

“In the Presence of the Great ‘I Am’” Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26 8-28-05

When I was a layperson, sitting where you do every Sunday, there were times when I thought my pastor focused on a particular topic too many Sundays in a row. Being a curious layperson, like many of you are, I mentioned this to him. He patiently explained to me that when we follow the lectionary, as he did, we are guided by the readings that are determined by a neutral source outside of all denominations. Readings are set for a three-year cycle, somewhere out there, and they fall on us as the gentle rain, or sometimes not so gentle hail.

He also told me that when some people in the congregation felt that a sermon was aimed at them, they were wrong. Ministers touch what it is that lies deep within them selves most often. So, if we listen discerningly and carefully, we can usually tell what inner struggles a pastor might be having. But that is only if we listen carefully and with open minds.

This morning we have some “Wonderful Words of Life” and the way to live it echoing through our scripture readings. These words can be reduced, quite simply, to instructions for living. That is true of almost all scripture.

Do you ever sense you are standing on “holy ground?” Is your concept of “holy ground” those special places set aside for close encounters with God? Like this place? Or do you know that you can take off your shoes anywhere and discover that the great “I AM” is with you?

Moses had frequent displays of the presence of God. In our reading from Exodus for this morning he encountered the burning bush and actually heard God tell him that he was standing on Holy Ground and in the presence of the great “I AM.” Moses was properly humble but still resisted being God’s spokesman to the nation Israel even though God assured him that he would put the words needed into his mouth. Upon further resistance to God a little later in the story, God assigns, Moses’ brother, Aaron, to be the one who will do the actual speaking after the prophet, Moses, receives the revelations that need to be shared. This system works throughout the story even when Aaron and Moses go to Pharaoh to ask that their people be let go. Aaron was eighty-three and Moses eighty when they were sent to ask that their nation might be set free. When Pharaoh refused, ten plagues were visited on Egypt, each one worse than the last—everything from frogs to gnats, to flies to festering boils, to killing thunder and hail, to locusts to darkness. As you recall the heart of Pharaoh was hardened with each plague and he would not let the nation Israel go. Next Sunday, our story begins with the last and most deadly of the plagues.

Through all of those difficult days, Moses had no doubt that wherever he stood was on holy ground and that he was doing what it was God asked of him, although often reluctantly.

Jesus, as he began to set his eyes and his course on track to Jerusalem, knew that he, too, was doing what was asked of him by God. When Peter protested he was told that there was a far larger picture that needed to be considered. Peter was being blinded by the world in which he lived and could not see the world that was to come.

Jesus reminds us all that we are not to become so involved in this world that we lose sight of what it means to follow him. I have known, and I am sure you have, too, people who have become such slaves to our earthly life, that they have lost all that has meaning

for their souls. They live on the surface of life sometimes fearing to look at themselves and what harm they do to those around them when they live with such a narrow focus. There is no depth, no compassion, no caring for others. Their way is the only way and they wear blinders to any alternatives. Life is far vaster than what we see in our narrow purview. Jesus came to help us open our eyes to the broader vista that lies before each of us and to nudge us forward into fuller life. He must have never doubted that he stood firmly on “holy ground” and that his Maker was always beside him. He wanted us to sense this too. This is what it means to have life and have it abundantly. To recognize the power and strength of God that lies all around us and within us. When we choose to take up our cross and follow him, we are to open ourselves to the life and teachings that are before us and seek to walk in his footsteps. To do this we set aside our old ways of living.

Although Paul never directly knew Jesus, he sought to set forth the essence of his teachings in his letters. We always need to remember that Paul interpreted what Jesus said into his day and age and life situations. This morning’s reading from Romans speaks of turning the other cheek and learning to move forward in life with a measure of peace. This is what all communities of faith are called to do—from the earliest of the Christian churches to the very newest. The fact that Paul mentions this need so very often indicates the universality of human nature. He reminds us that vengeance belongs in the hands of God, never in ours. We are sad creatures if we believe that we are the final judges of anyone else. Paul understood this as he penned his wonderful words of life.

Some of you tell me that these are only words and that is true if we allow them to lie on a page in a closed book. When looked at this way they do us no good and that should sadden all of us. To help us live more fully they need to be read, understood and integrated into our lives, souls and hearts. Part of that is my job but a much larger part rests in your hands and hearts.

If we sense that we stand on “holy ground,” as did Moses; and if we understand that we are here to seek to understand and do God’s will as did Jesus; and if we truly want to reach out and help others to a fuller understanding of the teachings that are so vital to our lives, as did Paul; our souls will be broadened and enriched beyond any and all expectations by the “wonderful words of life” we finally manage to take from the pages of our Bible and live. Amen