

2-21-99

## **STANDING ON HOLY GROUND**

### **EXODUS 3:1-12**

#### INTRODUCTION:

We delight in singing about “standing on holy ground,” but have we ever experienced it? Did we so experience the presence of God in a particular place at particular time that we knew we were standing on holy ground? How did you respond? What did you do? What did you say? When you find yourself standing on holy ground, it is important that you respond to God appropriately.

This recorded moment came in the 80th year of the life of Moses. He had spent 40 years in the house of Pharaoh and now he has spent 40 years caring for the flocks of Jethro in Midian. Here he finds himself in an isolated part of the ancient world. Busied with a very menial task, imagining what ever life might have been in Egypt is only a memory of the past. Then something happens that will change everything for this Hebrew. It was the moment of fresh encounter between Moses and the God of Abraham. There are lessons for us to learn about standing on holy ground from this incident. Who knows, we could be standing on holy ground before this night is finished.

#### I. THE SURPRISE.

Everything in the text would indicate that this whole incident caught Moses completely by surprise.

There was nothing going on in his life that would indicate he was about to step on holy ground. He was surprised!

1. It may come while you are occupied with the mundane.

Did you notice how this whole incident is introduced? “Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Median and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.” Moses was doing on that day what he did every day. For forty long years he had been doing the same thing every day – tending the flock of Jethro. On this day while he was doing what he was responsible for doing for that day, he encountered the Angel of the Lord burning like fire in an ordinary bush on the back side of the desert. Suddenly without any warning he finds himself standing on holy ground.

Moses had not been engaged, as far as we know, in any particular religious exercise. There is no indication that he had been seeking the presence of God or holy ground. Rather he was doing what shepherds do, tending the flock. While in the text Horeb is called the mountain of God, this does not mean that Moses knew this to be in a special way the mountain of God. It is called the mountain of God because of what would happen on this mountain at a later time. This mountain was a part of Mount Sinai where God would later reveal Himself to the people of Israel. Moses calls it the mountain of God here because those to whom he is writing will know that it was Mount Sinai where he saw the burning bush and stood on holy ground.

I have found this to be the way of the Lord with many of us. It was while we were pursuing the ordinary pursuits of life that we came upon a burning bush in our lives. Without anything to indicate

to us that something momentous was about to happen, we are suddenly thrust into the presence of God. This has surely been the pattern of my life. Some of my most meaningful encounters with God caught me by surprise.

2. It will come at the time of God's choosing.

God selected the time and place that He would manifest Himself to Moses. The reason for this time and this place is known only to God. It is a simple expression of divine sovereignty. God chooses when and where He will make himself known to man. He is not subject to our manipulations. We cannot make some place holy ground, only God can do this by choosing at that place to manifest Himself.

There is a real need in our contemporary setting for us to realize just how sovereign God is in these matters. We want to bring God down to our level and make him one like us, bound by our limitations. We must not do this because He is the sovereign God and He is able to decide for Himself when and where He will make himself known. It was and will likely be a surprise because all of these matters are in God's hands.

## II. THE SANCTITY

What was it about the place that made it holy ground? Was there something in the physical make up of the terrain? Obviously not! The record indicates that it was just an ordinary piece of the Sinai desert and an ordinary bush that was burning from the inside and was not consumed. The secret of the sanctity of this place is found in God and not in the place. It is the manifestation of the presence of God in this place that makes it a holy place. This is always the way it is. A place that is holy not because we have sprinkled holy water on it, but rather because holy God has stood on this place.

Moses was now standing in the presence of holy God. The things recorded in the text about the activity of God at this place and time gives us the secret of the sanctity of the place.

1. The place is made holy by the voice of God.

What Moses first saw was an ordinary desert bush that was burning brightly with fire. This may have not been unusual to find a bush burning with fire. But this bush was different for it was burning but was not consumed. No ashes were being created by the burning. It was so unique that Moses felt he must investigate further and began to approach the bush. As he approached the bush, "God called to him from within the bush, "Moses, Moses!" It was this voice that he heard that made the place holy ground. The voice was calling him by his own name – "Moses, Moses!" Is this not a wonderful revelation into the nature of our God? Our God, the great and holy God of the ages, condescends to call us by name.

Have you heard the voice of God? I do not mean by this have you heard the voice of God audibly.

You may have heard the voice of God audibly, but an audible sound is not necessary to hear the voice of God. God can speak the language of the heart so distinctly that you know you have heard God speak. Where were you when God called your name? He may have been calling you to salvation or to service or to separation. But He was calling you. Where were you? Wherever you were when you heard God speaking to you that is holy ground.

That is a holy place for you – made holy by the voice of God.

2. It is made holy ground by the revelation of God.

In our text we are told that it was “the angel of the Lord” that appeared to Moses in the flames of fire within the bush. His expression “the angel of the Lord” is often used for the manifestation of the presence of God himself. Probably more specifically the manifestation of the pre-incarnate Son of God in His spiritual reality so we are not surprised when we learned that it is “the Lord” who speaks to Moses from the bush. It is God who is being revealed to Him in the flaming presence in the bush.

Some have seen the bush as a symbol of the lowly people of God, and this may be an appropriate understanding of this passage. However, the emphasis in the text is not on the bush but rather upon the fire that burns in the bush. Fire is associated with the presence of God in many different places in the Old Testament. Fire is a visible expression of the burning holiness of God. He is indeed a consuming fire. So in this burning bush God is revealing himself to Moses.

Then God takes the revelation a step further for after a word of caution to Moses about approaching the bush, God says to him, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” God is revealing to him that He is indeed the God who made covenant with the patriarchs. He is the God of Abraham. He is the God of Abraham’s son Isaac. He is the God of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. These are the three men with whom God established a lasting covenant that related to the people of Israel. It is a reminder to Moses that he is indeed still a part of the people of Israel and that the God of Israel is his God. What a moment of revelation!

And then God went a step further in the revelation as He revealed to Moses what he is now doing.

This is found in a series of active verbs that God speaks to Moses. “I have indeed seen the misery of our people.” “I have heard them crying out.” “I am concerned about their suffering.” “So I have come down to rescue them.” “So now, go, I am sending you.” The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is at work in the present moment. He is even now undertaking the deliverance of the people of Israel. It was this revelation of God that made the place where Moses was standing holy ground.

Has there been a moment in which God uniquely revealed Himself to you? Where were you when it happened? What was it that God made known that was so real in that moment? What did God say to you that day? All of that made that particular place holy ground.

3. The ground is made holy by the call of God.

This is the thrust of this passage. God is calling Moses to be the human instrument for the deliverance of His people Israel. Henry Blackaby speaks of this incident as being an invitation from God to Moses to join Him in what He is doing. God is already moving toward the ultimate deliverance of His people from their bondage in Egypt and the deliverance of His people into the land flowing with milk and honey. He has come to invite Moses to be a part of what He is doing.

However, actually in the text, it doesn’t come in the form of an invitation but rather in the form of a command. God says to him, “So now, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt.” That is a command!

Has God ever given you such a command? Has God ever made such an assignment to you? Has God ever invited you to join in something He is doing? Where were you when it happened? Where

ever you were that is holy ground. Any time God issues such a personal command to one of His people, they are standing on holy ground.

### III. THE SHOES

What do you do when you find yourself standing on holy ground? The Lord God gave to Moses a rather specific word of instruction: "Do not come any closer; take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Moses understood the significance of that moment because he did take off his shoes and covered his face in the fearsome presence of holy God. There are some lessons here for us.

#### 1. The removal of the shoes is an expression of reverence.

This was a common word of instruction to someone standing on holy ground. You took off your shoes in recognition of the fact you were in the presence of God. Some of you have visited the Holy Land and have been in one of the holy places of the Muslim people. I remember entering the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Everyone who enters the mosque leaves their shoes outside. It is a physical way of expressing the awareness that you are entering a holy place.

Reverence is not something that our generation does well. We have become a frivolous and blasphemous people. We seem to have lost the capacity to acknowledge the presence of God. Our youth are not even inclined to take their caps off in church. But taking off the shoes was a visible sign of reverence.

I don't know what would be most appropriate for you in acknowledging the reverence of God, but whatever is most appropriate you need to do it. If taking off your shoes would be the appropriate thing to do, then do it. If bowing your head is the appropriate thing to do, then do it. If kneeling on your knees is the appropriate thing to do, then do it. If prostrating yourself on your face is the appropriate way to do it, then do it. But when you are standing on holy ground, there needs to be a reverent response to the presence of God.

#### 2. The removal of the shoes is an act of putting away the defilement of the world.

This was probably another reason for putting off the shoes. The shoes would have become dirty from trampling across the desert following the sheep. So, if you are going to stand in God's presence, put away every sign of defilement. You must approach holy God with personal sanctity.

#### 3. The removal of the shoes is a presentation of oneself as a servant.

All of this, however, was designed to put Moses in a position to be ready to obey the Lord. God is revealing himself in this way so that Moses will be ready to go to Egypt. Unfortunately, in the case of Moses God encountered a reluctant servant. Instead of responding promptly in obedience, Moses responded with questions and excuses. We will look more deeply into the reluctant of Moses next time, but his reluctant is not recorded for our immolation. It is recorded for our warning.

Two notable Biblical characters who found themselves standing on holy ground, gives us a better example. When Isaiah found himself standing on holy ground, he said, "Lord, here am I. Send me." When Saul of Tarsus found himself kneeling on holy ground in the dust of the Damascus Road, he said, "Lord, what will you have me do?" That is the more appropriate response when you find

yourself standing on holy ground. God has brought you in top His holy presence to get you ready to carry out a mission, to do a task, to be faithful to an assignment so you move from the presence of God to do the will of God.

Do you remember standing on holy ground? Did you respond to God appropriately? Are you doing tonight what God told you to do when you were standing on holy ground? If you are not doing what God told you to do while you were standing on holy ground, then you are living in serious disobedience to God. It is time to come back to the God who made himself known at that holy place and say to Him, "Lord, I will do what you want me to do right now."