

## “Holy Ground”

Bryn Athyn Cathedral - November 14th 2021

Rev. Solomon Keal

*“Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”*

*(Exodus 3:1-5)*

What is ‘holy ground’? Are some places on the earth more holy than other places? Is the land around the bush on Mt. Horeb truly more holy than the land around other bushes? The people in the Ancient Church worshipped on mountains and in groves of trees (see AC 2722). Are *those* places more holy than other parts of nature? The actual ground in the land of Israel and the surrounding areas has long been considered holy ground by many different people, to the point of being fought over because of its perceived holiness. I think in the New Church (like in the Ancient Church) we can recognize that it’s not the *physical* ground itself that is holy, but the *spiritual* things which that ground represents.

And still, even in the New Church, we often build church buildings like this one, and we try to create sacred spaces in this physical world; locations that might feel like holy ground to us in some way. As much as we all love this cathedral and the sacred space we can find here, I think in the New Church we would also recognize that there’s nothing intrinsically holy about the stones on the floor of this beautiful church. That’s not to say that there can’t be power in ultimates (see AC 9836), but the power comes only if there is spiritual meaning in the ways we interact with those ultimates. And as much as this building can allow for the creation of sacred space in our hearts and minds, it’s not the only physical location in which we can find holy ground. So where *do* we truly find holy ground? What do we need to *do* to experience holy ground or sacred space in our lives? And what is it, that truly *creates* holy ground?

In our story today about Moses, it appears that the holy ground is created by the presence of the burning bush, which somehow contained or channelled the presence of God. The Writings for the New Church teach us that the burning bush is a symbol for the Lord’s Divine Love and Wisdom. The leaves of the bush are like the many truths we can find in the Word, much like the leaves of the Tree of Life. And the fire within is a symbol for the warmth of the Lord’s love which shines through those truths (see AC 6832-6841). The Lord’s love is a spiritual fire that warms and enlightens, but does not destroy or consume. And as the voice of God from the burning bush said to Moses, this created holy ground. Wherever we find the Lord’s love and wisdom, we find holy ground. As it says in the book *Secrets of Heaven*:

*“Holy ground symbolizes holiness emanating from the Lord. A state marked by the holiness emanating from the Lord’s divine humanity is therefore what is meant by these words.” (Secrets of Heaven 6845)*

And that is not limited by physical spaces. It’s a ‘holy ground’ that can exist anywhere and everywhere, based on the spiritual presence of the Lord’s love and wisdom in our lives.

These days it seems that the modern vernacular of the younger generations doesn’t tend to use the word “holy,” as much. But I’ve found that young people these days tend to use the word “wholesome,” to describe something good; something connected to love and wisdom. And etymologically that is actually where the word “holy” comes from. And so we could also use the term “wholesome ground.”

“Ground” is a word and a concept that comes up in many places in the Word. Humanity is formed from the dust of the ground in the Creation story (see Genesis 2). Noah finds safety

and freedom on dry ground after the Flood (see Genesis 8). The children of Israel also find safety and freedom on dry ground when crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan river (see Exodus 14; Joshua 3). The Lord appears to Joshua outside of Jericho, in a story very similar to the burning bush, in which the Lord says “Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand *is* holy” (Joshua 5:15). Many people throughout the stories in the Word are said to bow their faces or bodies to the ground (see Genesis 18, 19, 33; 1st Samuel 20, 25, 28; 2nd Samuel 14, 24; 1st Kings 1, 18; 2nd Kings 2, 4; Psalm 44:25; Lamentations 2). In the New Testament the Lord tells the familiar ‘Parable of the Sower’ in which the seed grows on “good ground” (Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). In the story of the woman caught in adultery, the Lord writes on the ground as He teaches a valuable lesson about mercy and forgiveness (see John 8). And at one point the Lord spat on the ground and made clay from His saliva to heal a man’s blindness (see John 9).

But in the end, there’s nothing truly miraculous about the literal ground in these stories. What *is* miraculous is the “holy ground” that these things symbolize in our lives. The ground that Adam was formed from can symbolize the goodness that we experience in humanity, and the community we find in the life of the Lord’s Church. As it says in *Secrets of Heaven*:

“Wherever it appears [in the Word], ground symbolizes the church, or some aspect of the church. This is the origin of the human's name — Adam, which means ground.”  
(*Secrets of Heaven* 566)

“The meaning of ‘soil’ or ‘the ground’ [is] goodness. The reason why ‘the ground’ stands for goodness is that a Church which abides in goodness is meant by ‘the ground’. This is why Adam was said to be formed from the ground.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 8935)

And so it is in the other stories in the Word: We find ourselves on holy ground when we experience spiritual safety and freedom, like Noah and the children of Israel found on dry ground (see AC 872, 8185). We find ourselves on holy ground when we are fighting our bad habits, like Joshua preparing to conquer Jericho (see AC 728.3-5). We find ourselves on holy ground when we practice humility, like the many people bowing their faces to the ground (see AC 2147). We find ourselves on holy ground when we are engaged in spiritual growth, becoming better versions of ourselves, like the seed growing on good ground in the Parable of the Sower (see AC 3310:2). We find ourselves on holy ground when we practice mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, like the Lord modeled in the story of the woman caught in adultery (see TCR 409, 652; cf. AE 222:7, 304:61). And we find ourselves on holy ground when the Lord helps us to see things in a new way and we experience enlightenment, spiritual healing, and rebirth, like the man who was blind and was then healed (see AC 6669:6, 9051:3; AE 475:17).

All of that holy ground is always accessible to us, no matter where we go in life. But as much as the Lord’s love and wisdom truly do exist everywhere, in all time and space, we may not always feel *grounded* in that love and wisdom. And that is because there are things we need to do - or change about ourselves - in order to truly tread on that holy ground. And so the Lord told Moses to remove his shoes.

As we heard in our readings, “shoes” are a symbol for the lowest level of our minds that think primarily from our five senses, or our “sense impressions.” Now, of course our five senses *are* a gift from the Lord, something that allows us to get around in this world, much like shoes allow us to get around in this world. They help us interact with the world in a way that feels supportive and comfortable, like a comfortable pair of shoes. So, shoes can have a positive correspondences as well as a negative correspondences, as it says in *Secrets of Heaven*:

“A shoe’s symbolism depends on the topic at hand. When mentioned in connection with something good, it is taken in a positive sense; when mentioned in connection with something bad, it is taken in a negative sense.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 1748)

The challenge with our five sense is that they can prevent us at times from truly connecting with the spiritual world, which is an aspect of our reality beyond the reach of our five senses. And in the same sense, our five senses can also prevent us from truly connecting with the Lord. And so we need to spiritually remove our “shoes,” - our patterns of thinking based on our five senses - before we can truly be grounded in the Lord’s love and wisdom, and stand on holy ground.

For example, as we look ahead to the Christmas season, very soon we will be celebrating the blessing of the fact that the Lord miraculously took on a physical human body to be present with us in this natural world. The disciples and many other people benefited from a connection with that physical presence. But the Lord’s presence in our lives today is not dependent on only that physical presence. In fact, in some ways we can at times think *too* materialistically about who the Lord is. We might sometimes wonder what Jesus looked like; what color skin he had, what color hair or eyes he had, or how tall he was. And there might be ways in which thinking about those things can usefully remind us of the *humanity* of our Creator. But there are also ways in which thinking about those things can prevent us from truly standing on holy ground. Because the God of the Universe is so much more than the body of one middle-eastern Jewish man. The God of the Universe is the Divine Human who is Divine Love and Wisdom in *all* its forms. As it says in *Secrets of Heaven*:

“When the Lord appears to people He does so in a way suited to the kind of people they are, for a person cannot receive the Divine in any way other than that which is a way suited to the kind of person they are; and therefore also, when the Lord appeared on Mount Sinai He appeared to the people as a fire burning even to the heart of heaven. ... He would have appeared in an altogether different way if the people below the mountain who beheld Him had not been the kind of people they were.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 6832)

And further in the book *Divine Love and Wisdom*:

“If we stay engaged with [time and space] and do not raise our minds above them, there is no way we can grasp anything spiritual and Divine. We entangle such matters in concepts drawn from space and time, and to the extent that we do, the light of our discernment becomes merely earthly. When we use this light to think logically about spiritual and Divine matters, it is like using the dark of night to figure out things that can be seen only in the light of day. Materialism comes from this kind of thinking” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 69).

And also in the book *True Christianity*:

“Think about God in terms of essence, and from this think about person. Thinking in terms of person about essence means thinking materially about essence too. But thinking about person in terms of essence means thinking spiritually also about person.” (*True Christianity* 623.5)

And so we are encourage to ‘remove our shoes,’ in order to truly stand on holy ground.

And this is not only something we can do in our relationship with the Lord, but also our relationships with other people. We often use the phrase, “don’t judge a book by its cover,” as a way of reminding ourselves to spiritually ‘take off our shoes’ when we are interacting with another person; to look deeper than just what our five sense can tell us about that person. As it says in *1st Samuel*, “*The Lord does not see as people see; for people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” (*1st Samuel* 16:7). And I think that’s a reminder

that we can do the same, when we remember to spiritually take off our shoes. Sometimes we can get distracted by the different ways people look or dress or speak or write or behave, and we can miss the chance to truly understand how they think or feel. Removing our shoes allows us to reach past our differences and find the *common* ground that I think is part of what creates *holy* ground. In order to truly get to know another person - in order to “walk a mile in their shoes,” as the saying goes - we have to first remove our own shoes; or step out of the limitations of our own natural ways of thinking.

Spiritually removing our shoes can not only help our relationships with the Lord and other people, but it can also help our own spiritual growth. It’s useful to think about the symbolism of ‘taking off our shoes.’ What happens to us when we take off our shoes? We become more vulnerable, for better or worse. We have to be more careful in the ways we walk through the world. And we become more sensitive to our surroundings. We become more grounded and connected. It allows us to wash ourselves, and make ourselves clean (see Isaiah 1:16), and address any wounds we may need to address in ourselves. And it may even help us to relax, both physically and spiritually; finding the holy ground of peace and connection.

Taking off our shoes can be easier or harder depending on the type of shoes we are wearing. Sandals, slippers, and Crocs, might be easy to slip off, just as it may have become easy for us to look past a person’s physical appearance, to the person they are on the inside. Or it may be easy for us to know that the Lord is present, even when we can’t see Him with our eyes. But there are other shoes that are harder - or take longer - to take off; such as work boots, or ice skates, or laced-up ballet slippers. It might take time and effort to remove those shoes. And so there can also be ways that we think materialistically that can be harder to remove. There have been times in my life when I have struggled in my relationship with a loved one, because I have been thinking too much from appearances, and not enough from the deeper ways that both I and that other person are thinking and feelings. Sometimes it might even take someone else, like a counselor or therapist, to help us undo the many ‘laces’ of our spiritual shoes, one by one.

This may be part of the sacred space that was created when the Lord washed His disciples feet (see John 13). In order to connect in that meaningful way, the Lord and the disciples had to mutually consent to the removal of their shoes. And similarly in our relationships with other people we can try to help each other - with mutual consent - in the removal of our spiritual shoes, which brings us onto the holy ground of the church. As it says in *Secrets of Heaven*:

“‘Feet-washing’ was an act of charity, meaning that one ought not to dwell on the evils of another person. It was also an act of humility, meaning the cleansing of another from evils, like filth from the body.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 3147.8)

We can imagine that after the Lord spoke with Moses at the burning bush, that Moses put his shoes back on to return to his life in the world. And as long as we are in this physical world, we too will always need to put our shoes back on, and walk through the world wearing our five sense and the thinking that comes from that. We might also at times need to put on new shoes, when our old shoes have worn out, and we come to understand things in a new way. But I think the Lord’s invitation always stands, that when we can remember to *remove* our shoes - to step out of our sensory impressions and natural ways of thinking - that we will find ourselves, wherever we go, standing on holy ground. Whenever we take a stand for love, compassion, forgiveness, humility, respect, and usefulness, then the place where we stand is holy ground. *Amen.*

### **Lessons:**

Exodus 3:1-5; Secrets of Heaven 1748, 6843-6845