Call to Worship [From ‘Aurora Leigh’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning]
Leader: Earth’s crammed with heaven,
People: And every common bush afire with God;
Leader: But only [those] who see, take off [their] shoes,
People: The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

In seventh or eighth grade I attended a weeklong United Methodist summer camp. At the end of the week my small group was to perform a skit. The theme was up to us so we sat in a circle on the first afternoon of camp brainstorming ideas. Our adult leader read this poem as a possible text to act out.

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only [those] who see, take off [their] shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries. [Gender inclusive language is mine]

Not so long ago the words came back to me as I was running. I had some trouble remembering all the words and was stuck on the line, “every common bush afire with God”. It so happened I was running through nature. I could hear the birds chirping, such a welcome sound after months of winter. There was the Fox River, water fowl, trees with spring buds, a random daffodil here or there and of course, bushes. I started looking for the common bush on fire described in the poem. I thought, I’ll take a picture of it and post it on Facebook. I ran and ran and ran (quite literally. I did 12 or so miles that day). I never took that picture. Nothing struck me as on fire. Nothing struck me as holy.

It feels too obvious to pair this poem with the story of Moses and the burning bush. Do you remember this story? Moses is in the desert with his father in law’s sheep. He sees a bush, on fire, and goes to investigate. As he gets closer he is told to take off his shoes for he is on holy ground. God speaks to him through the bush.

I read this story and think, of course that would be holy ground. There are two significant clues. The first is the burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. That would grab my attention. Would it grab yours?

The second clue is the voice. I have walked by a number of bushes and none of them have talked to me. Well one, but there was a child hidden inside. And, the voice says that this is holy ground. God gives Moses a calling to lead God’s people out of Egypt where they have been slaves. In this story about Moses and the burning bush the bush is obviously holy. Moses removes his shoes and converses with God.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem introduces something else. “Every common bush afire with God.” We have a little bush in the front flower bed by our front door. It has been jumped over. Stepped on. Fallen on. The boys even tried to sled down it this winter. This bush is common and slightly misshaped. Is this bush afire with God? I passed many bushes on the run I mentioned earlier. I passed beautifully trimmed bushes. Rows of bushes. Bushes beginning to bud. Bushes flowering. Bushes, shrubs, or little trees are common in our community. Where these afire with God?

What exactly does an ‘on fire’ bush look like in our modern days?

The story of the Good Samaritan is also familiar to us. A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was robbed and left on the side of the road. The first to pass was a priest. Second to come was a Levite. The third was the Samaritan who took him to an inn and paid for his stay. I’m curious, how intently did you listen to this reading as it was read today in worship? I would suspect that your mind wandered. Mine certainly does. This is a story we have heard so many times. It is one of the earliest we learn in Sunday school. It is a common sermon text. I’ve probably even been in one or two Good Samaritan skits. Someone recently reminded me of the Good Samaritan law. As you may know, the Good Samaritan Law offers legal protection to people who assist a person they believe to be in need of help. The law is named after this Bible story.

If I say to you, a priest, a rabbi and a minister walked into a bar, how do you expect me to finish? With a punch line, right? We know this as the beginning of a joke. If you were a Jew in the days of Jesus and heard Jesus tell about the beaten man you could have jumped to the same conclusion. A priest, a Levite and a ____________. The story should have said Israelite. That is what people would have known. It was the beginning of a common joke. [“Knowing and preaching the Jewish Jesus,” The Christian Century, Elizabeth Palmer interviews Amy-Jill Levine, March 13, 2019, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/knowing-and-preaching-jewish-jesus, 05/09/19]

The joke was on the listeners. Jesus sends in the Samaritan. The enemy of the very people he is speaking to. Many years before Jesus, when the people of Israel disobeyed God, they were overrun by conquering powers. These armies took all the wealthy, smartest, and best looking to their capital to make them ‘like them.’

To keep order they colonized the captured lands and all who had stayed behind by mixing up people from all the lands they had conquered. The Samaritans are the results of the intermarrying between the Israelites and the people from other lands. When the Israelites returned from the exile they rejected those who had not kept God’s laws because he Jews had strict scriptural laws against intermarrying non-Jews. The Jews segregated themselves. They called what the Samaritans were practicing as idolatry.

When Jesus says, first came a priest, then a Levite (both employed in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem), the crowd would have expected to hear Israelite. One of their own helping one of their own. This would have been the common story, the one expected. Jesus turns the common story into one on fire – he makes it holy. The enemy, the scorned and rejected for centuries,
stops to help the beaten man. This becomes an uncommon story. This becomes a holy moment. The man who shouldn’t have helped helps.

Peek a boo is a game we play with young children to teach them that objects continue to exist even when the object cannot be seen, heard or touched. The giggles we get when we cover our face in front of a toddler and remove our hands with a “peek-a-boo” are out of amazement that the face is still there. The disappeared has reappeared. The child learns to trust that the object is still there.

I’ve come to the conclusion that this is what we are looking for – holiness where we don’t expect to find it. Trusting it is there even when we don’t see it. It’s holiness that is easy to miss because we think we know what will happen.

I remember an afternoon when Hans and I were preparing to take a walk. He was just barely two. We used the bottom stair landing and steps as a diaper changing/shoe putting on station. So, one of these was happening when he said to me, lay down here mommy. I did and looked up. What I remember is how my view changed and I saw something I had seen many times from a different angle. This new view felt inspired. It felt holy lying beside my toddler, looking up.

I think about how many times I had walked up or down those stairs. I had changed a couple hundred diapers right there and made sure shoes were secure dozens of times. I thought I knew that space in our house. I had seen it from many angles but not from the angle of laying down on my back and looking up. It could have been that posture of laying down – or the toddler snuggling up next to me – or the light coming in through the front door or the pause in ordinary – but that space in time felt very holy.

A few weeks ago I offered communion in the breakroom of my workplace. As a manufacturing Chaplain this is still a little weird. Not all of our team members are Christians so I am sensitive to those who practice other faith traditions. This was Maundy Thursday, the day we celebrate Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, so I had asked for special permission to provide communion to our team members who would be working during their own church’s service. Picture the scene, a small table covered in a light blue tablecloth. A gold chalice and plate borrowed from this church because I needed something that would not break for food safety reasons. A loaf of braided white bread. White napkins. An industrial breakroom sometimes crowded with team members on their breaks and sometimes with just a few people depending on the ebbs and flows of our facility’s production schedule of sausage, hot dogs and deli meats.

I had a prayer of confession printed and laying on the table. When a person came to me for communion I invited them to confess their sins praying the prayer I had typed up silently or another of their own. I would then give them a piece of bread to dip into the cup and close with a benediction to go into the world as a forgiven person. This happened with 19 of the 20 people who came up to the table. This is what I had planned. It was what was common.

Then Henry walked up to the table. He’s a young man and by looking at his skin color, knowing that he grew up in the area, and that he grew up in a pretty stable household, I would have assumed what I was doing would have been obvious.
Instead this happened:
“What are you doing down here?”
“I’m offering communion.”
“What’s that?”
“Communion.”
“Yeah, what’s that?

I realized that he didn’t know what communion was. I explained, “Today we remember Jesus’ last supper – that last meal he had with his disciples – where he broke bread and shared a cup. I’m offering this bread and cup to anyone who would like to know God more.”

He said he would go change out of his work clothes and be back.

“What do I do?” he asked when he returned.
I explained he could say a prayer to confess his sins since those things – big or small – separate us from God. Then, I would give him a piece of bread to dip into the cup. His mouth moved as he read the prayer I had printed. “Okay,” he said when finished. I offered the bread. “God loves you, Henry, for who you are. Receive this sign that you are enough.”

We stood in silence before he gathered his things. It was an uneasy silence, like something had happened but neither of us were sure what.

I said, “have a good Easter.” “You too,” he said in a stunned voice.

The common – breakroom, bread, grape juice, a prayer – became very holy. Henry stopped and took off his shoes.

Jesus took a common joke and turned it into a holy message of who to love.

Moses saw a bush unconsumed by flame and turned to investigate. He entered holy ground.

We live in the very common. The holy is seemingly sequestered to famous Bible stories. It’s time to play peek-a-boo. Oh, holy, where are you? Show us the fire. And when we see it, may we take off our shoes.

Amen.