

### Honoring the sacred

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2016.

*Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.* Exodus 3:5

Moses is just minding his own business. He is out tending his flock on Mount Horeb when he is confronted with the strange and fascinating sight. To his utter amazement, he sees a bush on fire. The bush is not being consumed while Moses is completely consumed with curiosity. How can this be? A burning bush is not consumed? And if that is not enough, the very voice of God speaks out to him, telling him to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground.

Moses hides his eyes because he is afraid to look at the very face of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. This is his first encounter with God who is calling Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt to the land of promise, the land of hope and freedom. There is only one problem. Moses has serious self-doubt. He doesn't feel up to the task. He protests, "You have the wrong man. Find someone else. There must be others better qualified and more articulate." Alas, his protests are to no avail. God knows better than we do and won't take "no" for an answer.

There are accounts of people in history who have overcome their lack of self-confidence. One of the best known is about Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin Roosevelt. The orphaned young Eleanor was well aware of how plain and unattractive she looked. To make matter worse, her grandmother cruelly referred her to as the "ugly duckling." With the encouragement of teachers and friends, the young Eleanor slowly gained confidence in her self and learned public speaking from those who had confidence in her. Having been brought up in a life of privilege, she dedicated her life to improving the status of women and conditions of the poor and disadvantaged. In time, she became one of the most admired women known as the "first lady of the world."

Moses is very unsure of himself and what he is supposed to do. He is not even sure of how he should refer to God. In Jewish tradition, the very name of God is so sacred that many devout Jews believe that it is disrespectful even to speak God's name. A variation of God's name is Jehovah or the Hebraic Yahweh. With the vowels omitted, Yahweh reads YHWH, which is how God's name is traditionally written in the Hebrew Scriptures. When Moses asks by what name he should refer to God, the response is, I am who I am. God is who God is. The Infinite One is for all generations to come: "I shall be what I shall be."

Any attempt on our part to create an image of God is impossible. We imperfect beings cannot create anything in language or art that comes even close to the perfection of God. Our best example is through the life and person of Christ in whom we find a glimpse of the full nature of God.

God has a way of calling us to certain tasks when our mind is on other matters. God has a way of calling the least likely of us for particular tasks because God knows us better than we know ourselves. It is when we acknowledge and respond to God's call that we discover gifts of which we were unaware.

We would do well to get in touch with a sense of the holy in our lives. When you enter a Moslem mosque, you are expected to remove your shoes. This is not only to honor the sacred ground, but also for the more practical purpose of keeping the beautiful oriental carpets clean. Wherever and whenever we become aware of God's presence, we are on sacred and the holy ground. How often do we get caught off guard and don't realize God's presence in our midst? We honor the time and place when we encounter God, often when we least expect it.

A holy place for us is right here at God's altar. When we gather here at the altar we are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. We are part of a vast throng of the communion of saints stretching back through the ages. There are other times and places when we feel close to God, if only for a few moments. Those sacred occasions happen when we interact with those we know and trust who remind us how much we are loved. No sooner do we savor those sacred moments of God's grace and presence than the realities of life intrude upon us again.

Political campaigns used to intrude upon us but once every four years. Now it seems to be ongoing. Just when we think that the cacophony has reached a crescendo, there is no end to all rhetoric and accusations and demands for apologies that

spew forth between candidates. Sadly, history records that the invective of political campaigns has always been part of American life. The danger is that we become numb to the incivility. Perhaps that is why watching the Downton Abbey series on Sunday nights has become so much a part of our lives. It gives us a glimpse into the past of a very civil and well-ordered society. We will miss it.

We need quiet times and places of warmth, intimacy, solitude and peace when we can be alone with the holy and center on the presence of the Spirit. I experience the holy when I reflect on how fortunate I am to have caring people in my life. I see it in grace-filled moments with complete strangers who appear to offer help, often never seen again. God's grace can be discerned just as much when we are alone as when we are interacting with those we know and love as well as complete strangers.

Sacred times and places are where and when we decide to get serious about making the effort to be part of making a difference in the lives of others. We walk on holy ground when we are faithful in our relationships and when there is healing through forgiveness and reconciliation.

When we are called to a task and are reluctant to respond because we don't feel equipped or qualified, we have to realize the qualities we may have that we never considered. That is when we have to trust that God knows us better than we know ourselves. We must never underestimate the qualities and gifts we have. Just because we've never had an occasion to use them doesn't mean we don't have them. What God calls us to do may not always be what we want or like to do, but that isn't the point. What is important is that we respond to that still, small voice within.