

What comes to mind when you hear the words “**holy ground**”? Had you asked me a couple years ago, I would have said: *our church’s property up in the Blues*. Those of you who have been up there know what I mean. There was just something about the place – the beauty, the peace, the inspiring view from the bluff. It made you feel: “**Surely the Lord is in this place!**” This is “**holy ground!**” When I went up there, it was easy to envision a retreat center nestled on the hillside, where people could go someday to get away from the rat race, refresh their spirits, and grow closer to God. Sadly, that dream came crashing down after some neighbors hacked our cross down – at least, the dream of a retreat center up there. For those who bought the land, I hope it still feels like “**holy ground.**” But for me, that’s no longer the image that comes to mind.

And maybe that’s just as well, because really anywhere can be “**holy ground.**” God is present everywhere, so God can meet us anywhere. Anywhere can be “**holy ground.**”

I thought about this a couple weeks ago when I was up in Kadlec’s Neonatal ICU. The Salter family had gathered around the incubators of their tiny little premature twins. With just a few drops of water, I baptized Jaydin and Jaycob “**in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.**” In that moment, the boys became members of God’s family. And what a precious moment that was! Surely, the Lord was in that place! Kadlec’s NICU was “**holy ground.**”

The same was true a couple months before, when the Hardman family gathered around Patty’s bed at Hospice and prayed for her. As she breathed her last, there was great sadness, yes, but also a spirit of peace as God received His precious child into the arms of mercy and welcomed her into eternal life. Surely, the Lord was in that place. Her room at Hospice was also “**holy ground.**”

Why, even a few weeks ago I felt that sense out on a lonely stretch of Highway 395. I was driving up to Spokane, you see, and my car broke down right in the middle of nowhere. It was a 108°. I had no cell phone to call for help. So I had to set out on foot, not knowing how long it might take to reach the farm I could see off in the distance. Dozens of cars whizzed past me, either ignoring or not noticing me, but then some “*Good Samaritans*” slowed down and pulled over. “Do you need a ride?” Turned out my “*Good Samaritans*” were a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they could not have been kinder. They let me use their cell phone, then drove me up to Lind. They even made sure I had a shady place to wait and a couple of cool drinks. Now, what are the chances of that just happening? Yes, the Lord was present even on that lonely stretch of Highway 395. It, too, was “**holy ground.**”

Maybe you have had a similar experience – the feeling that you were truly meeting God in a certain place; that you were truly standing on “**holy ground.**”

If you have, you know you don't have to be in a church to feel this or in a scenic spot. You can even feel it in a situation that to others might only seem trying or tragic. In fact, the more you are tuned into God, the more any spot can be a place for meeting God. Centuries ago, Brother Lawrence "practiced the presence of God" while scrubbing floors. That may be the case for you, too – or while pulling weeds in your backyard, doing work in your office, or driving to the store. It can be a place you've been many times before, a place you'd never think of as sacred, but then somehow you realize: "**Surely, the Lord is in this place.**" It is "**holy ground.**"

That's how it was for Moses in our text. On this particular day, he was out pasturing Jethro's flock, something he had done again and again, year after year. No doubt he was taking the flock down a path he had been down many times before, through land he knew like the back of his hand. Then, off in the distance, he saw a burning bush. This, too, was nothing out of the ordinary. Over the years Moses had probably seen a number of bushes burning out in the wilderness. Normal ones, I mean, ignited by a lightening strike, perhaps, or a combination of heat and dryness. Fires in the wilderness are not uncommon, as all of us here in the west know too well.

Yet, as we also know, it was precisely in this spot that Moses encountered God. A common, ordinary, very familiar spot turned out to be "**holy ground**" -- *just as it can for us*. So we have to wonder: How exactly does that happen? Or put another way: Why doesn't it happen more often? If God is always here with us, if God is always reaching out to us, why aren't we constantly aware that we are standing on "**holy ground**"? In the short time we have this morning, I'm not sure we can answer this definitively, but I think we can figure out how to experience God's presence more often and more fully. We'll find our clue in one simple detail from Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush.

So let's think back to that scene. On this particular day, Moses noticed a burning bush. Now, he could have just ignored it. "*Oh, it's just a bush like any other!*" He could have just given it a cursory glance and gone his merry way. But he didn't. He actually *focused* on it. That's what made him realize something was different here. And he *stayed focused* on it. That's what made him realize there was something that defied explanation: the bush kept on burning without being consumed. Naturally, Moses went closer to check it out. And what then? "**God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he answered, 'Here I am.'** Then God said, '**Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground... I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt...So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.**'"

We know how the story goes from there, so let's pause and identify that simple detail that led to Moses' encounter with God. It's the fact that Moses ***paid***

attention. And if this sounds just a little too simple, let's ask ourselves: What if Moses *had* ignored this burning bush? What if Moses *had* just given it a glance and gone his merry way? What would have happened then? We don't know, but nothing close to what *did* happen. The story unfolds as it does because Moses **paid attention**. That's what led to His encounter with God. **Paying attention!**

Folks, this huge! How much depends on paying attention! Yes, God could have gotten Moses' attention another time, another way, but Moses would have missed out this time, wouldn't he? And that's the lesson for us. You know, when we stand in heaven someday and we look back on *our* story, chances are we'll see plenty of times when we were standing on "**holy ground**" and didn't realize it; times when God was reaching out to us and we didn't notice – not because we couldn't have; because we weren't paying attention. But it doesn't have to be that way! We may never duplicate Moses' experience, but like him, we can have a richer experience of God, a more personal relationship with God. And there is nothing God would like better! For the God who once met Moses in the burning bush wants to meet us, too – in fact, wants to meet us on a regular basis. The key, though, is us learning to pay attention to Him – pay close attention to the presence of God that makes any place at any time "**holy ground**."

So how do we learn this? Where do we begin? It seems to me, the most natural starting point would be the times and places where we would most expect to meet God. By that, I mean our **private prayer time and our public worship**. If we can learn to really pay attention in the so-called spiritual moments, that will help us pay better attention to God in the rest of life. Yes, this seems the most natural starting point: our **private prayer time and our public worship**.

But even that is a challenge, isn't it? Really staying focused on God, really paying attention. It is a challenge! I'll admit I struggle with it, and I think we all do to some extent, because we human beings are just so distractible!

In private prayer times, our minds can wander here, there, and everywhere. We flash back to something that happened yesterday. Then it's an errand we have to take care of today. Then back to a conversation we had, or a joke we heard, or an irritation we're still chewing on. Anything and everything but what we should be focusing on. It's like we've got a spiritual attention deficit.

And public worship is no better. The potential distractions here are endless. There are sound distractions like chitchat, cell phones, little kids making a not-so joyful noise unto the Lord. Likewise, there are visual distractions. Is the pastor's stole straight? Is there a typo in the bulletin? And do the flower arrangements seem to be getting smaller? Then, too, there are opinion distractions. *Do I like the music or don't I? Do I like the way pastor does the liturgy or don't I? Ditto for the sermon. Ditto for the ushering. Ditto for the lecturing. And really, does Communion have to take so long?* The list could go on and on. It's ridiculous, but it's a fact of life: we are just so distractible!

Unfortunately, there's no easy way to overcome this weakness. In our struggle to pay attention to God, the only helpful thing we can do *is* struggle – and ask for God's help with the struggle. How to do that specifically? I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know, but *before* private prayer or public worship, one thing we can do this is consciously focus on God and ask for help up front. Quiet the mind. Focus on His Presence. Then pray: *God, I know you're right here. In front of me. Behind me. Above, below, all around me. I know you're right here, but I'm easily distracted, so please help me stay focused on You.* If we ask, God will help us with this. So this is always the best way to begin.

But, of course, the fact that God will help us focus doesn't mean He will *make* us *stay* focused. Eventually, our thoughts will drift elsewhere, and when that happens, there's only one other thing we can do: we need to pull our thoughts back again and ask for help again. Don't get discouraged. This is normal. And please, don't waste time feeling guilty about losing focus. In this case, guilt is a distraction, too! No, just keep pulling our thoughts back. Just keep asking God to help. Again and again and again.

Because you know what? Even if we don't make it all the way through our prayer list, that constant focusing on God is meaningful prayer. Or in church, even if we don't stay focused through a single hymn, that constant asking God to help us focus is genuine worship. We are turning to Him, aren't we? And we are depending on Him, right? We're showing Him that He matters to us, matters enough to keep trying to pay attention. So even if we accomplish nothing else, that makes the struggle worthwhile! And...we'll find that the more we struggle this way, the more focused we will become. We'll also become more aware of His presence. In private prayer, in public worship; really, in life as a whole – much more aware of His presence wherever we are. This is “**holy ground.**” So it is worth the effort! First, last, and always, we need to **pay attention.**

I know this may sound simple, and in a sense, it is. Not simple in the sense of simplistic or easy but in the sense of basic. Simple like “Keep your eye on the ball.” In other words, basic enough that really need to master it in order to move forward. For many a great saint, learning to pay attention has been indispensable for spiritual growth. One of the greatest, *St. Frances DeSales*, taught that even if we do nothing more in an hour of prayer than just keep pulling our minds back and focusing on God, that will be time wisely spent. And indeed it is! For how can we grow in faith without learning to focus on God? How can we truly follow without learning to keep Him front and center? First, last, and always, we need to **pay attention.** As we do, how our outlook on life will change! More and more, wherever we are, we will sense the truth: “**Surely, the Lord is in this place.**” More and more, wherever we are, we will have the assurance that we are standing on “**holy ground.**” Amen.

