

"The Right Place"  
(listed in the bulletin for this day as "On Holy Ground")  
Psalm 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45b; Exodus 3:1-15  
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
September 3, 2017  
Dr. Catherine Taylor

This was a busy week here at church.

All week we were hearing about what was going on in Texas,  
and trying to figure out ways that we could offer concrete help.  
Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has been our guide,  
and the things they need the most,  
I learned from a phone call to headquarters,  
are hygiene kits and clean up buckets.

So we put out a call through email to all of you for the needed items.

We'll be putting them into kits this Tuesday.

In concert with Northside Presbyterian  
we'll be driving them to a drop off point,  
from which they'll go to Texas.

Some of you asked if money might not be a better thing to send,  
and yes it's important, yet when disasters like the one in Texas strike,  
many people want to do something concrete.

Buying items for the kits this weekend,  
helped me feel connected, and the kits we're making  
are desperately needed, and will be needed,  
for many weeks to come.

In the middle of all this, I changed the sermon title three times,  
so it's no surprise that the wrong one showed up in the bulletin today.  
The one I finally settled on was "The Right Place."

It is heartbreaking to image one's place in the world,  
and, in particular, the physical place where you live with your loved ones,  
where you go to be at home and at rest,  
--to imagine that place submerged in contaminated water,  
to the point where, in many cases, it won't be possible  
to clean up enough to live there ever again.

It raises questions about what makes for home,  
what is the source of our security,  
what makes for our rightful place.

This morning's story from the book of Exodus  
can be read as a story about place.

Moses is in a good place at the beginning of our story.

He is tending flocks on Horeb,  
the Mountain of God, also known as Sinai.

They are not his flocks. They belong to his father in law.  
When this portion of the story begins  
we know nothing about whether Moses is content, but he should be.  
He has committed murder in Egypt and gotten away scot free.  
The Pharaoh who once sought his life is now dead.  
Moses is married to the daughter of a priest,  
has a job, and an accepted place in her family.  
He and his wife have sons, we are told,  
and daughters, too, is a safe guess.  
In the middle of this settled life, at work on a day like any other,  
Moses sees something unusual and stops to look more closely.  
It is a bush aflame.

Several years ago I learned more about flames,  
when we took our kids out West  
to the four Corners area of New Mexico and Colorado.  
Huge parts of the region had been burned over.  
The trees were bare of leaves and in many places  
the black charcoal still painted the bases of the trunks and branches.  
Although it was heartbreaking to see the effects of fire  
as far as the eye could see, in another sense it was incredibly beautiful.  
Perhaps it was because the areas that had been burned over,  
though stark, were fire adapted.  
The twisted shapes of branches of the piñon pines  
stood out against the sky.  
They stood out against the rock and earth of the mesa tops,  
where a few small, low-growing plants  
still bloomed against all reason in a land besieged by drought.

At Mesa Verde, there was one mesa in particular  
where the effects of fire had created a landscape of indescribable beauty.  
The rangers took people up in groups  
because the fire danger was so extreme,  
and, in one place only, allowed us to get out of the tram  
and walk by ourselves between archeological sites.  
As we walked a cool wind blew  
and in the distance there was thunder,  
the thing that worries fire-watchers most,  
since a single lightning strike in one of the unburned areas  
can ignite a whole forest in a heartbeat during a drought.  
If there were a place perfectly suited to a burning bush  
it would be that place, where every shrub of any size  
has known the touch of fire again and again though time, and lived on.

Moses must have looked at the burning bush a good long while,  
long enough to see that the branches

were turning to ash, and yet they were not crumbling.  
The strangeness of this has his attention quite fixed  
when a voice calls out his name.

“Moses, Moses,” calls the voice.

In marvelous literary design, some form of the word “to see”  
shows up again, and again, and again, and again in this part of the story.  
Moses *looks* and then he *looks closely*.

God sees that Moses sees and only after a string of these words  
does the call come.

It makes me wonder had miraculous things  
happened under our noses

and we didn't look at closely enough?

And if we had would we have heard God's voice?

Or has God put our name back on the list  
to call another day.

On the day at hand in our story, God calls Moses,  
and Moses responds as any Israelite

who has sat around the fire of an evening

listening to the ancient stories of Abraham and Sarah,  
Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachael.

He responds as any Israelite would.

He says what you may say to God when it's your turn:

“Here am I.”

God tells Moses to take off his shoes.

This is a holy place. God is holy and set apart.

That's what holy means, what sacred means,  
to be set apart.

“I AM the God of your father, the God of Abraham,  
the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,” says the voice.

At this news, Moses wisely ducks his head.

The story says it is because he was afraid,  
and he was, but not just in the ways we might think.

I think Moses knows that introductions to God come with instructions,  
and he is afraid of what the instructions might be.

He finally has his place in the world all worked out and tidy.

What if God wants to interfere?

Being afraid God may interfere is one reason why, I think,  
many of us wind up not praying,

or not wanting to engage in anything  
that might really draw us closer to God.

God is about to interfere in Moses life.

But remarkably God has a way  
of taking what we think is just right

and turning it into something much, much better.

At Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta  
there is a huge needlepoint of the burning bush  
hanging in a stairwell landing.  
The colors of the yarn are rich:  
many different reds, oranges and yellows,  
and the deep, deep blues that are found at the center of flames.  
The flames seem to dance along the branches,  
as if the bush were ever burning without being consumed.  
This needle point was lovingly made by one of the former pastors,  
a bearded academic man who most people  
would never picture doing needlepoint.  
But some kind of fire clearly was burning in him  
while he worked his needle, because the finished work  
has a particular power and beauty.  
The burning bush originally hung in the chapel of that church,  
a narrow room whose focal point  
was the back wall above the communion table.  
For years that was the needlepoint's place,  
and it was perfect there.  
But a later pastor took a dislike to it,  
and had the burning bush moved  
to a wall in the landing of a stairwell.  
Now here's the thing.  
That stairwell was the busiest in the building,  
a place everyone used to rush past with their heads down,  
intent on getting to a different place, either up or down.  
But an odd thing happened.  
A place that used to be no place at all,  
now rivets your attention.  
The light is actually better in the stairwell than it was in the chapel,  
and whichever direction you move on the stairs, up or down,  
you spend half your time moving toward the burning bush  
in all its brilliant color.  
Being placed in the stairwell did not diminish  
the needlepoint of the burning bush.  
The burning bush has made the stairwell into a holy place.

God tells Moses he has to go to Egypt,  
where he was once a wanted man,  
and bring the Israelites out.  
Moses fights to keep his place in the world the way he wants it.  
Wheedling for time, Moses asks his question:  
"Suppose they ask me who sent me? What do I say?"  
God says to Moses, "I AM who I AM."

In the beautiful economy of Hebrew, it has three meanings:

I AM who I AM;

I Am what I AM;

I Will be what I Will be.

It's a circular answer that would be rude in anyone else.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going where I'm going!"

But God can and must talk in this way.

There isn't anything else in all creation

that can be used to reference the Creator.

God's only reference point is God: I AM who I AM.

This is the God who is holy and above reference,

but who chooses to be made known to people,

who makes faithful promises to Israel,

who guards fugitives like Moses,

who goes with and sustains those whom God calls.

Moses' settled life with his father-in-law's flocks is over.

Here beside this bush that burns but is never harmed,

Moses changes places.

His place now is in God, and to whomever God sends him.

Fred Craddock has said that to understand the bible

you have to understand the word "place."

Craddock gives several examples:

A daughter says as she prepares to go back to a far-off city,

"Now, Mother, get your things together.

You're going home with us." And the mother says "No."

The daughter says, "Well, now that dad is gone,

there's nothing holding you here.

We've all moved away and I don't want you staying here by yourself."

"I'm not by myself."

"Mother I don't want to hear anything about it.

Get you stuff together we'll arrange about the furniture later,

but you're coming home with me."

"No. No. NO! I'll stay here. I have my church

and I have my friends and I have my memories,

and this is my place," says mom.

Or this story:

Children run all through a new little house.

A bath and five rooms built by volunteers

from Habitat for Humanity.

A woman and those three little children stand there,

the woman's eyes brimming with tears

and the children run from room to room and back to their mother again,

then pulling at her skirt, asking,  
"Mama, is this our place? Mama, is this our place?"  
Off they run and back and she says,  
"Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

Or this story:

A fisherman is finished for the day when he sees  
a man and a woman driving a car down to the bank.  
They get out as the fisherman is coming up from the creek,  
and he says to them, "Going to fish?"  
"No," says the man from the car.  
They open the trunk and get out a couple of folding chairs.  
So the fisherman says, "Oh, you going to have a picnic?"  
"No," says the man.  
Then they put the chairs out in front of the car and sit there.  
Well the fisherman can't stand it, so he says "What are you doing?"  
The man says, "I'm a minister in the United Methodist Church.  
I'm going to retire in two years.  
We lived over forty years in the church's houses.  
So I bought an acre here along this creek,  
and we're going to have a place of our own."

Beloved, there is something about your rightful place  
that is God-filled and God-infused.  
Long ago when Fred Craddock was still a seminary student,  
he had a professor, Rabbi Silberman.  
Rabbi Silberman never used the word God,  
It was a word too holy for him to say aloud.  
So one day Craddock asked him:  
"What is your favorite expression for the almighty, for God?"  
And the rabbi looked at him and answered without hesitation  
"Of all the names my favorite is one of the oldest.  
'The Place,'" he said. AMEN.