

*Exodus 3:1-15*

*Luke 13:6-9*

*word count: 1,675*

A country dirt road split in a rural outpost of a small Vermont town, and I used to hike along where it broke to the right. Trees formed an arbor over the lane for as long as it went, until it turned into a path that crossed the clearest stream from which I ever drank. Following the stream, a hiker would eventually come through a wood and into an open field. There was no sign a road had ever come closer than a few miles of this field, but there, standing not far from the woods was the remains of a small house.

The house had at one time been white, as I could see from some remnants of wood that had fallen into the shallow basement with a frame of rusty springs from a mattress. Glass, bits of a chair, some rust-eaten cans—all lay beneath the remaining support beams for a floor that had long since disappeared to the elements, or for a trespasser’s fireplace. A wood and wire framed artwork beribboned with ripped green cloth that had once been the sofa, sat in the sunshine in the yard; now a home for mice. A more permanent rock bench perched maybe ten feet away from the house, and that is where I sat and contemplated what had happened here. Over time, the place began to disappear slowly back into the earth.

Someone had chosen to live beyond civilization in the presence of these multitudinous maple trees that flamed and burned in autumn reds and oranges, and the white birch trees that brought flutterings of yellow here and there. The stone bench once served as a place to turn out to be in the presence of the Divine-in-nature, surrounding a simple house. But now it felt like a place in which to turn in towards the ruins and pay one’s respects to a mystery that lay smoldering before it—a home being reclaimed by the very beauty of nature that had caused its builder to lay down roots there in the first place.

Years later, I revisited this site from memory, hiking miles to find an open field that bore no trace of ever having been lived in by whatever mystic or Vermont country loner it was that had once taken up residence there. No outline of the foundation, nor even the bench made out of rocks remained. Only the maples and birches are witnesses to what transpired in one small human lifetime, and only the Mystery that drew whoever it was to live there, still resides among the secret remains of a house that now lies swallowed up beneath that holy ground.

The early Celts believed in “thin places”; geographical locations scattered throughout British Isles where a person experiences only a very thin divide between past, present, and future times; places where a person is somehow able, possibly only for a moment to encounter a more ancient reality within present time. Edward Sellner, who writes about this idea of “holy ground,” says, “We inherit from our ancestors gifts so often taken for granted... Each of us contains within... this inheritance of soul. We are links between the ages, containing past and present expectations, sacred memories and future promise.

One of my “thin places” is an empty Vermont field where a house, long lost to the earth, once boasted a window where the unknown resident within looked out at the same flames of red and orange and yellow in the autumn bushes and trees outside and felt that he, or she, was standing on holy ground, in the presence of all that is Divine, just as this interloper with a backpack would later sit on a rock bench and feel that same presence.

Where are the “thin” places in your lives, places where you feel most spiritually connected?

Moses was tending sheep while journeying beyond the edges of civilization, past the wilderness, to where the story tells us that he came upon the Mountain of God. There, an angel of God appeared to him in a burning bush, and Moses made a conscious choice to turn and examine what the Celts might have called, “a thin place,” one of those geographical locations where one might expect an occurrence of great mystery. Moses decided to stop, turn around from what he was doing, and concentrate on the mystery that was now before him. God, seeing that Moses made the choice to respond to this sign, told him, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Author William Bryant Logan writes, “God is asking Moses to experience in his own body what the burning bush experiences; a living connection between heaven and earth, the life that stretches out like taffy between our father the sun and our mother the earth. If you do not believe this, take off your shoes and stand in the grass or in the sand or in the dirt (or on this sanctuary floor).” (*Logan, writing in “Dirt.” Parentheses mine.*)

Where are the sacred places upon which we stand and feel most connected? What is our responsibility to hold those places with the reverence they are due?

Mythologist Joseph Campbell reports that in India a sacred place might consist of a red circle drawn around a stone so that the environment becomes metaphoric. “When you look at that stone, you see it as a manifestation of Brahman, a manifestation of the mystery.” Any place where the Mystery breaks through into our consciousness is holy.

Suzanne Guthrie, writing in *Grace’s Window*, says: “A hospital corridor can be a mysterious place, a terrible and holy threshold upon the boundary of the soul. Here you will find an opening through which you might apprehend and embrace unexperienced aspects of God. Uprooted from your ordinary days, the hospital con-founds the peaceful soul with the realization that the God of daily living is also the God of sudden dying. The God of the comforting church sanctuary is also the God of the Intensive Care Unit. The God of beeswax candle and incense is the God of vomit and pus; the God of white linen and embroidered vestments is the God of plastic curtain and sweaty sheet; the God of organ and flute is the God of squeaky gurney wheels and crying children; the God of [deep port wine] grape juice and [delicately embossed] Communion bread is the God of infected blood and wounded flesh.

In short, every place can be a holy place, if we but partake in the experience with integrity. The peace vigil, the walk for equality, the hospital room and the places in which we pray. The church sanctuary, the forest sanctuary, the workplace, the civic arena and the home—all of the places where we rise to the challenge to be fully human—holy ground all.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree—it is a story of repentance, of being asked to examine who you are and what you are called to do, and to bear fruit. It is also a story of the God of second chances.

Somerset Maugham said it best in his autobiography, *Summing Up*, “I knew that I had no lyrical quality, a small vocabulary, little gift of metaphor. The original and striking simile never occurred to me. Poetic flights...were beyond my powers. On the other hand, I had an acute power of observation, and it seemed to me that I could see a great many things that other people missed. I could put down in clear terms what I saw...I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought, with pains, that I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed.” Somerset Maugham discovered the secret of genius.

The point is that life does not ask us to become what we are not. The fig tree was only required to produce figs. No more. You and I are asked only to accomplish what our natural gifts allow, but we are asked to accomplish just that. In any one of those fiery flashes that can knock us

off our feet if we were only to pay attention, we are reminded that we stand on Holy ground, and as we do, we owe the creation around us a sense of reverence through how we live our lives in response to the needs of family, friends, community, and world.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's last book, *An Altar in the World*, she writes, "What made him Moses was his willingness to turn aside... The practice of paying attention really does take time. Most of us move so quickly that our surroundings become no more than the blurred scenery we fly past on our way to somewhere else."

If we do not have the time to spend our lives apart in contemplation of the Divine in nature all around us, what if we were to take a moment to turn aside?

"I Am That I Am," says the voice of God to Moses. Martin Buber says that a more appropriate translation would be, "I will be whatever I will be." The Ground of All Being, enabling all things to live and move and have their being. The Elohist tradition that passed on this story that is found in Exodus felt this presence in a God that at once calls Moses and enables the dumbfounded shepherd to turn his thoughts to his own vocation.

The parable of the fig tree calls hearers to turn thoughts to their own—to paraphrase Bishop Spong last week, "to live fully and love wastefully," and so to bear fruit. We are all standing on Holy ground. If you need to be reminded of that—take off your shoes and feel your connection to sacred space.

This is an open table. No matter who you are or where you are on your journey, you are welcome here. Bring your pain and hurt to this table and eat and drink hope.

## Scripture for Sunday, March 7, 2010

### Exodus 3:1-15

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, “ I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!”

And he said, “Here I am.” 5 Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” 12 He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

13 But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.’”

### Luke 13:6-9

6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”