

Holy Ground

I have to say that the Old Testament readings over the last few weeks have held me spellbound, marvelling again at this rich story of God working in the lives of his people.

So where did we leave things last week?

Moses. Born to devout Hebrew parents, hidden from Pharaoh's henchmen, then placed in a basket in the rushes, found by the daughter of Pharaoh and, after a time of being cared for by his own mother thanks to the intervention of his sister Miriam, subsequently adopted into the royal household. How's that for a rags to riches story? To say nothing of irony.

To all intents and purposes Moses was, by then, Egyptian. But deep inside he still knew he was Hebrew as evidenced by his intervening when one of "his" people was being beaten by an Egyptian. He killed the Egyptian and hid his body but word got out, getting to Pharaoh himself who vowed to kill Moses.

So our Egyptian prince fled and ended up in Midian subsequently marrying a daughter of Jethro, a shepherd and priest of Midian. Here Moses tended his father-in-law's flock for 40 years and this is where we pick up today's story on Mt Horeb

I have always been confused as to whether Horeb and Mt Sinai are one and the same or different places and I find that most scholars seem to have that problem too. Many come down strongly on them being one and the same, suggesting that the terms the mountain of God, Horeb and Mt. Sinai are interchangeable. According to that fountain of all knowledge, Wikipedia, 'Horeb', meaning desert or mountain of the dried-up ground, was the name for the mountain complex of which Mount Sinai was one of the summits. The range is about 3 kilometers long and 1½ kilometers wide, with a plain at the north-east end. From the look of it, a barren mountainous land.

What I do find fascinating is that when the Israelites finally left Mt. Sinai, God's presence went with them and the mountain no longer was a significant religious center. Mt. Sinai appeared in recorded Biblical history only one more time. Nearly six centuries after the Israelites were at Mt. Sinai, Elijah fled to "Horeb, the mountain of God" to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel following his encounter with the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 19:1–21)

Maybe we shouldn't worry too much about geographical locations but get back to Moses. There he was, wandering around with his flock

in this barren landscape, when God stepped in and what was an ordinary day suddenly became extraordinary. Moses saw something strange.

The angel of the Lord (another way of saying the Lord himself), and a burning bush that didn't burn.

Over the centuries there have been many theories to try and explain this phenomenon. Such as:

a temporary mirage of reflected sunlight on some red leaves

a campfire of some Bedouin

St Elmos Fire (The latter is a type of continuous electric spark called a "glow discharge.")

And, of course, the simplest one, and the one I believe – it was God. May I say that I don't believe explaining how God did this is important – consider it, if you like, as an attention seeking device provided by the Lord.

Now note this next bit –Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight" and he did so. It was only then, when he turned aside, that God spoke to him and called him by name. I can't help but wonder what would have happened if he had ignored it and continued with his day's work? History rewritten? I don't think so. I am inclined to think that God would have reached out to him in some other way for he was the man God had raised for that specific task.

A burning bush and an angel and then God called Moses by name. It just became personal.

And Moses responded. “Here I am” at which God instructed him to take off his sandals for he was standing on holy ground.

God then identified himself - “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” His credentials as it were. And Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. He experienced that sense of awe, that knowledge that he was in the presence of the God of his people.

A sentence I read says

“Moses has to be reminded that in the presence of God you belong on your face with your shoes off”.

This was holy ground, not because of its geographical location or features of the landscape, not even because of a bush that burned but didn’t – but holy ground because of God’s presence there...

Moses saw. Do we, like Moses, recognise when we are on holy ground?

William Barclay talks of people

“running around the burning bush taking photographs from suitable angles instead of taking off our shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is holy ground.”

At times I think at times we have lost some of that sense of the holy – the awe and wonder – and that we too forget to take off our sandals (figuratively speaking) when in the presence of God – and just take the photo.

We too need to realise that everywhere we are is “holy ground” for God is all around us waiting for us to turn aside.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her epic novel poem “Aurora Leigh” these words that really resonated with me, that

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.*
–Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh

But back to Moses

Not only had he encountered God, his God, the God of his ancestors but now God gave him a task to do and not an easy one either.

“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

Suddenly this intensely spiritual experience, this touch of the holy, had turned into a nightmare. God wanted something of Moses and it was not something that the 80 year old Moses felt equipped to do.

In response to his call, he asked 2 big questions of God, probably in a state of panic:

Who am I that I should do this? and (in brackets – if I should do this)

Who shall I say sent me –or, in other words, what is your name?

And God revealed himself to Moses “I am who I am” ” In Hebrew it’s Yahweh To the ancient Jew this name was so feared and revered that they did not even dare speak it. Although we find Yahweh used in the book of Genesis most

scholars agree that God did not reveal his personal name to anyone before the time of Moses. This was God revealing himself as the one who was and is and ever will be.

Remember Jesus made this claim too. In John 8 we read⁵⁸ “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”⁵⁹ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

But not only did God reveal his name but he showed himself as a God who cared – “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry.... I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them.”

Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Heschel refers to this as God’s Pathos, meaning that God is actually affected by and responds to the events and happenings of the world. God’s loving desire for just, personal, reciprocal relationships between his creation and himself makes possible a “living encounter between God and [God’s] people.”

I believe that is our God

Moses’ burning bush experience of God carried with it a call to action, to God’s action. Moses took some convincing. His objections continue well into chapter 4 if you wish to read on for yourselves. But God never gave up; he didn’t take “No” from Moses. We all know what happened – Moses, God’s unlikely deliverer for his people, eventually went and did as he was commanded, reluctantly it must be said — but he went. Isn’t the Bible full of ordinary people like this called, in the midst of their ordinary lives to do tasks that seem and are beyond them – but are not beyond God.

Mountain top, burning bush experiences, however wonderful, cannot last forever. I am sure that many of us have at times experienced a sense of being in the presence of God. Maybe it has been the beauty of the world around us, the deep sense of worship history in a church or the light of God shining out of another’s face. These are indeed blessed moments – that make the back of your neck tingle. Moments to remember that “in the presence of God we belong on our face with our shoes off”.

But there is more. God reveals Himself to us for a purpose – the giving and receiving of His call on our lives. Being in the presence of God leads to being called – it’s as simple as that. God calls us to come into his presence then says “go.” And in most cases this call will be not to stay on the mountain top but to take his presence, his message down from the mountain to his people who need it.

After Moses finally did what God had asked him and led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt they journeyed back to Mount Horeb where they stayed almost two full years – until God moved them on, on from a relatively comfortable existence. In Deuteronomy 1: 6 we read “The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain’”

As Christians, we can find ourselves stuck on our Horeb, in our own holy space. We need to realise this is a time for preparing ourselves for what God has in store for us, knowing that there will come a day when he will call us to move on. I do wonder if as individuals and a church, we may be guilty of spending too long on the mountain, enjoying our burning bush moments and at times have forgotten what he has called us to be and do.

We have encountered God in our own lives and in this church. May we continue to experience that sense of awe and holiness as we come and kneel before him. But our true call is to go.

Is it time for us to move further into our community, to where the needs and the hurts are, where people live broken lives, to really be the gospel to all people?

Amen