

A Grace-full Resolution
Exodus 3:1-6 and Philippians 4:1-9
January 2, 2011 ~ Caldwell Memorial
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Philippians 4:1-9 (The Message)

My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God. I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn't want his children holding grudges. And, oh, yes, my friend, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them. These women worked for the Message hand in hand with Clement and me, and with the other veterans—worked as hard as any of us. Remember, their names are also in the Book of Life. Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute! Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

It's that time of year again. You've exchanged the wrong size, wrong color Christmas presents and hidden the ones that are too strange to re-gift. Soon the tree will be out by the curb or more likely dismantled, the decorations back in their boxes, and the angels will no longer flutter their delicate wings.

It's time for endings, beginnings and making New Year's resolutions. While we have favorite memories of 2010 etched in our hearts for many it feels good to say good-bye to last year's regrets and dashed hopes in favor of a fresh start with a new outlook. More than likely, you've made a resolution or two. You may actually keep America's number one resolution which is to spend more time with family and friends.

Most of the others will be short lived. After a few days or weeks you'll decide it takes too much time and effort to eat healthy and exercise; stop smoking or overspending on credit cards; or change any of those other troublesome habits. Even the holy resolutions to consciously observe the Sabbath and pray every morning before your feet hit the floor will likely fall by the way side. Or you may have decided not to participate in such foolishness this year! After all, you've seen resolutions come and go. Why bother making one this year...only to feel guilt by mid January?

As for me, well....I admit that I've made and broken more resolutions than I care to remember. So, this year I'm approaching the whole resolution thing in a new way.

What if you and I were to make a resolution that would truly be worth keeping; not just a resolution, but a commitment of substance? What if we make a commitment to live a more deeply, fulfilling spiritual life? To be fully alive in the present moment; not diminished by past regrets or falsely enchanted by the "maybe's" of tomorrow. To find pleasure in the beauty of the earth. To be totally engaged with the people in our lives and embrace the joys of human love. To celebrate Emmanuel, God with us, all day, every day and fill our lives with things of grace, hope and truth. To be aware of the holy ground on which we often stand.....the ordinary, often unnoticed moments in our lives that are gloriously sacred and profound.

Oh, sure...it sounds like a great idea, but how do we make such a life-enriching resolution?

We begin with the familiar story of Moses and the amazing burning bush, add the directives from Philipians for living a Christ-centered life, and we have the foundations for making and keeping a grace-full resolution.

When we meet up with Moses in our passage this morning we discover he's been busy lately with lots of stressful life changes. He's on the run from Egyptian authorities, moved to another country, got married, became a father, and started a new job working for his father in law!

On this particular day he's minding his own business, tending the sheep, when he comes upon a burning bush. The burning bush probably wasn't that unusual for a hot, dry dessert but when it doesn't burn to ashes and starts talking, things get really weird!

Sensing this is no ordinary moment, Moses explores a little further and finds himself face to face with God. Poor Moses is so startled by the whole event that God has to remind him of his religious manners: "Moses, take off your sandals for the place on which you stand is holy ground."

Imagine God telling *you* in a very clear, distinct voice that *you're* standing on holy ground! Not in a place of worship but on plain, ol' foot blistering sand that is suddenly holy. God's presence and Moses' willingness to encounter God in an unexpected way allow this place among the sheep to become holy! God's command to remove his sandals is not as much about respect as it is to invite Moses to experience life with openness and wonder. His sandals, made of dead animal skins, symbolize lifelessness. When Moses removes his sandals he comes alive to God's amazing love and experiences the world as new and vital.

Throughout the scriptures there are plenty of very obvious holy ground events. God, who is anything but ordinary, goes to extraordinary means to get our attention. Most of us agree that God doesn't appear use such radical Old Testament attention getters much any more. Aside from the supermarket tabloids we don't hear many stories about seas being parted, wrestling matches with angels or whales spitting men onto beaches.

Yet, I believe there are burning bushes experiences all around us all the time. Either they don't wow us and grab our attention like a video or text message or we're so preoccupied we don't even notice. In truth, we often stand on holy ground, face to face with God. Certainly we expect to encounter God in church and pay attention to the obvious sacred moments of life...births and deaths; baptisms, communion, and weddings; even a stirring sermon...but it's the simple, profound holy ground moments we routinely walk right past.

Like many of you, I lived much of my life missing holy ground moments. You may think that sounds a little odd for a minister to say, but our spiritual journeys are very much alike. We all have inner longings that cry out for spiritual nourishment. As children of God we're well equipped with hearts to recognize extraordinary moments nestled within the ordinary. After much contemplation, I embrace the notion that we need to change our awareness and perception so that we won't miss so many holy ground moments when we deeply feel our inner union with God, self and others. When we expect the unexpected, we will meet God in the most surprising of circumstances.

For some people such as Bud Willis a single holy ground experience changes lives forever. In 1966 Bud provided air support for Marines by flying the wounded out of combat areas in Viet Nam. On one particular mission he picked up a teen aged soldier who was mortally wounded. After dropping his passenger off at the local hospital, Bud saw the wounded Marine motion to the crew chief to lean forward so that he could tell him something over the deafening noise of the helicopters.

Back inside the chopper the crewman said "Captain Willis, do you know what he said to me? He said to 'tell the pilot, thanks for the ride.'"

Reflecting on the experience Bud says: "Any man who could see through his own incredible circumstances and still have the presence of mind to say 'thank you' still brings tears to my eyes. It made me want to be like him."

From that day on, Bud committed himself to thanking at least one person each day. He's shared the lessons from that holy ground moment with family and friends, complete strangers and every employee he's had. For the past forty plus years one dying soldier's "thank you" has been the source for countless other holy ground moments as Bud pays forward the thank you and shares his inspiring story.

One of the most meaningful parts of my work as a health care chaplain was serving communion to my patients. During Holy Week I visited a new hospice patient named Archie and learned he'd come close to dying twice before and now had less than six months to live. He explained that he wasn't afraid of dying this time because he was "different." While watching a Billy Graham crusade on TV he found Jesus Christ. As he told it, he was completely changed by what he could only explain as "God reaching out and touching him."

After our conversation, I felt led to ask Archie if he would like to have communion. With tears in his eyes, he joyfully agreed. Archie, his wife and I sat at their tiny kitchen table to share God's Holy Banquet. He requested I read Psalm 51, which says: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new, right spirit within me." After Communion, there was not a dry eye among us. Without doubt, we were standing on holy ground, as God invited us barefoot children to join the celebration of life and resurrection.

Like you, I've witnessed some amazing holy ground moments at Caldwell this year. For sure there are two in every Sunday service...OK...there are lots more but these are *my* two favorites. One comes when the children gather for Sunday School...we see all these beautiful smiling faces which is like a collage of God's kingdom. When we send them on their way saying, "May the Lord be with you there," we hope they might experience a holy ground moment to carry through their lives. Most of us remember a tender moment with a favorite Sunday school teacher who taught us a song, Bible verse or special saying that always stuck with us.

My other favorite holy ground moments come from the choir...when the Holy Spirit is powerfully moving all around...lifting us from the pews, bringing our hands together, and renewing our weary souls as only music can. Then we're just not standing on holy ground...we're dancin' on holy ground!

We've had two holy ground creation miracles this year with the bi-lingual pre-school and the shelter home for women. Both sites ARE the essence of holy ground and have produced countless moments of grace, love, and hope as well as meaningful personal encounters that remind us of all that joins us as divine children of God. There was such excitement and enthusiasm for the fiesta dinner celebration...where barriers of language, culture and age melted away into hospitality, laughter and singing.

As work started on the shelter Labor Day morning the first helpers to arrive well before 8 AM were men from McCreesh Place. Several shared their stories of heartbreak and triumph with me and what stood out most was their desire to give back to others and their deep compassion for women and children who do not have a place to lay their heads at night. It was the first of many holy ground moments from that day and the weeks that followed as we've gotten to know our shelter guests as extended family of Caldwell.

Mother Nature provides endless holy ground moments. On cold December nights you'll find me outside star gazing. It may be singing all those "star of wonder" carols or the fact that the stars appear more crisp and brilliant this time of the year. Just before sunset I saw a star that was like a painting on God's deep blue canvas. There were five long wispy tendrils of clouds radiating out from one glistening beam to form a breathtaking star

burst! It reminded me of the star of Bethlehem and a Reba MacEntire song entitled *This Christmas*. One verse says:

2,000 years ago, three wise men left their home
 When an angel of the Lord Said, "Seek the Savior born"
 Logic told them they were crazy; they shouldn't even try
 They followed their hearts, they followed that star.
 This Christmas, let me be that wise.

In this new year let's be wise enough to make grace-full resolutions we can keep. Let's celebrate God every day and kept Christ at the center of our lives, listen with and follow our hearts, focus on beauty and truth, and seek peace and harmony in all aspects of life. When ever you gaze at a Christmas star or any of God's amazing wonders, take off your sandals and appreciate the holy ground on which you stand.

As part of a Presbytery of Charlotte disaster response team, I traveled with four others, including a Vietnamese pastor, to Bayou La Batre, Alabama the first week of December. The tiny town is about as far south as you can go without landing in the Gulf. Before the oil spill self-reliant, proud people lived off the sea and managed to make ends meet. Now they live with despair and hopelessness. Along with NY firefighters, we took over 200 ethnically diverse dolls, soccer and footballs, trucks and cars as part of a toy distribution for 1300 children. Bringing joy to a child, especially one in poverty is always a holy endeavor!

One evening we hosted Lifting Lives With Hope, a free evening of food, music and inspiration for 100 townspeople. Many were unemployed, most were stressed, some had lost homes, boats and businesses, and all were in need of uplifting. So we had the ingredients for a holy ground moment but what truly made this gathering one of wholeness is it was the first time blacks, Vietnamese and whites ever shared a community meal together. Such a gathering may not take place again for a long while but for a couple of hours in the Blue Heron Café God's kingdom on earth sat together on holy ground to share a meal of hope and joy.

Most holy ground moments are personal; however, with TV and the internet people around the world connect for holy ground moments. A few weeks ago NBC news ran the story of John MacPherson, a World War II veteran, who lives alone in Boston. In order to pay his heating bill he goes without eating some days. The story was heartbreaking.

A few days later a follow up story reported that strangers from all over the US and Canada, many of them veterans, were moved by John's plight. They sent donations of money, gift cards and food. A contractor replaced his drafty windows and doors free of charge and someone helped him find information on how to receive more veteran benefits. My eyes filled with tears as I realized how many people's hearts were touched by John's story. Right there on the Nightly News with Brian Williams was a holy ground moment...people heeding God's call to step up to do the right thing; people connecting with people.

This past year you and I have encountered the holy in the ordinary events of daily life...we just may not have recognized them or been bold enough to name them as holy ground moments. Perhaps we got a call from a long lost friend who remembered some kindness we did for them years ago; sitting in bumper to bumper traffic we bless the drivers of the cars we let merge in front of us; amid hurried schedules we stopped to giggle and play with our children, grandchild or neighbor's kid; we comforted a friend waiting for medical results; drove the

back roads of North Carolina...enthralled with the gift of God's awesome artistry; volunteered our time to help a child learn to read or build a Habitat house; nurtured someone with fresh water or food to eat; or when we were afraid and prayed for help felt the brush of an angel's wing.

The truth about holy ground moments is simple. In all the times of our lives...in the good and the bad, the joyous and the sad, the enriching and the disconcerting – God is present and offers an opportunity for us to more fully know God and to know ourselves. In the plain, mundane, ordinariness of every day life lies the extraordinary...whether driving the kids to school, sports events or dance lessons.....preparing dinner and washing the dishes... caring for loved ones or welcoming strangers...or seeing the sun, moon and stars...In the midst of the business of our lives....the holiness is there...waiting expectantly for us to notice! Surely a giant, talking burning bush is eye catching and will get most people to take a second look but God's deepest desire is for us to appreciate those ordinary moments in our daily lives that are heart-catching and soul enhancing.

God comes to us in many ways: in the sharing of stories; breaking bread together; on the way to work; and in the most unexpected times and places. By God's mercy and grace we are invited time and time again to take off our sandals and know that we are on holy ground. This New Years let's forgo the usual resolutions...the ones we know we won't keep more than a week or two...and instead make a grace-full resolution that we can live with. Keep Christ at the center of your life; let your light shine for all to see; give your worries to God and pray as if you believe in miracles; live in the present moment; be guided by love, faith and hope; and be open to the wonder of people and events in your life.

In the most ordinary, routine events of daily life, God give us the privilege to participate in and witness holy ground moments. We can hurry past without noticing or we can choose to stand firm in our faith. I pray this year you will make and keep a grace-full resolution and there will be many times you take off your sandals and say, "Thank you, God, for the holy ground on which I stand."