

13th Sunday after Pentecost – 03 September 2017
Exodus 3:1-15

Have you ever heard someone say that they have stood on holy ground but you knew they weren't talking about a church or a cemetery or some other traditional "holy" place? I don't remember hearing that phrase all that often in my younger years but over the past decade or so it seems to have become quite popular. Indeed, I have used it myself.

When I was in my last year of seminary, my dad took me to Toronto to watch a Toronto Maple Leafs' game at the historic Maple Leaf Gardens. As you may already know, I am no fan of the Maple Leafs, but this was to be the last year the team would play in its Original Six barn. A new home was opening for the team and it seemed an end to an era had arrived. I couldn't get to the Montreal Forum before it was decommissioned, but I did get to the historic Gardens, and it did feel to me a hallowed place. Legends had walked those halls. Stanley Cups had been won on that ice. Marriage proposals had been made in those stands. In that old, ramshackle, smelly ice barn was a sense of history and importance that any true hockey fan would acknowledge as a sacred space for the sport.

On the third day of my trip to Scotland last month, I was reminded of that phrase as I tried to explain to my sister why our father had the biggest smile on his face that we had ever witnessed as he stood on the stone bridge of the 18th hole at St. Andrew's Golf Club. We were both amazed at the transformation that came over him as he gazed across the course at the North Sea. Then it dawned on me, for golfers this is mecca; St. Andrew's is the cathedral of golf courses. There was something about standing on that bridge which had lifted the feet of legends and which had been dreamt of by thousands of athletes of this gentlemen's game, that carried my dad out of the damp misty weather and lifted him to a place of peace and joy that we had never witnessed. For all of his adult life, my father had wanted to stand right there on that very spot, and finally he was there. It was, in a sportsman's way, a holy moment.

This morning we have heard a story about what "true" holy moments can be like as we listened to the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. We have been reminded of this quintessential story of God breaking in to a life in a way that was both unexpected, and almost unbelievable.

Moses was not a perfect person. We heard last Sunday the story of his birth and how he came to be raised as a member of the royal Egyptian household, but we skipped right over the story in which he kills a man as he was trying to defend a Hebrew slave and then buries the evidence and is forced to run away from his crime. Moses was not a typical hero. In many ways, he was just the opposite. He was the exact person you would never guess could be used by God to do something important and big! And yet, here we are, seeing Moses as God saw him – as a human being with the potential to do something significant for God.

So, as we come to this morning's Old Testament reading, we see a man who is really hiding in the hills. He is tending the sheep, minding his own business, staying out of sight and a long, long way from the people who might be looking to find him in Egypt. Moses was not looking for an assignment from God. He wasn't even expecting that God would speak to him. As a matter of fact, I have often wondered how many times God tried to get Moses' attention before He decided to go at it with gusto and show up in an unquenchable burning bush ... Finally, Moses

had to notice and when he did, he realized that something spectacular and noteworthy was happening. But even at that, it took God speaking to him for Moses to get the point and realize that he was standing on sacred and holy ground.

Quickly God taught Moses that when you are standing on holy ground it is important that you show proper respect and awe, hence removing his sandals and averting his face. And only once Moses has gotten himself all straightened out does God *then* speak to him and fill him in on His big plans. Moses was to have enough trouble comprehending what God wanted him to do once he was aware of the sacred nature of the moment, the time and the place. There was no way that he would have been able to believe in and understand the depth of what was happening had God not called him up abruptly with that burning, and yet unconsumed, bush. Moses needed to be made aware of the moment before he could become aware of the occasion and what would be divinely called from it.

Holy moments are not reserved for prophets and saints. Certainly, we do have a Bible that is filled with these holy moments that throw light on sacred occasions but these stories that have been captured on paper and shared over the centuries are not an exhaustive example of when God speaks and how God's people respond. Holy moments, which could indeed lead to holy occasions, are around us all the time. Not as often are they marked with such obvious signs as a burning bush, but the signs are there if we are in a space within our own faith journeys in which we are willing to become alert and aware of them when God breaks in and does create hallowed ground beneath our feet.

On the last evening of my trip to Scotland, my sister, who had made the trek up Arthur's seat, all 890 feet and ninety minutes of hard climbing, the previous Saturday evening, told me that I too had to take a journey up that wee mountain – or at least part of the way. On her adventure, she had discovered tucked away off the path, the ruins of St. Anthony's Chapel, which had been built probably sometime in the 1300's. She convinced me that for the sake of my spiritual life I needed to hike up there with her and see the world from God's perspective. And so, we trekked up that path with full backpacks stuffed with last minute souvenirs for family, water bottles and sweatshirts. From the paved path, to gravel well traversed, to hard rocks and then finally to loose gravel, I struggled up behind my mountain goat of a sister to discover a small well with a basin just off the path. Little did I know that this was just the entrance to a holy and sacred space. Around a large outcropping of rocks, she led me to the most beautiful church I have ever seen – one that only has the remains of a wall and some foundation stones.

When I first arrived, I had a fleeting, silly thought that I should take off my shoes as I was standing on holy ground, but I was only being facetious. After I caught my breath and began to really take in the view, my sister told me to sit down on the stones and to throw my baggage (that's what she called our backpacks) over behind the rock where it wouldn't distract me from the moment. She also told me to sit with my back to the view of the bottom of the mountain and Holyrood Castle so that I could see what God had made here in this place instead of what man had made down below. And so, for the first time in my life, I listened to my little sister and did as I was told.

As I sat in the windowsill of that old chapel wall, I closed my eyes and listened to the wind. I smelled the cool night air as the sun was setting and the chill of the damp night began to

descend. When I opened my eyes, I saw the hills surrounding me – hills that have been there for millions of years and yet are still so very young in God's time. In my imagination, I heard the chant of the Mass from priests gone by and the prayers of the faithful and broken-hearted alike who have prayed on that very spot over the centuries before I did as well. And I realized, as I prayed and cried and allowed myself to be honest with God – who was definitely there with me on that holy ground – that God had indeed given me too a burning bush – my sister, who ordered me up that hill and instructed me to get rid of my baggage for a little while and to just sit in silence and be with God.

I think that God did speak to me that night. Unlike Moses, God's words were not so very clear but they are still there in my heart and in my head, helping me to grow ready for that divine and holy occasion that the holy moment at St. Anthony's Chapel was preparing me for. While so much of that time is still swirling around within me, one part of it has come home clearly. Baggage.

Moses carried with him the baggage of his past, and yet God was able to work with Moses as he was, and to let the baggage Moses carried become a part of who Moses was to become as he entered into God's divine occasion. But first Moses had to set down that baggage and simply appear before God just as himself, no baggage in hand, no shoes upon his feet. When he appeared stripped down like that, then he was ready for God to prepare him for what would come next.

What I learned part way up Arthur's Seat, sitting in the ruins of St. Anthony's Chapel is that to listen and be present for God, we need to intentionally shed ourselves of our baggage. Our contemporary version of taking off our shoes, is to lay aside all the baggage we carry – the worries and concerns of life, our hopes and dreams, even the people we love. God doesn't ask us to throw that baggage away, but just to lay it aside while we stand on sacred and holy ground, listening to him speaking to our hearts. The baggage we carry is a part of the journey God will call us to walk, but before we begin to walk that path toward, or even within, our sacred occasion, God needs our full attention. And that means that we lay aside the things that would call our attention away from God, so that we can truly immerse ourselves in those brief, or maybe not so brief, moments when God invites us to stand undistracted on Holy Ground, barefoot and baggage free, as we too listen and comprehend what God is calling us to do.

We are citizens of a world that is ready and able to recognize holy secular moments. That means that we are already primed to recognize those real holy and sacred moments that are truly of God. Now we just need to learn how to trust God and set aside our baggage from time to time when we realize that something, or someone, has become a burning bush before us, calling us to acknowledge that God is present and we are indeed standing on sacred ground.