



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
July 15, 2018 Sermon

Standing on Holy Ground

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-6; Psalm 84

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

Our first Scripture lesson is depicted in the third window here on the left-hand side of the sanctuary. On that window, you'll find symbols of Moses and Moses' leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, to freedom in the promised land.

That forty-year journey begins with Moses encountering God in, of all things, a burning bush. In that third window, in the far-left, middle section, is a burning bush. If you can't see it from where you sit now, I invite you to take a look after worship. "Standing on holy ground." It comes from Exodus chapter 3 verses 1-6, which I'll read now. . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

Our Second Scripture Lesson is depicted in the second window on the left-hand side here. That window depicts sacred objects inside the "tabernacle"—which was the name of the portable tent of worship—the dwelling place of God—that travelled with Moses and the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the promised land.

Again, if you can't see the window, I invite you to attend today's Sunday school class, starting at 11:20 down in the chapel, where we'll hear a report about the church building and its historical status, as well as the outdoor lighting and window restoration projects.

All three of the objects depicted in the second window—menorah, altar, and the ark of the covenant—were inside the tabernacle/tent. But what may surprise our modern ears is that God was in there, too. God promises to go with the Israelites on their journey, and says that, as he does, the tent will be *his* dwelling place.

That plan of the tabernacle also becomes—on a much grander scale—the plan for the temple, which Solomon builds centuries later in Jerusalem, which was once again, God's dwelling place. Our second Scripture lesson—Psalm 84—is about the joy of dwelling with God in God's house. . . .

Sermon:

I bet it's happened to you. I know it's happened to me—on both sides of the equation.

A late summer Sunday afternoon: a car with out-of-state plates drives slowly in front of the house, and then comes to a stop. Then, hesitatingly, slowly, a middle-aged man or woman, or maybe both, walk up and ring the doorbell.

"Hello, um, you don't know me, but I . . . I used to live here, I . . . I grew up in this house—yes, it *was* a long time ago, and . . . well, we were just driving by . . . no, really, we drove here because . . . I wanted to, I needed to, see the old place again . . . would it be OK if we walked around a little?"

So the owner let's you walk around, shows you around even. "We used to play whiffle ball back here: here, right here, this was home plate; right there was the pitcher's mound; and if the ball hit that tree, it was a triple, and if you hit it over the garage roof, home run."

You are standing on holy ground.

And then the owner invites you in. It's all so familiar, yet so different, so much smaller than you remember. "This

was my room—*that* window, my sister used to hold me by the ankles and dangle me out *that* window.” And so there you sit, at the kitchen table of a complete stranger, staring down at the ice tea they were nice enough to offer you, fighting back the tears.

Holy ground.

We human beings have a sense for—a deep and ineradicable need for—the holy. Always have, always will. A place, an object, anything, becomes holy to us when we experience something eternal, something timeless—there, through it, in time. In the house you grew up in, you experienced love, connectedness, joy, reassurance—not always and certainly not for all of us, sometimes we experienced those things by their painful absence and our inarticulate longing for them, but either way we experienced what it meant to be a family, to be human—in time.

Moses, in front of that burning bush, experienced something eternal, something timeless: God—in time. Holy ground.

“Bethel,” in Hebrew, means “house of God.”

It begins with Jacob, the chosen one of God who would go on to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. But when Jacob’s a young man, he’s running for his life, and he has nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. So one night, he falls asleep under the stars with only a stone for a pillow.

And while he sleeps, he dreams; he dreams of a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven with the angels of God, ascending and descending on it. And then, suddenly, the Lord is standing beside him saying, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”

You are sleeping on holy ground.

When Jacob wakes up, he says, “Surely the Lord is in this place! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven!” So Jacob takes the stone that he had put under his head and sets it up and pours oil on top of it, and he makes a vow, saying, “This stone, which I here set up for a pillar, this stone, shall be called Bethel, God’s house.”

Perhaps it seems strange that stone could be God’s house, but no less strange than a burning bush or a tent. And perhaps none of it will seem strange at all, if you’ve ever had someone drive up to your house on a late summer Sunday afternoon—or made that drive yourself. God will dwell where God will dwell.

Any place, any object, anything, can become holy—it’s nothing inherent to the place or the object that makes it holy—a bush is just a bush, after all—it’s what happens there, what happens through it. And yet there are places and objects and things that, because of what happens through them—become holy forever, become places or things where the eternal, the timeless can be experienced again and again and again in time, by so many, many people, and they are dedicated to that very purpose.

And boy oh, boy, does that make us nervous. Protestants in general, and Presbyterians in particular, get very nervous when people start to talk of holy places and holy objects.

You see, Presbyterianism was born of the Protestant Reformation, and the Protestant Reformation was born as a response to—an attempt to reform—the excesses of the medieval Catholic Church.

The whole idea of holy places, and the practice of making pilgrimages to them, the whole idea of holy objects—relics (the bones of saints for example)—with special powers, including the power to heal—by the 14 and 1500’s it was all *rotten* with abuse.

There were so many purported pieces of the “true” cross—that is, the cross Jesus was crucified on, and therefore the relic of all relics—in churches, cathedrals, and castles across Europe, there were so many, that the Dutch scholar Erasmus (sympathetic to the Reformation) wrote this:

“The cross of Our Lord, which is shown publicly and privately in so many places . . . well, if all those fragments were collected together, they would form a fair cargo for a merchant ship.”

In *all* of human history, there has never been anything like it. In scale, in imaginative brazenness—preying on the naïveté and gullibility of the faithful, exploiting people’s need for ways to touch the timeless, the fraud, chicanery, greed, and cynicism, the mass commodification of the unique and the sacred—all of this in late medieval Europe, in *all* of human history, there has never been *anything* like it . . . until the sports memorabilia market of late 20th-century America.

I kid you not. A baseball player named Luis Gonzalez spit out a piece of bubble gum during a spring training game, somebody picked it up, put it on eBay, and after an extensive and much-publicized bidding war, sold it for \$10,000. I kid you not.

“The bats of Babe Ruth, which are shown publicly and privately in so many places . . . well, if all of them were collected together, they would form a fair cargo for a merchant ship.”

We human beings have a sense for—a deep and ineradicable need for—the holy. Always have, always will. And if we Presbyterians have become so wary of past abuses that we can’t even acknowledge this human need for the holy—much less the reality of the holy—the Protestant Reformation persisting in us like a bad, 500-year hangover, then people will find the holy elsewhere. And so much the worse—for them and for us.

We human beings are bodily, physical, material creatures existing in time. That’s not *all* we are, but it’s an important part of us. So if we’re going to experience the timeless, the eternal, it’s going to be *in* time, at least in part.

Art, for example, which has always been recognized as having transcendent power—a power to take us above and beyond our everyday time-bound lives—art, all art, always has a material, physical dimension—a medium. Music, for example, often thought to be the most universal and transcendent of all arts—is an intensely physical endeavor: you use your body, your whole body; and you use instruments, including the human voice (I’m preaching to the choir here). Music is in time—keeping time matters (I’m preaching to the choir here)—and yet in music, in time, thorough time, we experience the timeless.

It’s as if God is saying to us, “I made you as bodily, physical, material creatures existing in time, and so I will come to you in that way, so you can know me: the word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . this is my body . . . this is my blood. God comes to us physically in time.

Which brings me to this: ***This*** is a pipe from our pipe organ; it’s one we had to replace—it’s a tuba magna metal organ pipe from our Casavanti pipe organ. But now it sits on my desk: as a kind of paperweight, no, really, as a memento, no let’s call it what it really is—a relic, a holy relic. It’s something physical, bodily and material that helps me to remember, to experience, the holy.

My 15-year-old son, Graham, does too: he likes to pick it up and . . . blow it, again and again.

Relics aren’t bad. Of course, our need for them can be abused and exploited, but in themselves, they’re good. As bodily, physical creatures we need bodily and physical things—touchstones, if you will—to remind us of the holy, to help us to experience it again. Hence that summer Sunday afternoon pilgrimage back to your childhood home. Hence the mementoes and souvenirs, the pictures, programs, ticket stubs and other scraps of paper, that we keep on our desks or in our dresser drawers, on our walls or in our wallets, in our memories and our hearts—things that we keep, because we need to touch and to see them, or just to know that they *are* there, that we *are* here, and that the holy, that God, is here, too—with us.

This stone, this stone of our church, all this stone, is God's house. We are standing—well, you're sitting, and I'm standing—on holy ground. And boy, oh boy does that make us Protestant-Presbyterians *nervous*.

So let me say two things to assuage your nervousness.

First, yes, it's true:

Craig Showalter, our Business Administrator, and our Buildings and Grounds Committee are selling mementoes, souvenirs—including many, many replaced organ pipes of all sizes, as well as panes from the temporary Te Deum window, not to mention other relics of Westminster—Craig and company are selling these downstairs in Fellowship Hall. But we will not, I assure you, lapse into the corruptions of the medieval Catholic Church or the late 20th-century sports memorabilia market. Every organ pipe sold downstairs comes with a **Certificate of Authenticity** signed by none other than the Reverend John Neely. So next month when you see one of these babies selling for \$20,000 on eBay, you know that, as long as it comes with one of these certificates, it's the real deal, the genuine article. (Hey, if used chewing gum can sell for \$10,000 . . .)

Second, let me assure you that we are not going to lapse into that **church-building-olatry** that Protestants protested against 500 years ago. Our love and care for this building will not take the place of other ministries God calls us to—both in the building and beyond. God is with us not just up here in the sanctuary. No, God is with us downstairs with our ID ministry. God—and God's holiness—lives in our kitchen downstairs. God is there when our members go to DECA Middle School or Eastmont Elementary—or when their children and teachers come here. God was there with our youth and advisors in Montreat this past week, with our intergenerational mission trip in Raleigh earlier this summer, and with the Habitat for Humanity build in Dayton. But I am sure of this: unless we honor God up here with our hearts and minds and lives—the very best of ourselves—we will not do so in any of those other ways, elsewhere.

It's as if God is saying to us “I made you as bodily, physical, material creatures existing in time, and so I will come to you in this building, in this stone, so you can know me. Our love for this building does not take the place of our love for God, but it is one way—an important way—that we express our love for God. And more than that, it is one way—an important way—that God expresses his love for us.

This used pipe is by no means the only memento on my desk. I have several others there because they were on my father's desk and some of those were on his desk because they were on *his* father's desk. I have this dream that my son, Graham, 92 years from now, when he is a spry and sprightly 107-year-old, will have this sitting on his desk. And one day, he will say to his great-great grand-daughter, “Oh, that? That was my father's, it's from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio, he was a pastor there way back when.”

And seeing the wonder in her eyes, he'll say, “Do you want to go see it?”

I don't know how they'll get here: by car, hovercraft, or teleportation. But I do know what I hope they'll see *when* they get here. I hope they'll see a sign out front that says, “Westminster Presbyterian Church.” But it's OK if they don't. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord. It's ok. Man proposes but God disposes. It's ok. If they see a sign out front that says “Westminster Condominiums,” I can live with that—I really can. The question is whether the future residents of those condominiums can live with me—because I'm telling you, I'm coming back to haunt them.

In the middle of the night, they're going to hear me preaching and teaching. And it won't be just me. They're going to hear John playing the organ, the choir singing, and all of us, they're going to hear all of us—so so many, many of us—singing and praying, laughing and talking, cooking and serving—and eating *and* drinking. They're going to hear so many of us loving God and neighbor . . . I tell you, we're going to be having ourselves a good time [blow horn]. “Ain't no grave, and no condos neither, gonna hold us down.”

There are places and objects and things that, because of what happens there, through them, become holy *forever*, become places or things where the eternal, the timeless, can be experienced again and again and again in time, by so so many, many people, and they are dedicated to that very purpose. This building, this church, is one of them. It is God's gift to us. It is beautiful and we love it, as we should—because we love God, this is God's house, and God is here. “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven.”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.