

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY JULY 21, 2019

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"I've Got Your Back!"

Based on Exodus 3:1-6

Moses was a man who had spent most of his life watching his back. He was born as a child of the Chosen People during a time of exile in Egypt. It had been a long exile. The Israelite people had grown in numbers and strength, and the Pharaoh of the day became paranoid of rebellion. But the Pharaoh needed their labour, their artisans, and their services. So in a bold, horrific move, more than a little similar to the story of King Herod after the birth of Christ, the Pharaoh ordered that all baby boys be killed, in order to keep the Israelite slaves in line. In fear and in love, Moses' mother secreted Moses away in a floating basket in the reeds close to the water's edge, just as the Princess was making her way to the river.

The child was found. The Princess' heart was moved to compassion. She welcomed the child into the palace, and raised him as one of her own, with his own family close, acting as nurse and nanny. For as much as there was joy in Moses' family that the child's life had been saved,

they were always watching their back, wondering 'if' or 'when' their secret would be discovered.

"TAKE OFF
YOUR SANDALS,
FOR THE PLACE
WHERE YOU ARE
STANDING IS HOLY
GROUND."

~EXODUS 3:5

The child grew with grace, wisdom and knowledge that a privileged palace life could offer. As a young man, Moses came to know his true heritage and could see that some of his people were badly used by Egyptian managers. One chaotic day, he came upon an Egyptian master beating an Israelite. His anger and desire for justice overtook his good sense and he killed the Egyptian; a grave offence. In fear of his life, Moses left town quickly in the dead of night, watching his back at every turn for soldiers.

Moses then journeyed a great distance, far enough, he

hoped, that his story and his identity would not be known; that no questions would be asked about who he was, and where he had come from. Moses reinvented himself. He blended into the nomadic lifestyle common of the day, raised sheep, and in time, was welcomed as a husband, and a son-in-law to Jethro's family. But always, lingering in the back of his mind, was the fearful worry,

"Would someone, someday figure out my secrets?"

For now he had more than one!

"Would a gossipy soul, connect the story from a travelling caravan with the mysterious man who had arrived from the desert, and figure out who he was, and what he had done?"

The day in question started as any ordinary day for a shepherd. Our scripture lesson says that Moses went beyond the 'wilderness' so one wonders if perhaps he had not travelled a little further than his usual route.

- Perhaps he was in unfamiliar territory.

- Perhaps he was in a little bit of an adventurous mood.
- Perhaps he wanted to make sure his location was recorded so searchers could GPS his coordinates in case he got lost!

There before him, a bush appeared to burn, but did not burn up. He stopped in his tracks, trying to take in the beauty of what he was seeing, the wonder of what he was seeing, trying to understand the meaning of what he was seeing.

He looked to the left.

He looked to the right.

He twisted his neck to look behind him. (He'd gotten good at that!)

God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer,"

God said.

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (v4b-5)

Was this a trick?

No.

It was YHWH.

Moses lowered himself to the ground. He turned his eyes away from the burning bush, for he knew well that no one could see the face of YHWH and live. And then he waited for YHWH to speak.

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." (v6)

"I've got your back."

We have places that are 'holy ground': this sanctuary, other churches in this community, cathedrals around the world, monastic communities like Iona in Britain or Taize in France, the temple mount in Jerusalem, Byzantine chapels from the Middle East. There is change in our demeanor when we enter these buildings: a quieting of our voice; a recognition of the hushed silence in the room; a sense of walls steeped in history and tradition; a whisper of the faces and families who have passed through the space over the generations.

But are these the only places of 'holy ground?' When a loved one whose mind is slowly disappearing into the mists of dementia curls their fingers around yours, or looks into your eyes, and for just a second, there is clarity and recognition, is this not 'holy ground?'

- When family members who have been at odds for a time, pulling people this way and that with emotional drama, decide to approach the Thanksgiving Dinner table with calm or at least to set aside their differences for a while, is this not 'holy ground?' When those who have closed minds to others of different race, theology, skin

colour, or lifestyle, recognize that they have more in common than they do to separate or alienate, is this not 'holy ground?'

My friends, holy ground is more than just geography, or square footage or soil beneath your feet. If God is in all things, through all things, and around all things, then all things, all places, all people are His 'holy ground.' You are 'holy ground.' Every-thing before you, every-one before you is 'holy ground.'

And if that seems a rather daunting task, remember, Moses was overwhelmed also. When Moses had doubts, YHWH said, "I've got your back," and Moses replied, *"Here I am." (v4b)*

When we are shown a glimpse of 'holy ground' before you, and God whispers, "I've got your back," will your reply be, "Here I am?"
Amen.