

Orienting to the Holy
Sunday, August 6, 2006
First Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
Exodus 3:1-6 & John 21:4-14

I spent last weekend visiting my family in western Pennsylvania. My parents still live in the house where I grew up and one of my brothers lives just about a quarter of a mile from them with his family. This area of Pennsylvania is pretty foreign to most New Yorkers, who know better the eastern part of the state with its cut hills and valleys that signal the northern Appalachians. My parents are Ohioans and they did not cross so far over the state border. The hills that make up the eastern and central part of the state begin to flatten as the plains of Ohio and Indiana draw closer. Western Pennsylvania leaves one with just a taste of soft rolling hills pushing trees and broad green corn fields along the contour of the land.

This year's wet summer left the trees and grass lush with green and filled my parents' front yard with water. This new pond was an attraction to mosquitoes, which in turn prevented us from enjoying one of my favorite activities there, sitting outside in the evening watching the stars appear through the twilight, often with a small campfire lit just for enjoyment.

In truth, I spent most of childhood dreaming of moving out of the house and into the pup tent I kept pitched in the yard during the summers, a campfire burning slowly throughout the day, ready to be called to hotter action of cooking or marshmallow roasting at a moments notice. For whatever reason, I have found myself thinking a great deal this summer about these campfires, and the ones like them that have made up significant life transitions.

A high school friend that I still keep up with used to have a summer cookout every year and invite our high school circle of friends to sit around and talk about the glory days and catch up with what was new as we all went in different directions. During the time I was in college and graduate school, that was probably the most significant event of the summer; attendance was especially mandatory for new partners and spouses who were measured by their ability to navigate and keep their wits about them on these occasions, as they tried to keep up with the running dialogue about what so-and-so, whom they had never heard of, was doing now.

Campfires in my family aren't just for summertime. Last spring when my grandmother died, my siblings and parents gathered around a campfire to share memories on the night before the funeral. Loaded with sugary marshmallows, we remembered fondly our unique relationships with my grandparents.

Summer sometimes feels like the least likely time to seek out the sacred. After all, summer is break, a time to relax, a time to rest and summon our energy so we are able to seek the holy and work hard the rest of the year. In thinking about my own most powerful experiences of the holy, though, it occurred to me that the times I have encountered it are when I am worn out, trying to find some bit of respite, unsuspecting, and oblivious that the holy might even be lurking nearby. It is also true that it is summer when I am near the places that I find the holy is most likely to be revealed – the ocean, riding my bike, taking time to cook a decent meal. In the summer I may be in the least likely mode to

intentionally seek the holy, but at the same time I am more likely to be in an open enough position to see the holy in the ordinary. It is often when the ordinary is noticeable that the opportunity to hear and see the holy is the most fertile.

The story of Moses and the burning bush is dramatic reminder of how the holy is present and often revealed to us in the ordinary. Moses was not expecting anything out of the ordinary on this day when he was keeping Jethro's sheep on Mount Horeb. This was a day like any other day, until Moses happened to see the ordinary transformed by the angel of the Lord. The bush was burning but was not "consumed" as the text tells us; even at this point, Moses does not understand that he is witness to something holy, but his sense of the ordinary had shifted enough to peak his curiosity.

It is when he turns to really see the burning bush and God calls to him by name that suddenly this ordinary day of keeping the sheep has oriented to something holy. Moses is given instructions of how to approach this now holy place, he is to remove his sandals and then come closer. As he watches the bush burning and the listens to the voice, he becomes afraid and hides his face, understandably afraid to look at God.

This welcome is only the beginning of the story of Moses call. He and God continue their conversation for some time; Moses debating, like most good prophets, with God about whether or not he is really such a good choice to help in God's plan for deliverance of the Israelites. But, it is not this debate that is of interest today; rather, what is of interest is how God is able to get Moses' attention. Surely the burning bush is completely unexpected, but it is an ordinary object within Moses' routine; it is simply surrounded on that day by extraordinary circumstances.

It raises the question for us, what gets our attention? Does something have to be extraordinary to give us pause? I daresay the holy is before us much more often that we realize, mostly in the small interactions and the beauty we see everyday. Too often, it is our own preoccupation that keeps us from paying attention to the holy in the ordinary.

The other question raised by this initial interface is a question of how we respond when we do find ourselves on holy ground or in sacred space? Moses' reaction is at first curious, then obedient, then fearful. A rational sequence when we consider that he is not expecting to happen upon anything holy; he actually has quick reflexes in realizing that he is on sacred ground and then is face to face with the Holy One. Sacredness is created by the recognition of the power of God, and with it is the accompanying knowledge that human beings are much more fragile than what our everyday lives tell us. It is the comfort of God's presence that makes sacred space bearable to us at all.

In John's gospel, the orientation to the holy is described a little differently. First, the point at which we enter the text is radically different than where we were with Moses. While Moses is being prepped to bring deliverance to the people, in John, the moment of deliverance has already happened. What is happening now is that the disciples are trying to determine if anything can be ordinary again. It is Peter who is trying the hardest to bring something ordinary to bear on the overwhelming events of Jesus' death and resurrection; it is he who suggests that they go fishing. It is a return to the life that he and certain ones of the other disciples once knew; it is akin to Moses returning to the work of sheep herding after the people are delivered to the Promised Land.

Interestingly, in John's Gospel, Jesus has already made several post-resurrection appearances, and one might think given the way the Gospel is brought to closure at the end of chapter 20 that this might be all one could expect from the Gospel. This narrative

in chapter 21 that continues the post-resurrection experience of the disciples, has led some scholars to believe that chapter 21 was a later addition to this Gospel. Suffice to say, the blessing is really ours it was retained, early or later, for this description of Jesus sharing breakfast on the beach with his disciples is one of the most vivid post-resurrection narratives we hear.

At first, the disciples do not recognize Jesus; he stands away from their boat, the sun breaking over their shoulders, his feet feeling the coolness of the sand in early morning. First he questions whether they have any fish, and then he invites them to fish on the right side of the boat and see what they catch. At this point, the narrative gives that Gospel echo, and the reader is reminded of a similar story in Luke's Gospel; a story that comes much earlier in that Gospel, in Luke chapter five, when the Jesus orchestrates a similar miracle in the fishing boat with Simon Peter. That catch of fish serves as the call to discipleship for Peter and his fishing partners, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. John's narrative sounds a harmonious chord by giving an indication of how the call to discipleship has been transformed by Jesus' resurrection.

The boat's proximity to the shore serves to highlight Peter's eagerness as he jumps into the water to swim at once to the now recognizable Jesus. Like Moses hearing God's voice in the burning bush, this is no longer a stranger on the shore, but the holy to which they must orient their boat and themselves. What happens when they reach the shore illustrates perfectly the tension the holy creates between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

There is Jesus, a charcoal fire prepared, fish and bread ready to be eaten. His next action though is what makes this fire on the beach a moment of transition and not just a moment of glorification; he asks them to bring some of the fish they caught and add them to the fire. The meal they will share is not just of his making, they will add their gifts as well; fish given out of abundance of blessings he has shared with them.

The final scene of this shared meal is not more preparation, but the sharing of the meal itself, in those words of invitation, "Come and have breakfast." As the bread and fish are shared, there is no doubt that the images here mirror what we have come to know as communion. John's Gospel is clear that the gifts of Jesus' incarnation are not lost in his resurrection. A direction of how the disciples are to continue has been set forth; this direction can hold grief and eagerness; it can hold ordinariness and patience.

These biblical narratives highlight the importance of developing ways to recognize the holy and orient ourselves to it. Both of these stories pivot on an initial event that provokes curiosity. In one case, it is a burning bush not consumed; in the other, it is a question called from the shore by a seeming stranger, who turns out to be a dear friend. In both of these stories, curiosity is provoked within the ordinary daily routine. The first big challenge is having enough curiosity to recognize the potential presence of the holy in the ordinary. The second challenge is learning to overcome our resistance and susceptibility to distraction and actually turn toward these potential encounters with the holy. Not unlike the responses we hear from Moses and Peter, our emotions are often mixed in our response. In some cases, we are fearful and in some cases we are so eager we cannot do enough fast enough. The demands of being oriented to the holy are great and require us to strive for greater self-awareness and awareness of our surroundings.

Harvard professor Diana Eck reminds us in her book, *Encountering God*, that “whatever we may think of God, the referent of that word, that symbol, is a mystery. God is finally beyond our grasp. God is not ours—even with the grace of God’s revealing.”ⁱ We are given opportunities to glimpse this mystery, but at the end of the day, Diana Eck is correct, God is beyond our grasp. We are however called to be in relationship with the pieces of the mystery that are revealed to us. We are called to orient to the mystery of the holy, with the recognition that all of whom and what God is will not be revealed to us in completion. If we allow ourselves to orient to the holy, we are acknowledging our human frailty, and balancing any hoarding of control we demand with an acceptance that we are not the most powerful one in the relationship. The wonderful thing is that, despite our inability to grasp the mystery of the divine, the Holy One is constantly seeking us out and calling us to position ourselves in relation to the holy.

Orienting to the holy is about grounding in our own lives a sense of enthusiasm and ability to recognize the unexpected. Orienting to the holy is about accepting our own fragileness as human beings. Orienting to the holy is about bringing that enthusiasm and frailty into a collision that bursts forth a confidence that we are being sought by God. With that confidence we are asked to bring our gifts to be shared.

The celebration of communion is one of those ordinary events in which we are challenged to orient to the holy. The meal itself is prepared and put before us, but it is communion unless we turn toward it and bring our gifts. With it, a call to us, as if from a bush that is full of flames and is not consumed; with it, a question for us from the shore: have we caught any fish? With it, a challenge to us, to not try to more than what we are -- humans in every sense of the word. In it, a promise to us, that there is one who is more powerful, who is mostly a mystery, but who chooses over and over again to find ways to reveal that eternal nature to us. Friends, the holy one calls to us from the ordinary places in our lives. Turn and see where the holy will be revealed today.

ⁱ Eck, Diana L. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. (Beacon Press, Boston) 1993. p. 46.