

Holy Ground

In the name of him who is the Resurrection and the Life, dear friends in Christ: Today's reading from Exodus gives the account of the calling of Moses as the Lord appears to him in flames of fire from the burning bush. The Lord tells Moses to go confront the Pharaoh of Egypt and rescue his people Israel from their cruel bondage there. And as he begins to address Moses, the Lord identifies himself as the God of Moses' forefathers saying, "*I am* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". The "*I am*" is present tense, a fact which might not initially strike us as theologically significant; but it is. In today's Gospel, Jesus uses it as Scriptural proof that life continues after physical death and that one day there will be a resurrection of the body. He was in an argument with the Sadducees who denied these things. They said this is all there is to life, what we see and experience here. And after that, well, dead is dead. No more existence, conscious or otherwise. Once you pass on, you're gone forever.

This is why they came to Jesus with a preposterous hypothetical story of a woman who had been married sequentially to seven brothers – all of whom died while married to her. I don't know; I suspect it was her cooking. I do know that if I had been one of few last brothers, I would have done whatever it took to keep from marrying her: go into exile, enter witness protection; something. These days a guy might get off by claiming to be gay, but back then they'd stone you for that and you'd end up dead anyway. But I digress. The real issue is that the Sadducees think they have an airtight case with this story. If there really were a resurrection coming, and this woman and her seven former husbands were all raised up, the resulting confusion as to whose wife she should be for all eternity would be problem even the Lord couldn't sort out. It demonstrates (to them at least) that there can't be a resurrection. The problems it would create are just too big.

In response, Jesus tells them that their silly story really only demonstrates their lack of faith in the power of God and their ignorance of the Holy Scriptures. Marriage, he says, is an institution for this age, not for the age to come. So the grand confusion they imagined would result is a non-issue. But with respect to the fact that there will be a resurrection, Jesus points to the simple truth that because the Lord calls himself the God of the patriarchs in present tense, and these are men who died over 400 years before he spoke with Moses on the mountain, proves that they are still alive. If they were gone forever as the Sadducees claimed, the Lord would have said, "I was their God." But he didn't, thus proving that he is and always remains the God of the living.

From all this we can derive two important truths. First, that grammar is important. It's necessary to communicate clearly and accurately. So, if you're in school wondering why you have to learn about nouns, participles, prepositions, and all the rest of it, you just do. Deal with it. The second truth is this: there will be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. It should never be in doubt. And that in turn should be great comfort to us both when we lose loved ones, and when the time comes for us to face our own hour of death. God is the God of the living. If he is your God, you live, even though you die. And he will raise you up on the last day in a body incorruptible to inherit forever a new and completely recreated earth.

Because this is true, what I'd like to focus on this morning is ensuring that the God of the living is our God. And to do it, I'd like to develop another concept that is revealed in today's text from Exodus. It's this idea of holy ground. When Moses turns aside to investigate the strange

sight of a bush on fire that yet remains unconsumed, the Lord, even before he identifies himself, says, "Do not come near. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground."

What does that mean? How can ground be holy? What makes a certain piece of real estate or plot of soil somehow more sacred than other places? These are good questions. And I'll have you note that this isn't something Moses thought up. This idea of holy ground comes from the Lord. It's part of his revelation to us, part of the way in which he relates to us; so we should seek to understand it.

But before we do, we need to know what the word "holy" means. It's often used as a synonym for moral perfection or sinlessness; but that doesn't quite capture the idea. Besides, how can a patch of ground be sinless? It doesn't make sense. No, holy, as it's used in the Bible, means set apart; in particular, set apart for the Lord to be used for his purposes. And the idea is this: God, though he is everywhere present in his Creation, selects in time and space certain locations at which he acts: acts to reveal himself, his Word, and his saving work on behalf of fallen man. The places where he does these things are holy because there the Lord is present in a very special and gracious way in order to save us.

And for our sakes it's necessary that he does this. A God who is everywhere transcends our reality and is therefore impossible to grasp. We can't really know him. Sure, it's comforting to know that he's always with us wherever we go; but we don't see him, nor do we know that we're actually dealing with him apart from his making himself known at particular times and places. People will say they see God in Creation when they admire the flowers, trees, and mountains; but those things aren't God. They are merely the work of his hands. They point to the Creator; but they are not him.

Thus God chooses certain locations at which he acts so that we can be sure that we're actually dealing with him. We see it in the call of Moses. The Lord appears to him at Horeb, which is Mount Sinai – not on any of the other mountains; but on this particular one of the Lord's choosing. There he tells Moses "I have come down to deliver my people out of the hands of the Egyptians and take them to a land flowing with milk and honey. So come, I am sending you." When Moses argues with the Lord asking, "Who am I that I should do this thing?" the Lord responds, "I will be with you. And this shall be the sign that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship me on this mountain." That is to say, "Here I appeared to you and commissioned you to go rescue them, and here I shall appear to all my people when the job is done. That's how everyone will know that I did this work of salvation and that you are my agent." The Lord tied the proof of his saving work to the place: Mount Sinai.

And that's what happened. When Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he led them to Sinai, God's holy mountain. There the Lord did appear as he'd said, and there he gave his people his law, his commandments, and his statutes. Most importantly, he gave his people instructions about how he was to be worshipped: through sacrifices which were to be offered at the places he chose – and only at the places of his choosing. While Israel was on the march for forty years, this was always wherever the Tabernacle was set up – a mobile place, but a place nevertheless; somewhere that the Israelites could point to and say, "There. Right there: that's where God is with us in a gracious way. That's where he forgives our sins."

After the conquest and occupation of the Promised Land, that place became Mount Zion in Jerusalem. That's where the Temple was built – the holy ground where God made his abiding presence known. There sacrifices were offered to the Lord and he forgave his people's sins for a thousand years (albeit intermittently because the people were not always faithful).

These sacrifices were mere foreshadows of the ultimate sacrifice for sin that was made to the Lord on the same holy ground, when Jesus, our great High Priest and Deliverer took upon himself all our guilt and was crucified on Golgotha – the holy place where God revealed himself, his loving gracious will toward us, and his mighty work of salvation: God dying for us that we might live. And having died, he was buried in a tomb, one that had never been used because it was yet another holy place – where the sacrifice for sin, the dead body of Christ, was laid. And from that holy place he also rose to begin the work of making the whole world holy unto the Lord.

This is what we see in the years that followed. Before, the whole world was to come to the Lord at the place he had chosen in Jerusalem. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus the directive changed. No more sacrifices for sin were required. “Therefore go into all the world” Jesus told the apostles, “make disciples of all nations – out there.” And they did. And wherever they did, they established churches, churches which consecrated or set aside holy ground on which to conduct worship. We still do this today. When this building was dedicated to the worship of God, the ground was declared set aside for God’s purposes. That’s why we call this the sanctuary: it means “holy place”. And mind you, it’s not holy because of what we did in declaring it so; but rather because of what God does here. Here he meets with us in Word and Sacrament. Here we receive his gifts of life, forgiveness, and salvation. Here he sets us free, delivering us from the cruel bondage of sin and death. And here he makes us holy. He sets us apart to be his own and to live as his children. He makes us temples of his Holy Spirit ... we who are, when all is said and done, nothing but a few handfuls of dirt that God has given the gift of life. Friends, you, me, all of us together, we are holy ground. Made so in Holy Baptism and kept that way only because of God’s gracious presence and his saving work for us in Christ Jesus.

And thus we remain holy ground as the Lord continues to visit us with his presence and saving work. It happens as we continue to hear the spirit-filled and life-giving voice of Jesus who speaks to us in his Word and gives us his very being in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We live as holy ground, and one day we will die that way returning to the dust from which we were taken.

But even then we will be holy ground, our mortal remains, once the Temples of God’s Spirit, lying in soil that has been set aside for the burial of the dead. These are holy places now filled with sadness. They speak to us harshly of death’s cruel oppression. But from them Jesus – a Deliverer far greater than Moses – is coming to set us free. Then our bodies will be raised. Our sadness will be turned to joy. The places of sorrow will be the sites of happy reunion. And the whole earth will become, as it was in the beginning, a holy place for God and mankind to dwell together in peace and love forever. Then there will be nothing but holy ground. And we will, with all the new creation, give endless thanks and praise to our God and Father through Jesus his Son. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!