

Living Like We're Standing on Holy Ground

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
September 3, 2023 – Contemplative Worship Sunday

Let us pray: Silence within us, Lord, every voice but your own. And then help us to hear your voice, deep within us. Through Christ we pray, Amen.

Last year at Lewinsville, we spent time working with the theme of the “Journey Into the Heart of God,” throughout the year. Our primary goal, you may recall, was to sink our roots down into God’s heart, God’s presence, God’s Spirit. Our driven and compulsive area desperately needs the missional witness of a small number of people who are consciously on a pilgrimage into the heart of God.

This coming year – and you’ll hear more about this next week, and in the weeks to come – our theme will shift a little bit, so that we will be reflecting on how we are “Sent From the Heart of God.” That is to say, the heart of God is not a place to hide from the pain and the hurt and the conflicts and the suffering of the world. We are not meant to hide out in the heart of God, we are meant to live from the heart of God, to carry the heart of God with us into the world in mission. We may think of the rhythm of our lives as a movement into the heart of God to rest, and then a movement from the heart of God to serve. Whether we rest or whether we serve, we are living with the heart of God. A question is how do we do that?

Our text from Exodus 3 this morning has become for me a primary text that holds together the life of contemplative presence and active servanthood, the kind of life that we want to develop and embody here at Lewinsville. Moses is out in the field shepherding a flock that belongs to his father-in-law. While he is out working, the text says that he walks by a bush that is on fire, but that is not consumed.

That alone tells us much about Moses’ capacity to be present. In order to notice that it was not being consumed or burned up, Moses had to observe the bush for a certain amount of time. So he was not in too much of a hurry – that’s a big deal, especially for those of us who can rush around from task to task – and he was attentive. He did not ignore the burning bush, but neither was he anxious about it. He didn’t run to get a fire extinguisher to put it out. He was not in a hurry, he was attentive, and he was non-anxious.

He turns aside to see it, and it is in the turning aside to see, that Moses has an encounter with the living God, the God of his ancestors. While God can surely encounter us when we are in a hurry, when we are not paying attention to our life, or when we are anxious – God could presumably still get through to us – but we’re not

making it easy on God. We can cultivate the qualities that Moses demonstrated here – slowness of heart, attentiveness to what is happening in this present moment, and holding our anxieties lightly. As we cultivate practices of inner stillness, we increase the likelihood that we will be able to hear God’s still small voice resonating within us. God then marks this moment for Moses by instructing him to remove his sandals, to recognize the sacredness of the ground of their encounter, out in the wilderness.

But the text does not stop with Moses having a meaningful experience at the burning bush. Genuine contemplative practice, done in the name of Jesus Christ, always connects to the pain of the world. As James Finley has written, “a commitment to contemplative living is synonymous with a heightened awareness of and response to the real suffering of real people.”¹ So the Exodus 3 text moves immediately from the holy ground in verse 5 to verse 7 where the Lord says, “I have seen the suffering of the people in slavery, I have heard the cries of injustice, and I am sending you, Moses, to respond to that suffering. “Come, Moses, I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.” Contemplative presence flows into missional action, which is done with contemplative presence.

The work of Moses’ life emerged from his encounter with God at the bush. Moses was called to respond to the suffering of the Israelites, not out of some compulsion to fix people, not out of some self-righteous need for others to see him as a good person, not as a way for him to work off the guilt of his past, not for any of his ego-driven personal programs for happiness. God called to Moses and gave him the work that his life was giving him to do.

Down through the ages, the Christian tradition has long understood the need for us to cultivate an inward quiet, interior spaciousness, so that we can live from the still, small voice of God, rather than being jerked around by the frantic voices of the world. In order for us to live out the qualities of the Christian life that are described in Romans 12, we need to be grounded and rooted in the heart of God: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

These are not things you can do in a hurry; they are not things you can do on the fly. In order to do them, in order to live this way, we need to return regularly to the well of God’s deep quiet and rest. In a few moments, we will come to the table of the Lord in communion, where we will receive the life of our dear Lord into our own bodies. As we are preparing ourselves to receive communion with grateful hearts, we are going to keep a few moments of silence. During these few minutes, you are welcome to use one of the suggestions on the handout – there are two breath-prayers there, there is

¹ James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*, referenced in Richard Rohr’s *Daily Meditation*, September 1, 2023.

some guidance about watching your breath, there is a description of Centering Prayer, and you can hold someone in the Light of God, as our Quaker friends have taught us. Or you can simply close your eyes and pay attention to God's loving presence within you. The primary goal is to do what Moses did in Exodus 3 – slow yourself down, pay attention to what is happening in this present moment, and hold your anxieties lightly.