

EXODUS 3:1-15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." **6** Then he said, "I am the God of your father,[a] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8** So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **9** And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

12 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you[b] will worship God on this mountain."

13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am.[c] This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'"

15 God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord,[d] the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.'

"This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HOLY?

Exodus 3:1-15

Have you ever had an encounter with the Holy? I wouldn't be surprised if you have. If you think of Moses and his encounter with Yahweh on Mount Horeb as the only model for being in the presence of the Holy, I think that would knock most of us out of contention. But, if we can see the Holy in the more mundane, then, yes, you might very well have met the Holy.

Example.

Late this past spring I went backpacking with my younger daughter in the Porcupine Mountains of Northern Michigan. Our second day out was sublime. The Lake Superior Trail followed a high ridge with frequent views of the lake and a constant breeze that kept us cool and discouraged the bugs. The only problem was that it had rained very hard for quite a few days before we arrived and the trails were very muddy. In some places the water was standing 3 or 4 inches above the mud which was another 3 or 4 inches deep. It really wasn't possible to go around it because the floor of the forest all around was flooded too. Where we could we followed little hummocks that rose above the water or walked on stones or logs. In other places we just had to go through it, thankful for waterproof boots.

At one point I saw a little island formed by a birch tree and headed for it. I reached out with my left hand, grabbed the tree trunk and stepped right at the base of the tree where (I thought) the would be roots to hold me up. I was sadly mistaken. My left foot found the roots, but they were slippery and in a second I was falling towards the swampy path. I tried holding on to the tree, but the momentum of my weight and that of a heavy pack was too much. Moments later I was sitting in 5 or 6 inches of the most glorious muck that I had ever seen, smiling at my daughter who was suppressing her laughter and asking if I was alright.

That night we reached our campsite, ate dinner and went down to the stoney beach to watch the sunset. I still had my muddy jeans on. They had dried out and the caked mud had fallen away for the most part. As I watched the sun set, the clouds lit up in red, yellow, pink, orange and purple. They spread across the sky in ranks like pews in a celestial cathedral. And, as the sun deepened in color and approached the horizon, it became the cathedral's rose window divinely illuminated. We sat in silence and watched with wrapped attention. I thought to myself "It just doesn't get any better than this."

For some people, me included, a day like that, mud and all, might be an encounter with the Holy.

In the Old Testament the Holy is equated with God. To encounter the Holy was to be in the presence of God. So we have stories like the one we read this morning wherein Moses finds himself on holy ground, beside a bush that is burning yet is not consumed, listening to the voice of God.

First we hear God call Moses by his name; and Moses, with some trepidation I should think, acknowledges his presence: "Here I am."

Then God tells Moses that he is aware of the suffering of his people - the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in Egypt - and that he plans to free his people from oppression and give them a land to live in where milk and honey flow in abundance. God has chosen Moses to be the human agent who makes this happen.

Now Moses' fears reveal themselves. He starts throwing roadblocks up to show God that he has obviously made a mistake by choosing this humble sheep-herder from Midian.

"Who am I," says Moses, "to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And when that does not dissuade God, he brings up the issue of credibility. What makes you think that the Israelites will even listen to me? What if they start asking questions? What if they challenge where I got my authority from and want to know who sent me? I don't even know your name! If they ask - and I'm sure they will - I had better have an answer! What should I tell them?

"I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

There are some things that we can learn from this ancient story about encountering the Holy.

The Holy does not come by appointment, neither can we summon it by our own command.

It comes unexpectedly and may happen in places that seem wholly inappropriate for the Holy.

It does not require the person to have a special knowledge or insight.

In fact, it doesn't necessarily require a special level of purity or morality - remember Moses was a murderer before he met God.

It is often marked by things that defy rational explanation - like a bush that burns, but is not consumed.

It reveals something to us... often something about ourselves that we did not know. And, finally it asks something of us... or maybe better said, it demands something of us.

So, let me tell you about another day of my backpacking experience - the day that the Holy came calling.

It was day four... the day that we were to cover the most miles. The trail led through some beautiful old growth forest of hemlock and black spruce; and it climbed along the steep course of the Big Carp River beside dramatic rapids and waterfalls.

We started out at a good pace that we could sustain for hours and about halfway through the day we reached the point where the land flattens out and the Big Carp becomes a wider and tamer stream. Soon we had to ford the river and my

experience from many trips when I was quite a bit younger kicked in and helped us get across without getting soaked. We celebrated with nuts, dried fruit, oats and water.

As the afternoon went on I gradually began to feel like the day was dragging. In truth, however, it wasn't the day that was dragging, it was me. I suspect my daughter recognized that I was slowing down before I did and she adjusted her pace without saying anything. Although it had been over twenty years, I had been backpacking many times and I knew that sometimes you just have to grind it out.

Then we met more swamp. We thought we had left that problem behind two days earlier, but here it was again and this time it was accompanied by mosquitoes. To call them pesky little buggers doesn't do them justice! So out came the bug repellent and mosquito netting; and we soldiered on.

More elevation and this time my daughter began asking me if I was OK. Of course. Of course. Onward and upward. But the truth of the matter was that I was having to take rest breaks more frequently and, to make matters worse, my right knee was threatening to give up the fight.

Eventually, I had to admit to myself that I was struggling. And yet, I could not just stop. We were still one to two miles away from the next campsite. So I took the risk [TO MY PRECIOUS EGO] of telling my daughter that I was having some pain and needed more frequent rest breaks, and we went on like that for a while.

On one of those rest breaks my daughter said to me that she thought she should carry my pack and hers. She said that she would drop her pack where we were and pick up my pack. She would walk it forward towards our destination and after a while she would drop my pack, come back, pick up her pack and walk it forward. When she reached my pack, she would again drop hers, pick up mine and continue forward. In that way she would carry both packs in stages until we reached the cabin that we were to stay in that night.

And then the Holy happened. I said, "OK."

When I was describing the character of Holy encounters there was one that I did not mention.

Sometimes we can't know that a Holy encounter has happened until it is all over. It can be hours, days, months, years even before our eyes and hearts are opened to the fact that the Holy has knocked on our door.

And that is what happened for me. The reality of the Holy encounter dawned on me over the course of the next couple of days.

It had all of the characteristics.

It came without announcement or invitation.

It happened at the wrong place and time.

It required nothing superhuman from me.

It brought with it a revelation.
And, it called on me to change.

Here's the deal. I have always defined my role in life as a father as a care-giver, provider, defender, protector. When I look at my daughters today I see two capable, intelligent and talented women. But I also see two little girls, the ones who were small enough to hold in the crook of my arm, the ones I used to dance around the living room while singing with John Denver:

I'll walk in the rain by your side, I'll cling to the warmth of your tiny hand
I'll do anything to help you understand, and I'll love you more than anybody can.
And the wind will whisper your name to me, little birds will sing along in time,
Leaves will bow down when you walk by and morning bells will chime.

I am 71 years old. I know a few of you have me beat in that category, but give me a break. This is NEW to me. I've never been 71 before.

Saying "OK" when my daughter offered to carry my pack was an encounter with the HOLY precisely because it redefined me. I went from being the care-giver, protector, defender to being the cared-for, protected and defended. It was a HOLY calling to accept that I am changing, I have entered a new era in my life - and it is not an era to be feared and denied. It is an era to be welcomed, cherished, and greeted with deep gratitude for the people in my life who care for me.

The HOLY sometimes meets us where we are vulnerable. But it does not leave us there. It reveals a new way to us and transforms us so that we are ready to walk the path that God has put before us. And sometimes all we need to do is say, "OK."