

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 4, 2010 (III Lent, Year C)

From the miraculous to the mundane. That's where our readings take us this morning. From the burning bush to mere manure. From holy ground to ordinary soil. Along the way we meet a burning bush and a fig tree; it's a gardener's delight. The story of the burning bush is well-known; the story of the fig tree is often ignored.

Deeply embedded in these stories is the concept of holy ground. Out of a bush blazing yet not consumed with fire God says to Moses, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And, presumably after doing a double-take, Moses does just this. He removes his shoes and hides his face in the presence of the God of his forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He immediately comprehends that he is indeed standing on holy ground.

Before we go any further I'd like to take a moment to explore the notion of holiness. To call something holy is to recognize that it has been set apart by God; that it is sacred. Saints are holy men and women who have been set apart by God for a specific calling. Holy Water begins as ordinary H₂O but has been set apart and blessed for use at the sacrament of baptism. But holiness is broader than this. It reflects anything that has been touched by God. Thus anything in all of creation can be said to be "holy."

Which includes me and you. As a child of God, as one of God's own creations, you yourself are holy – set apart by God. Now you might not always feel holy; you might not always act in holy ways. But that doesn't change the fact that you were created to embody holiness; to be a sacred vessel of God's love. Obviously as fallen creatures we can't live up to the holiness of our creator. We are made in the image of God but not in the fullness of God. But the potential is there for us to be the holy creatures that God intends. Not always, perhaps not even often. But the potential for holiness resides deep within your soul and God continually seeks to call it forth.

As people of faith we are bearers of the holy to the world. Which sounds daunting but it means that we have a responsibility to help regain the lost notion of holiness in our world. At best it's been diluted. We refer to our sports arenas as cathedrals, to computer images as icons, we use all sorts of expressions like holy smoke, and holy mackerel, we occasionally act holier than thou, and some of us have been known, on occasion, to raise holy hell. Lent is a good time of year to set about recapturing the holy in your own life.

And to do so you must look all around you – inward at your soul; up at God; outward at those around you; and down at the holy ground upon which you walk. What makes it holy? Simply God's presence. With the incarnation of Jesus Christ into our world and his ever-abiding presence the entire world has become holy ground. From the heights of the hills to the depths of the sea; from the suburbs to inner city slums; from war-torn or earthquake ravaged countries to

the lush green fields of rural communities. When you get out of bed in the morning you're walking on holy ground; when you walk out to get the newspaper you're walking on holy ground; when you walk around your office you're walking on holy ground; when you walk up the aisle to receive communion you are walking on holy ground; when you walk around Stop and Shop you're walking on holy ground. And when you see the entire earth as holy ground, your perspective can't help but change.

God asks Moses to remove his sandals as a sign that he is walking on holy ground. And if we metaphorically remove our shoes, it might just change the way we approach the places upon which we tread. But there's also something very earthy about this. With bare feet, Moses is literally in touch with the holy ground upon which he walks. It gets in-between his toes; he is in communion with God in a very tangible way.

Holy ground isn't always a destination or a physical place – it's a spiritual state of mind. A recognition that we are surrounded by God's presence and therefore always in the midst of the sacred. To live life with the assurance that with every step we tread on holy ground, doesn't mean we walk on eggshells. Quite the opposite. It means that we can walk boldly in the assurance that Christ himself is with us.

So the holy can be found in both the miraculous and the mundane. God can appear as a burning bush one moment and in the dust of the earth the next. God may speak to us in dramatic ways or God may speak to us through the everyday. Some of us have experienced the holiness of God through visions or the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit and those experiences can be life-transforming. For most of us, such moments are rare. We're more likely to experience God's presence in the dust of the earth rather than in the burning bush. Transcendent moments do occur, but on a daily basis we're more likely to see God in the small encounters that make up the routine of our daily lives. Through the sharing of a cup of coffee with a friend in need or the cat that curls up in our lap after a long day or comforting a child who has skinned a knee. But God is equally present in the miraculous and the mundane.

With this talk about holy ground, Jesus' parable about the fig tree seems somehow out of place. This isn't one of Jesus' most easily understood parables so a bit of explanation is in order. In the story there are three "characters": the owner of the vineyard, the gardener, and the fig tree. The basic point is that the owner had a fig tree planted three years ago and hasn't seen a single fig. Not a great return on his investment. So, he tells his gardener to cut it down. Soil is a precious commodity, it's being wasted by this useless fig tree, so get rid of it. This makes a lot of sense except that the gardener seems to have some sort of sentimental attachment to the tree and asks that the tree be given a year's reprieve. He'll pay some more attention to it, throw on some fertilizer, and if it still hasn't produced any figs, then he'll cut it down. The fig tree has been given a last chance, a stay of execution. So what's Jesus talking about here? Many see this parable in the following light: the owner of the vineyard is God, who has the authority to plant and to uproot lives as he sees fit. The gardener is Jesus, who intercedes on behalf of the fig tree.

And the fig tree is seen as God's people in the world. So, through the intercession of Jesus, God has mercy upon us, and offers us a reprieve. Despite our sinfulness and our turning away from God and one another, we are offered another chance to make amends. This doesn't minimize the fact that we will all ultimately be judged by our actions but it does highlight the merciful nature of God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ.

In light of our discussion of holy ground, I think this emphasizes just how important humanity is to God – we *are* holy ground. And when we don't treat ourselves and one another as such, God weeps. God created the heavens and the earth; God created night and day; God created water and sky; God created living creatures; God created humanity. Holy things for holy people walking on holy ground.