

## HOLY GROUND

Exodus 3:1-15 / Romans 12:9-18

We have a saying in German that goes, “Different countries, different customs.” Taking off your shoes,” for example. When you visit someone’s home in Germany, you bring a pair of slippers along because you are expected to take off your shoes before entering. Makes a lot of sense to me because who wants to clean up a sippy mess in the winter as people track in snow and ice. The Germans are not alone in this. In many parts of the world, including East Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and New Zealand, taking off your shoes before entering a home is seen as a sign of respect for the host.

This custom also extends to religious communities. If you have ever visited a mosque, you know you are expected to leave your shoes in an ante-room before stepping onto the sanctuary floor. Just don’t forget where you left them. The same is true for many Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh communities. So, it does not really come as a surprise when we read in the *Book of Exodus* that God asks Moses to remove his shoes, or sandals, because he was standing on holy ground. Moses, at least, didn’t seem surprised, most likely because he was familiar with the custom. Rather than being startled by God’s request to remove his shoes, Moses is more curious about the burning bush.

Moses thinks to himself, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” When God notices that Moses begins to investigate the phenomenon, God calls to him out of the bush, and the two go back and forth a bit. “Moses, Moses!” God says. And Moses replies, “Here I am.” Then God says, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And in case Moses is not weirded out enough by this encounter, God states God’s credentials: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” How does Moses respond? He hides his face, for he is afraid to look at God.

I think this was Moses’s mistake. Not curiosity, mind you. Curiosity is something God expects from us humans. It’s Moses’s turning away from the direct encounter, which threatens to move the barefooted Moses off the holy ground on which he is standing. To which God responds something like this: “OK, Moe, if you can’t bear to look at me, then look at least at what’s happening to my people. They are miserable because they are being brutally oppressed by the Egyptians. This has gone on long enough. I am going to save them from their oppressors and you are the one who is going to pull this off.”

What makes the ground Moses is standing on holy is not the ground itself. Without Moses looking the living God square in the eye, the dirt below his feet is just that—dirt. What makes it holy is Moses’s encounter with the living God, “the God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, both Jewish philosophers, would have said that holy ground is the encounter between the “I and Thou,” and the encounter of the “face-to-face with the Other.” It is an encounter between two subjects, both equal in God’s eyes. There is no power dynamic at play here. There are simply two “I’s” in an honest and open encounter, where one sees the other for

whom they really are. The only answer Moses can give, the only answer any of us can give when we want this kind of relationship, when we want this kind of encounter, are these three words: “Here I am!”

If we cannot manage to “take off our metaphorical sandals,” when we cannot remove the obstacles between “me” and “you,” we cannot stand on holy ground. If we cannot see that the person we encounter is a person created in God’s image, we repeat the cycle of oppression we see with the Egyptians who treated the Israelites not as people, not as human beings, but only as slaves to be exploited for their own economic gain. The Egyptians were never able to say, “Here I am.” They were simply not interested. Their world view consisted of “I stand here and you stand over there.” There was no reciprocity, no mutuality. Only naked power. I am afraid things have not changed in the last few thousand years as we, too, seem to live in a time and place when few people are interested what the other person has to say or who that other person is. The path this leads to is a scary place, one more often than not marred by violence.

This means that every time we genuinely want to encounter another, when we want encounter a child of God created in God’s image, we need to see that person as an equal, with both of us finding ourselves on holy ground. When a parents comes face-to-face with their children and truly tries to see them for who they are—Holy ground. When a man talks to his therapist and the therapist truly listens—Holy ground. When we gather at the bedside of the sick and the dying and behold in silence the mystery of life and death—Holy ground. As a matter of fact, we probably ought to walk around barefoot all the time, because each and every encounter we have on any given day puts us in the presence of God, puts us on holy ground. And I hope that unlike Moses, we would have the courage not to turn away.

There are so many ways to interpret Moses’s question of who God when he asks for God’s name, and God replies, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” Some think this is a way for God to remain shrouded in mystery. Others think God does not want to disclose the divine name so Moses cannot get the upper hand. Others get lost in the weeds of semantics because nobody is really sure how to translate the Hebrew. But I wonder if this is about something completely different. What if God wants to say to Moses, “OK, Moe, you tell me, ‘Here I am.’ And I want to tell you that ‘I am here, too.’ You say that I have your full attention, and I am telling you that you have mine. So let’s talk.” I think this is a story of an encounter between two subjects who take the other seriously and are willing to hear the other out and listen to the other, no matter what it takes, for every encounter with another is holy ground.

In our Romans passage for today, we hear the apostle Paul rattle off his customary ethical exhortations before he leaves the faithful at the church in Rome. But maybe he leaves them with more than just an ethical “to-do” list. Maybe Paul shows the faithful Christians in Rome how they can live as followers of Jesus with their eyes wide open to the people they will meet, who will most likely not believe what they believe. Maybe he is showing them how they can be curious without turning away. How they can truly see and respond to others as children created in God’s image. That each of his exhortations

is couched as an imperative shows us how important this is to the apostle. Here again is what he had to say to them:

“Let your love be genuine! Oppose what is evil! Hold fast to what is good! Love one another with mutual affection! Outdo one another in showing honor! Do not lag in zeal! Be ardent in spirit! Serve the Lord! Rejoice in hope! Be patient in affliction! Persevere in prayer! Contribute to the needs of the saints! Pursue hospitality to strangers! Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them! Rejoice with those who rejoice! Weep with those who weep! Live in harmony with one another! Do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly! Do not claim to be wiser than you are! Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all! If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all!”

I wish for us all that we can respond to each encounter with another person the same way Moses did and say, unequivocally: “Here I am!” And I wish, we would have St. Paul whisper in our ears the litany of things that will help us do just that. Then, maybe, just maybe, we, too, will find ourselves together with God on holy ground.

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

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11th Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2023