastimes was kicking stones. While walking to the store . . . to school . . . to anywhere . . . I'd find a stone to kick. Carefully I'd aim, protected by my shoe . . . and with some luck the stone would go straight down the sidewalk. However, since stones have a mind of their own, now and then it'd roll into the grass. I'd search for it diligently . . . this was my stone to kick, and I wasn't about to lose it. I've never determined how many shoes I wore out . . . I suspect I outgrew them before I outwore them. Nevertheless I kept my shoes on . . .

Our text, however, is not about St. Paul, Minnesota . . . it is set in the wilderness of Mount Horeb (same as Mount Sinai), "the mountain of God." Almost as prelude, a few years later Moses was to climb that same mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. For now, however, God had something else in mind. I doubt that Moses would have been kicking stones . . . and, if the traditional pictures are close, Moses would have been wearing open-toed sandals . . . not the best for stone-kicking . . .

I imagine the scene . . . while minding his own business, together with minding the sheep, something really confusing catches Moses' eye. "How can it be that this bush is burning and it is not burning up?" I suppose the forest fire crews are asking: "How can WE pull THAT off.?" That question Moses asked is but the beginning of a long-term conversation.

"Take off your shoes, for the place upon which you are standing is Holy Ground."

Three millennia later Golda Meier, then Prime Minister of Israel, is quoted: "There's thousands upon thousands of square miles of sand and desert around here . . . with vast rivers of oil running underneath. With all that wealth, we took the land under which there is no oil. You call this the Promised Land? You call us the Chosen People? This is The Holy Land?"

"Take off your shoes . . ." Huh? The text does not indicate if Moses did or did not obey that command . . . nor does the text give any indication of Moses' response, which, likely, might have been: "Are you kidding? Have YOU ever walked in the desert with bare feet? Have YOU ever been stuck with a cactus thorn?" Moses was apparently saving his arguments for later . . . for now all we have is "The ground upon which you stand is Holy Ground." Stone-filled. Apparently God-forsaken desert.

Holy Ground.

Now that God has Moses' attention, God lays it on the line. I have seen the affliction of my people . . . I'm going to get them out of Egypt . . . and you are going to do it for me. That started the argument . . .

"Who am I to do this . . ." "I will be with you" (Ex 3:11)

“When they ask, ‘Who sent you?’ what shall I say?” “I AM WHO I AM.” (Ex3:13).

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“They won’t believe me.” “What’s that in your hand?” (Ex 4:1).

“I’m slow of speech and tongue.” “Who has made man’s mouth?” (Ex 4:10)

“Send somebody else.” That was the final straw, and God got really mad at Moses. (Ex 4:13)

To make matters worse, it appears that the mission was pre-ordained for failure . . . for after all the instructions from God, and all the promises by God, God also promised to Moses: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will not let my people go.” Talk about Kamikaze. (Ex 4:21).

However, it turned out that it was the failures which sprung open the door to that fateful night of The Passover . . . the last straw for the Pharaoh . . . and the beginning straw for the Exodus . . . the 40-year wandering into the Promised Land.

Take off your shoes . . . you’re on Holy Ground . . .

Last June we were celebrating The Eucharist, in Peace Lutheran Church, Manhattan, Kansas. The procession of the cross served as an indication of what was to come. When the acolyte, a young boy of ten or so, got to the place where he was to plant the cross, symbol of our redemption, he looked helplessly, and quite unredeemedly, around. Someone had moved the stand and, like the women at the tomb, the acolyte seemed to say, “I know not where they have taken it.” While standing at the altar during the Communion liturgy, the acolyte had to duck several times to avoid getting smacked by the pastor who, oblivious to where the boy was standing, moved his hands in traditional liturgical gestures.

During the service, the peace of Peace Lutheran was repeatedly interrupted by the loud noise of munitions being exploded at Fort Riley, 20 miles to the west. And, as if in response, the church shuddered and shook. Although often shaken and shaking, the church stands solidly on Holy Ground. Military training exercises are routinely heard and felt for miles around. Fort Riley is adjacent to Junction City, rental home of the truck made infamous in 1995, the weapon used to murder 168 men, women and children in Oklahoma City.

Timothy McVeigh, while detonating the bomb, stood on Holy Ground.

On Inter-state 70, about thirty miles west of Junction City, the traveler is greeted by a sign, “The Lion’s Den” . . . billed as a super store for adult entertainment. Never having gone into one of those places where lust is nurtured and lasciviousness is fostered, I can only guess what awaits those who patronize this, and similar, places. About 100 feet past the exit to The Lion’s Den, and just off its property line, there stands another sign which reads “The eyes of the Lord are upon all.” Both signs, each with its own purpose, together with the store itself, stand on Holy Ground.

Our return from Kansas takes us on Highway 50, billed as “The Loneliest Highway in the World.” Mile after mile of nothing but stones and sagebrush, with a few towns to break the

monotony. Recently there have been more bicyclists than cars on that highway. We enjoy 50, because its beauty, beauty of its own kind, is unbroken by the noise and confusion of heavy traffic. Some call the land God-forsaken. However that may be, the highway is built upon Holy Ground.

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Out of WWII comes this story . . . a German soldier while walking a road, spied a Russian soldier hiding in the ditch . . . taking careful aim, the German stopped short of pulling the trigger when he noticed the Russian, without a gun, waving a picture. The German put down his weapon and approached . . . the picture was of the family of the Russian. At this the German took out a picture of his family . . . and, together these two enemies laughed and made sign-language conversation. What kept them apart was government ideology . . . what brought them together was the commonly-shared experience of family, a holy moment which took place on Holy Ground. They met as enemies . . . they parted as friends.

Take off your shoes . . .

There was once a time when we knew what a family was . . . the traditional mom, dad, two kids and a dog or a cat. And there remain those in power who, in the face of inevitable change, insist on defining for everybody what a family ought to be: the traditional mom, dad, two kids and a dog or a cat. Unwilling to recognize that that Holy Ground has gone through a seismic change, these people of power denigrate and destroy new, and ever-changing, family structures, which now include a mom, a dad, two kids and a dog or a cat, together with single parent, two male or two female parents, and a host of combinations unrecognized fewer than ten years ago.

These new family structures are also Holy Ground . . .

Take off your shoes . . .

. . .

Who defines The Holy?

People, if not people of power, at least people who have all the answers, and none of the questions, are eager to define The Holy for the entire world. They do so because they seem to be unable, or unwilling, to recognize that life is one great paradox after another . . . life is filled with ambiguities which remain central to its core. (Jan Markell, Rick Wiles, Rush Limbaugh, James Dobson, Franklin Graham et al).

“John Kerry must resign before he brings God’s judgment upon us all”

“UFO sightings are demonic forces to draw us away from God”

“President Obama is the certain sign that the End Times are now upon us”

“America is doomed by the passage of the Marriage Equality Act.”

“Hollywood, together with our government and President Obama, combine to be The Anti-Christ.”

“The extreme weather we are experiencing is not caused by fossil fuels but because of America’s preoccupation with sex, homosexuality and abortion.”

While these persons are, indeed, absolutely certain that they are defining The Holy, together with the Unholy, at the least they are standing on Holy Ground while casting their stones and making their hell-bent pronouncements.

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“Take off your shoes . . .”

Contrast these hate-filled ideologues with Chief Seattle:

“All things share the same breath: the beast, the tree, the human. The air shares its spirit

with all the life it supports.”

Holy Air. Holy Spirit. Holy Ground.

She who welcomes all to America’s shores has inscribed these words upon her pedestal:

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

Holy Promise. Holy Spirit. Holy Ground.

All the while thousands of children are being turned away at our border and shipped to what some say will be certain death and/or being trafficked as sex slaves. Thousands more of our citizens are incarcerated in America’s new growth industry, the for-profit prison. Holy Promise revoked. Holy Spirit ignored. Holy Ground trampled upon.

For the first time in its history, this spring at Piedmont College, in Habersham County, Georgia, a student wearing a sparkly blue hijab walked across the stage to receive her diploma. Her family members were easy to spot for they, too, wore hijabs. The Habersham County Chamber of Commerce recognizes only seven churches in the entire county, all of them Protestant. The Protestant members of that county view Roman Catholics as of a different religion. Nor do they in any way recognize temples or mosques. However there’s a sign of hope. Representatives of the Buddhist Community came before the County Commission to seek permission to hold a Songkran festival on the grounds of their temple. A local man presented a petition signed by ten neighbors opposing the festival. 45 minutes into the debate another neighbor asked the defining question: “What makes the Songkran festival any different from the Jam for The Lamb concert at my Baptist Church?”

Holy Ground . . . take off your shoes . . .

By now, you might be wondering: “Where is all this heading?” Matter of fact, I’m wondering the same thing myself. Hang in there . . . we might get it all figured out . . .

. . .

Who defines The Holy?

The word itself means that something is recognized or declared sacred, either by religious use or authority. The Holy is that which is dedicated to the service of God, and, thus, entitled to veneration. Like this building . . . consecrated to the service of God and declared Holy.

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But . . . who truly defines The Holy?

We begin at Creation . . . repeatedly, God, satisfied with what God had just done, called it “Good”, God called it Holy. All of creation, together with all of Earth’s creatures, has been defined by its Maker as Holy. God defined the Holy . . . it is not left up to us, with our wandering whims and pernicious prejudices . . . it is not for us to define The Holy . . . that has already been accomplished once and for all.

And what we do with sacredness of Creation either denigrates and destroys The Holy . . . and, not incidentally, in the process we also destroy ourselves and become slaves to sin . . . or what we do honors The Holy, reveres it, and cares for it. Kicking stones is one thing. Casting them is another.

The Lion’s Den and the Scripture-sign both stand on Holy Ground. What goes on in that building is another matter. Gestures and such are meant to demonstrate holy veneration . . . and the fact that we are brought to tears of laughter when they go awry may well indicate that God means for us to not take ourselves too seriously. Highways are built upon Holy Ground. Unholy battles are fought on ground that has been declared Holy. Murder is committed in the name of an ideology which has been raised in warped minds to the status of Holy. Families and children are destroyed and torn asunder by prejudicial notions and bigotry which pretends to have The Holy Answers. The long-standing invitation into this country is revoked by unholy fear-mongering . . . it is revoked by pronouncing simplistic solutions to complex issues . . . and in the process people not like us are destroyed . . . people who, though not like us, are created in the same image as are we . . . I suppose those people look at us and, likely, say: “Not like us.” When morality stoops to moralisms, morality . . . that which is Holy . . . is denigrated and destroyed.

The paradox, and the ambiguity which we face in every circumstance, is identified in the words of Kahlil Gibran: “When you bite into an apple, give thanks to God for its goodness. At the same time, offer a prayer of confession for destroying the apple.”

God commanded Moses to free God’s people from their slavery.

First, however, came the prelude which would shape all that was to follow in our life-long conversation with God: “Take off your shoes, for the ground upon which you stand is Holy Ground.”

Take off your shoes . . .

Our slavery to sin, the abuse, the misuse and the defilement of The Holy, is not only against persons and creation, all sin is, ultimately, against God. Can we be free of that?

The best, perhaps, that we can do, is to take off our shoes and tread lightly . . . for, wherever we walk, we are on Holy Ground.

Amen . . .