

In Search of Sacred Ground

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

We all need the experience of walking on "sacred ground..."

- in order to feel alive
- in order to stay spiritually awake
- in order to feel the presence of God

We need time spent on "sacred ground..."

- to be reminded that our lives have a deeper purpose than the predictable, mundane, routine aspects of daily living
- so that we may feel the influence of heaven, and the Lord, and so that we may be moved by spiritual virtues like...
 - courage, patience, perseverance, forgiveness, love, gratitude...

A "sacred ground" moment might be...

- being present at the birth of a child
- or being present w/a loved one as they transition from this world to the next

A bride and groom stand on sacred ground when they declare their undivided love to each other, when they say, "I do."

We stand on sacred ground...

- when we experience that *overwhelming* sense of peace after going through a bitter struggle, temptation
- when we let go of trying to control everything in our lives and, instead, momentarily, put our complete trust and confidence in the Lord, and feel His presence...

- at the top of a mountain
or by the ocean
or when watching the sun rise and...
 - recognize that none of these marvels, these
miracles, would be possible w/out God.

However, these "sacred ground" moments tend to be few and far between because...

- we live in a world of time and space
- & our bodies get tired...
 - and when our bodies get tired we have less *resilience*
 - & when we have less resilience we find ourselves
being...
 - impatient w/others
 - intolerant,
 - reactionary,
 - sometimes unkind and judgmental...

Another reason we might feel far removed from "sacred ground" is because we live in a world that *dazzles* us with astonishingly sophisticated technologies which have a way of seizing our attention and interest.

These dazzling technologies and modern-day conveniences are designed to make our natural lives more and more...

comfortable,
easy,
pain-free...

And part of us might say, "What's wrong with this?" and one answer would be, "Nothing."

If you had the choice of traveling to a distant location on foot or by horse or by train or by plane, why not make use of the most efficient, comfortable, easiest, pain-free mode of transport?

That said, technologies *do* change the way we perceive the world. Take our modern day "printing press," the internet, by way of example.

We are a society that has become "enamored" by our technological capabilities, by our electronic screens, and our handheld devices.

Again, the question could be asked, "And what's wrong with this?" and one answer would be, "Nothing" in that from a hand-held device we can access any type of information around the world, instantaneously, 24/7. We can also connect with other people all around the world, in their hundreds, their thousands, their millions, instantaneously, 24/7.

It's an amazing new frontier, or in the context of today's sermon, a new kind of "ground" that we find ourselves walking on.

But there's a downside to this hyper "connectedness" and efficiency. The downside is that this medium can separate us from God and from each other. It can *distort* our sense of what's real and what's important.

For example, there's growing evidence to suggest that those who use social media as their primary means of building relationships with others actually report feeling lonelier and more depressed *the more they use it* (see *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt and *Lost Focus* by Johann Hari).

This applies to our current generation, and especially the younger generation, but we are all susceptible to the pitfalls of this *uncharted* electronic territory.

Now, a sermon is obviously not the place to get into all the reasons why this particular technology might be changing the way people *perceive* the world and each other, but its' dangers are very much related to the Scriptural text we are exploring today, so let's jump right in.

Moses and Joshua, the two great liberators of Israel, were both told to take the shoes off their feet if they wished to hear what the Lord was telling them.

In both cases, these men didn't realize they were standing on sacred ground and were actually in the presence of God.

Only after they had been mentally prepared (by symbolically removing their shoes) were they in a position to hear the Lord...

Moses and Joshua received important instructions that led to two, crucial *turning points* in the history of the Israelites: their escape from Egypt under Moses' leadership and their entry into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership.

In certain parts of the world, removing your shoes before entering a building or designated space is not only expected - it's done as a sign of *reverence* and *respect*.

It's a simple ritual that triggers a mental response, a mental "cue" or "reminder" that you've entered someone else's "space" and ought to respect it as such.

This tradition fits with the spiritual meaning of our text.

We learned in our reading this morning that the "feet" correspond to the lowest part of the natural mind and that the "sandals" or "shoes" which cover the feet (thus forming a *barrier* between the feet and the ground) correspond to "*an even more natural and earthly*" part of the natural mind (see AC 1798).

A couple of noteworthy points emerge here.

First, the "removal of shoes" describes a *mental* process, not a physical one.

Secondly, we're being introduced to the idea that our natural mind has *higher* and *lower* levels to it.

We might be tempted to think of the natural mind as being all one thing but the teachings of our church use very *precise* language to describe the different levels of the natural mind and how they perform different functions (see AC 1748, 3322, 3761).

For example, we use the *higher* levels of our natural mind to create and problem solve, to work on projects, to enjoy a good conversation whereas we use the *lower* levels of our natural mind to interpret physical sensations like seeing and hearing or touching and eating.

This precise distinction between levels of the natural mind brings us to the *why*, to *why* the removal of "shoes" plays such a pivotal role in understanding the significance of this text. Again, we learned in our reading this morning that,

*"if those levels of the [natural] mind consist solely in bodily and earthly interests the Divine influences coming into [the natural mind] are **reduced to nothing** since they are **incompatible with what is there**" (AC 6845).*

That's strong language - "reduced to nothing..."

What are these "Divine influences" which the Lord wishes to share with us which are, *nevertheless*, "reduced to nothing" if we don't become aware of, and cast aside, that which is blocking these influences?

They are spiritual qualities like,

courage, patience, perseverance, forgiveness, love,
gratitude...

...all of which we ask the Lord for in prayer.

These Divine influences are also deep states of mind like,

peace, order, wisdom, redemption...

...all of which our soul craves.

And the point is this: none of these Divine influences can reach down into the world we're living in, that is, reach down into our *conscious natural mind*, until two things happen:

- 1st** We, like Moses, must "turn aside" (reflect) to see why the bush burns but is not consumed.
- 2nd** We need to symbolically "remove our shoes" because this *switch in mental processing* helps us realize that we're *always* standing on sacred ground and that we are, therefore, *always* in the presence of God.

Let's go back to the world we're living in...

As marvelous as the internet is, it also has no *filter*.

This means we can learn about every disorder, murder, crisis, argument, war, disease, famine, lawsuit, injustice, not just in this country but in *every* country around the globe...

and not just occasionally but *every* day, or *every* hour if we so choose!

And what is the human mind meant to *do* with all this information?

No wonder people report having a hard time finding sacred ground.

Well, this gets to the crux of our spiritual lesson today because the lowest part of our natural mind, the part that "*consists solely in bodily and earthly interests*" (AC 6845) is *incapable* of interpreting what it sees in any rational way.

As it a result, it can only react in inflammatory and unhelpful ways because it is defending the base desires and materialistic wants of our lowest self.

So the first step in making sense of anything that disturbs us is to "turn aside" from the path we're currently walking and simply *stop*.

We're taught that to "turn aside" means to reflect (see AC 6836).

Reflection is the *antidote* to the knee-jerk reactions of the lowest level of our natural mind which, like the disciple Thomas, declares that it will only believe that which can be "seen with the eyes" and "touched with the hands."

It's the most stubborn part of the natural mind because it refuses to move beyond what our physical senses tell us which also explains why it is the last to be regenerated (see AC 6843, 9726).

This is why "turning aside" and taking time to reflect is so important. It opens our natural mind to the influences of Divine truth, the teachings of the Lord's Word represented by the burning bush.

One teaching simply says, "*without reflection we cannot be reformed*" (SE 739).

Without it we have no awareness of our "*interior life*" (Ibid).

Spiritual reflection lifts us out of dark places (see SE 733-738) to reveal the sacred ground that is all around us (see SE 733-738).

This text from the Lord's Word has many timely lessons:

It reminds us that the world cannot produce that which is sacred.

It reminds us that the world cannot produce *food for our soul*, no matter how sophisticated and ingenious our modern day conveniences and technologies might be.

And it reminds us that the world cannot create *meaning* either.

If we wish to go in search of these things, we must go in search of sacred ground because only on this ground will we feel the Lord's presence.

And we do this by letting the Lord lead us,

by letting Him help us "step aside" from the noise and confusion,

from the "snap judgments" of our lowest self which is incapable of viewing life in a rational way.

And so the Lord helps us "remove our shoes" because only then are we in a position to hear His voice.

Only then can He talk to us from the burning bush.

"So when the Lord saw that Moses turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, Moses, Moses! And he said, "Here I am." Then God said...take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."

AMEN.

Lessons: Exodus 3:1-10; Joshua 5:13-15; AC 1748, 6844, 6845