

Sacred Time, Sacred Space

Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:13-23

CWZepp, BWCOB, August 28, 2011

When president Barak Obama stopped in India last November, one of the places he did NOT visit was the Golden Temple, one of India's most popular tourist attractions, which you would have thought would have been an ideal location for a world leader to make an appearance. Although it is the spiritual center for the Sikh religion, it is cherished by Indians of all faiths as an emblem of India's religious diversity. Other world leaders, including the Queen of England and the Prime Minister of Canada, have made official visits, and it was seriously considered as a potential stop for the president last year¹.

There was just one snag. To visit the temple, President Obama would have to follow the protocol set by Sikh tradition, which mandates that all who enter must remove their shoes and men must cover their heads with a tied piece of cloth. For Obama, there was no problem with the removal of shoes. But the head covering was a different story. You see, most observant Sikh men wear turbans, as they do not cut their hair and because the act of tying carries spiritual significance. And for Obama to be seen wearing anything resembling a turban, even for the purposes of respecting the sacred space and traditions of a faith community, would have been a PR nightmare for the White House since the president has been dealing with persistent rumors that he is a closeted Muslim. So even though there is a significant difference between Sikhs and Muslims, and even though many of us in America don't particularly care whether Mr. Obama is a Muslim, a Sikh, or whatever, the potential visit was still nixed, probably because they decided it just wasn't worth the hassle.

Learning about this decision troubled me for a number of reasons. First, I was disappointed because I would have liked to have seen our President make such a visit to the spiritual center of another faith, and accept the challenges and responsibilities of promoting interfaith understanding and respect, something I personally hold as a core American value and an urgent need in our world today. Second, I was also troubled that the willful ignorance of some of our citizens and the necessity of maintaining certain appearances for our media continues to be allowed to dictate such important decisions for our national leaders. And finally, I was bothered when I found myself wondering why they couldn't just make an exception for the President and let him simply remove his shoes and wear a hat or something that wouldn't cause controversy.

I was bothered with this last thought because I know better. I know that the world doesn't (and shouldn't!) revolve around America, and so expecting a faith community to bend some of its most sacred traditions to suit the PR needs of our president would be not only ridiculously arrogant, but wrong. And I also know that even if there was a willingness to do so, the act of making exception to the sacred traditions of such a place would rob it of its sacredness, putting something else in the place of preeminence instead of the holy.

¹ Lydia Polgreen. "A question of appearances: Obama will bypass Sikh temple on visit to India." *The New York Times*, October 19, 2010. Available: www.nytimes.com/2010/10/20/world/asia/20india.html

Now I will confess that I have long struggled with the distinction between sacred and profane. It is something that I wrestle with because of my personality, my philosophical and theological ideals, and of course, my vocation as a minister. At the heart of my dilemma is a basic question: what makes something sacred? Is something sacred simply because we say it is so? Is something sacred simply because it carries the weight of tradition or because it has a history of significance? Is something sacred because we create rituals around it or infuse it with symbolic meaning? Is something sacred because of what we do or how we treat it, or because of something in and of itself? Are there different kinds or levels of sacredness?

As I have been thinking about this worship service and this sermon over the past few weeks, I have also been thinking a lot about football. It is no secret that I love the game, but some of my friends have been learning recently just how much. When we got together to watch a Redskins game a few weeks ago on DVR after having to miss the live broadcast for another event, I made them all suffer with me through watching the whole game, including commercials. I joked that all 3 hours was “sacred time” for me and that I didn’t want to miss any of it. But I was only half joking. In many ways, watching the Redskins is indeed sacred time for me. It involves rituals like wearing team gear on game days. It is part of my family tradition and it carries a history of significance as one of the things that I shared with my late Granddaddy Dick growing up. And I certainly treat Redskins games differently than other things – scheduling around them when possible and making a point to watch them in their entirety and with minimal interruption. So you could make a case that they really do constitute sacred time for me.

But how does that compare to the concept of the sacred that we see at the heart of the world’s great religions? Can we really compare my watching of Redskins games to anything that happens in a temple or cathedral, a synagogue or a mosque? I believe that the answer is both yes and no. Objectively, we cannot compare the two experiences – one is about football, the other about the ultimate mystery, the ground of all being, and the meaning of life. However, subjectively, I think we can legitimately draw some parallels.

But first I want to look at our scriptures for this morning. Both convey stories of a significant experience of the sacred. In the first, we hear of Moses’ encounter with God in the so called “burning bush”. It is one of the most significant passages of scripture in the entire Torah. In these few verses, we see God acknowledge and respond to the suffering of the Israelites. We see Moses receive his divine calling to go and lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. We see God reveal the divine name, a mystic name that even to this day many Jews consider too sacred to utter or even to write. And preceding it all, we see Moses take off his sandals in response to God’s announcement that he is standing on holy ground.

So, considering this story today, the question for us is this: What made that ground holy? What made that time and that space sacred? The obvious and objective answer is God. Witness the words of the popular worship song “Holy Ground”: “This is holy ground, we’re standing on holy ground. For the Lord is present, and where he is is holy.”

But if we think critically about this assertion, we might find this a less than helpful answer. For we are part of a theological tradition that asserts the omnipresence of God. And if God is always present everywhere, then we cannot be where God is not. Thus, by this definition, everything is sacred and all ground is holy.

But this fails to account for the reality we recognize that something different happened in that time and in that place with Moses, something that made that time and that space especially sacred. So if it wasn't the presence of God that created that sacred time and sacred space, what was it?

I believe the answer lies in verses 3 and 4. There we learn that upon seeing the burning bush, Moses turned aside from what he was doing and paid attention. It was only when God saw that Moses was paying attention that God began to speak.

A similar dynamic occurs in the gospel reading for today. Like the text from Exodus, this scripture lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is here for the first that one of the gospel characters calls Jesus the Messiah. It is here that Jesus gives Simon his new name – Peter – and declares that it is on this rock that he will build his church. It is here that Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven and with them the power to bind and loose on earth with divine authority. So what gave Peter this divine insight in this sacred moment? According to Jesus, it was a revelation from the heart of God. But only a few verses later, we see Peter rebuked by Jesus for being a stumbling block. The reason given is that Peter was setting his mind “not on divine things but on human things.”

Now, I believe that this phrase captures the essence of what creates sacred time and sacred space. Put simply, what is it that we are setting our minds on? Since the divine is always near us, the difference between the sacred and the ordinary must come from us – must stem from a change that happens within us.

Which takes me back to the Redskins. The games are on, whether I am watching or not. And there is nothing particularly special about them in and of themselves. What makes them special for me comes from within. It's a product of my memories and my desires, my habits and my hopes.

In truth, it's the same way with the sacred. It's the reason that we have thousands of years experience and countless religious traditions that bear witness to the value of spiritual disciplines. Prayer and worship, fasting and scripture study, silence and solitude, fellowship and ritual – such are the ways that we develop our capacity to experience the sacred.

In a few moments, we will have an opportunity to participate in a spiritual practice that is distinctively Brethren. There is nothing in the act of placing oil on the forehead that is sacred in and of itself. But when it is accompanied by a heart that is alert and ready to hear the still small voice of God, that is open to being touched by the Spirit of the living God, anointing becomes a sacred moment.

So as we contemplate the nature of sacred time and sacred space, I leave us with a few lines from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
And only they who see take off their shoes –
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.²*

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*.

Prayers of the People

Hymn # 631 “Anoint us Lord” (vv. 1 & 2)

Silence

Prayers

O God together we seek the anointing of your spirit.

We lift up those among us who are hurting in body, mind, and spirit. We lift up all those who were anointed this morning. We lift up the lonely and the lost, the depressed and the destitute, those dying and those whose living is void of meaning. We lift up all those seeking relief from addictions, from cycles of violence, from poverty, hunger, and persecution. We lift up those struggling with doubt and faith, and with matters of personal identity. We lift up those in difficult and trying relationships, and those whose family systems are under constant strain. We lift up those looking for work, and those for whom work is nothing but day after day of drudgery.

And Lord we lift up especially of our neighbors dealing with the effects of the hurricane, and those whose security was shaken by the earthquake. And we are mindful of all those who face tragedy in lands near and far, who so often go unnoticed.

For all these Lord, and all others who feel the need of your strength, we seek the anointing of your Spirit.

Hymn # 631 “Anoint us Lord” (vv. 1 & 3)

Silence

Prayers

O God, we want to give ourselves to you. But so often things get in the way. We allow ourselves to be distracted and become preoccupied with things that, in the end, don't really matter. We allow ourselves to be lazy and we make minimal efforts to nurture or to live out our faith. We allow ourselves to be misled, and invest ourselves in ideas and ways of life that are not life-giving for ourselves, our neighbors, or our world. We allow ourselves to get trapped in the past, and create shrines to feed our nostalgia. We so often miss the sacred moments that present themselves to us each and every day.

So anoint us Lord, and consecrate our lives. We want to give ourselves to you.

Hymn # 631 “Anoint us Lord” (v. 1)

Benediction (*The “Parson’s Benediction”*)

Go, live in the peace of God, my friends.
Live deep in the peace of God.
For whether in quiet or whether in strife,
The peace of God is your very life.
Yes, the peace of God is more than you think,
More than your food, more than your drink.
It is strength for your soul, It’s the bread and wine!
Aye, the peace of God is the living sign
That your living Lord is ever near.
And you need not fret, and you need not fear,
When you have the sign that your Lord is here.

So, go live in the peace of God, my friends.
Live deep in the peace of God.
But the peace of God is for those who obey,
Who listen and hear the voice each day,
Who listen and walk by their Master’s side,
Who have heard the call and have not denied.
Yes, the one who lives in the peace of God
Is the one who walks where the Master trod.

So, go live in the peace of God, my friends.
Live deep in the peace of God.

Amen