

Holy Ground

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Exodus 3:1-15

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Some biblical texts are too big to preach. This is one of them. There are simply too many threads in the tapestry.

The threads of this passage reach back into the tangled legends retold around a thousand campfires and finally written down in Genesis. The impact of this single passage stretches through the whole history of Israel and into the origins of Christian faith. And wrapped in the folds of this text is a story of the disclosure of God. More than that, it is the story of the revelation of God as one Who remains hidden even in the event of his revelation.

The word mystery is the right word to describe what's happening in this text. But that word is complicated by the ways we use it commonly.

I'm a mystery buff. I love mysteries: short stories, novels, television series and movies; from Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers to Ann Cleeves. A mystery story is a sort of narrative puzzle in which the author drops false and real clues, hides or distracts us from significant information, and challenges us to figure out "who done it."

That's not what we mean by mystery when it comes to God.

The word mystery is often a device lazy thinkers use to avoid having to think hard. "Well, it's a mystery!" may just mean that the speaker lacks the fortitude to do the necessary work to figure something out.

That's not what we mean by mystery when it comes to God.

In biblical terms, mystery refers to the kind of thing that happens in this text.

A human being brushes up against that Presence of the Holy that demands reverence and humility in the extreme. You don't just bow in this Presence, you're knees are cut off beneath you and you drop to the floor. The Presence makes itself known in ways that are hard to comprehend, much less to communicate.

So the human being takes in everything he or she can, employs all the intellectual and intuitive properties possible. But no matter long hard they try, they cannot comprehend the reality against which they have brushed.

In the story before us, Moses is attracted to a strange sight, something apparently inexplicable. But the Mystery he meets on the mountain is not the bush that burns but is not consumed. That's not the Mystery. That's just the lure God uses to get Moses up the mountain.

The Mystery knocks his sandals off. The Mystery speaks to him. The Mystery makes an unconditional claim on his life. Moses can't bear to look up as he realizes that the Presence of the Holy has surrounded him in this place, that pure Presence has made itself known to him. At the end of the meeting, Moses is as bewildered as at the beginning. And he will wrestle with the Mystery for the rest of his life.

There's no such thing as a solution to the Mystery who is God. There is only the response: reverence and humility. And I have no way to speak of this, but by telling stories, and asking questions.

C. S. Lewis, in his novel, *Till We Have Faces*, his retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, contrasts the clever rationality of a modernist pagan priest with the reverence of the old wizened Heathen shaman. The novel is set in the distant past of Greek legend.

The new priest, who represents for Lewis, the dawning of Greek philosophy, has a handle on everything. The world presents all sorts of problems, but there's a formula to fix every one of them. The human mind, human rationality, knows no bounds. The Temple the new priest has built is filled with light. It is bright. Clear. Nothing is hidden, a testament to his confidence in the power of rationality.

The old priest knows that the young priest has never met the Holy. He knows this because he knows that anyone who has met the Holy cannot be so blithe about their knowledge of the world. His ancient Temple is shrouded in darkness like the shadows of a deep primeval oak forest. Mosses grow upon the stone floors of the Temple. It is honeycombed with dark hidden recesses above the ground, catacombed beneath the ground, peopled by the dead. Altars rise here and there, stained with centuries of use, blood cakes the floors, the incense-smoked ceiling all but invisible above.

The foolish and the superficial, says the old shaman, think the gods are as clear, as transparent, as a mountain brook, that you can see right through them. But those who have met the gods know they are thick and dark like blood, and they flow and interpenetrate one another in an eternal dance that is beyond comprehension.

I can see why Lewis resorted to myth to speak of the revelation of God. The language of the Enlightenment stumbles here. As much as Professor C. S. Lewis admired and valued and used reason, he had to resort to legend even to begin to speak of Holy Ground.

This, I suspect, is also why in our text God doesn't reveal himself to Moses sitting out in the sunshine of a valley pasture with his sheep. This, I suspect, is why God in our story revealed himself to Moses high in the mountains where mists and smoke and fire illuminate at the same time they hide the Holy.

It is the very height of folly to believe that God can be named when we have no idea what forces actually are at work in this physical creation. We don't. A couple of black holes collide

and the time-space continuum bends and ripples like a piece of tin flopping on a barn roof in a high wind.

Do I believe in miracles? It is all a miracle.

Nothing has an adequate explanation, but *nothing else* does. The supreme miracle is that there is *something* rather than *nothing*.

The reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And, I suspect, the final culmination of wisdom too. The beginning and end of wisdom; the Alpha and Omega of wisdom is reverence.

Have you ever felt that you have stepped (if only for an instant) into that Presence that strips away all pretenses and reduces you to speechless awe?

Not long ago, I sat on our back deck one night. Looking up into the night sky, just a wisp of a hint of a tail of the Milky Way above me, just visible despite the lingering effects of light pollution..... caught up in the enormity of that infinite space I could but could not see, in a flash of insight, I felt, for just that instant, "Ah... there it is.... peace at the last.... I am so small..... just one of millions of this human race who have looked up into this sky for millennia and now are no more..... what a company of mortals it is to which we belong..... and what a privilege it has been just to be.

Wherever it happens, *however* it happens, through *whomever* it happens, it places its indelible seal upon us. Wonder. Awe. Reverence. In the Presence of the Holy.

William James, the American philosopher, has said that the word "religion" deserves only to be connected to that pure experience of the divine, inevitably something that happens to an individual. All else is second-hand, freeze-dried or canned. It may be handed down from generation to generation in communities of faith and through sacred traditions, but it will always be less than that singular, original, life-changing experience of that person in the Presence of something or someone inexplicable and wholly other who makes an unconditional claim on *that* life.

I'm certainly not a mystic. But our imaginations, with the help of this story, do allow us to climb with Moses up to the top of this mountain, to gaze with wonder at this fire, to feel the droplets of mist on our faces and the smoke in our throats, and to hear a voice and to feel the Presence, and to know we don't know much, but this is Holy Ground.

"Who are you?" Moses asks. "And who will I say has sent me?"

"I am who I am."

The Hebrew is old and as slippery as wet stones on the mountain side. "I am *who* I am."

"I am *what* I am." "I *was* what I *was*." "I *will be* what I *will be*."

"I am" has met you. "I am" sends you.

The Being of beings meets us in absolute Mystery, whether we notice it or not. And this, I think, is perhaps the strangest thing of all.

Would Jethro have seen the Lord that day if he had gone up the mountain? Would Pharaoh have seen the Lord that day if he had stood where Moses stood?

“I am” reveals himself as he pleases to whomever he pleases where he pleases. But it may also be true that “I am” is revealing himself all over the place to those who will not open themselves to see the Holy. This paradox lies at the heart of our text today. Those who will open their eyes to the Holy must shield their eyes from the pure Presence of God. They know they cannot take in all they see, and there’s much they can’t bear even to look at.

It has been said that God takes us as God finds us. But God never leaves us where he found us.

And so, after standing barefooted on Holy Ground, Moses puts his shoes back on, and he starts his long journey back to Egypt.

Amen.