

## **“The Sacred Spaces and Wide Places of Our Lives”**

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This morning Bob woke up in Israel and spent most of the day on the Sea of Galilee. It's about 6 pm there now and I imagine him sitting on the patio at the hotel reflecting on all that he has experienced in the last few days and all that the coming week will bring. He is on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with 20 other pastors from around the country. They are walking around in some of the most holy places of the Christian faith – and through ancient history.

This is the same trip I went on last summer and I know well how special it is to travel where pilgrims have come for centuries to experience these places that we call sacred and holy. I thought it was fitting and appropriate that while Bob was visiting the sacred places that are part of our spiritual tradition, that we look at some of the sacred places that we have encountered in life – the places that hold some particular meaning for us and are preserved in our memories.

Fortunately, we don't have to travel to the land of the Bible's stories in order to experience sacred places. In fact, Bob has left us a message to this effect. In the last Crosstie, he wrote:

“I really believe that all land is holy. “The whole earth is full of the goodness of the Lord,” the Psalmist wrote. .As a matter of fact, it was in common places with ordinary people that God revealed His presence so many times in scripture. So, as you go about your daily tasks or take a break from your routine and go on vacation, be aware that you, too, are on “Holy Ground.”

What makes a place holy or sacred? In the Bible we find stories about a particular place made sacred because of an encounter with God or a feeling of the presence of God. These places where God's presence was felt were not necessarily confined to the expected worship sites such as the temple in Jerusalem or the tabernacle in the wilderness. In fact, many of them occurred in the more ordinary, everyday locations such as a well, a tree, a road, a field, a rock, and so on.

To illustrate this point I looked at three well known stories from the Bible in which God becomes known in ordinary places. The first one involves a stone. In Genesis 28:11-15 we find the story of Jacob, the younger brother of Esau, who had tricked his father into giving him the elder brother's blessing. Needing to leave home after that, he set out to go to his uncle's home and stopped to rest after sunset one day. The text says he rested his head upon a stone and then had a dream in which God spoke to him and promised he would carry on the promise given to Abraham. When he woke up he exclaimed, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

Jacob did what other patriarchs did and set up an alter on that spot in order to commemorate this experience. It was the experience of receiving this life changing message from God that made an ordinary stone become a sacred place.

Moses was going about his ordinary routine of tending the flock one day when he encountered a bush that was on fire but not being consumed. In this story from Exodus 3, we learn that God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. He said to him, "the place on which you are standing is holy ground." There was nothing special about that particular piece of ground prior to this experience. What made it "holy" was the experience of God's presence and the realization of the call of God on Moses' life for God's liberating

purpose. It was this God moment that would become part of the most significant story in Israel's history and one that would be passed down from generation to generation. "Our God is a God who sets the captives free and journeys with us to a land of new beginnings." On this ordinary day that started by going to work, which for Moses was tending sheep, a holy moment happened that forever changed Moses' life and the lives of the Hebrew people who became the nation of Israel.

So far this might be sounding like some pretty amazing experiences that don't happen to ordinary people. If you're not relating to burning bushes or powerful dreams then keep listening.

In the Old Testament there are some references to God as "place" as a metaphor for God's presence. Deuteronomy 33:27 says God is our "dwelling place" (RSV) or "refuge" (KJV and NIV). Psalm 139: 7-10 affirms that there is no place we can go and be out of God's presence. "The Jewish philosopher Philo wrote God . . . is called place, for He encompasses all things, but is not encompassed by anything."<sup>1</sup> If God is our "place" then all the places we find ourselves in have the potential to become sacred spaces . How do we become aware of this?

Let's look at a story from Luke 24. This is one of Jesus' post resurrection appearances. Jesus encounters two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. He begins to walk with them and they have a conversation about what had transpired in the previous days but the men do not recognize Jesus. It was not until they sit down to a very common meal of bread and wine and watched what they may have seen many times before in Jesus' action of blessing and breaking the bread that "their eyes were opened" Luke says.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul E. Stroble, *You Gave Me A Wide Place* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2006)

I would imagine that it was also in their reflection on the walking and talking on the road that day – in the relationships that were taking place, that they recognized later that “yes, the Lord was with us.”

Like the two disciples in this story, have there been places where you were touched by God’s presence but you only understood the significance looking back at it rather than at the time it took place? You know the old saying, hindsight is 20/20. I think God speaks in many mysterious ways. We don’t always have clarity on it at the time and that is the value of building meditation and reflection into our daily life. When we are still and quiet, the mind can begin to quiet down and in the silence and stillness God can impart wisdom and insight to a problem, or a question you may be pondering. An experience you may have initially judged harshly or in anger can become a place where God is able to show you something about yourself or another person you did not understand before.

As I was writing part of this sermon, I was sitting outside at one of the picnic tables under a canopy of trees watching and listening to a whole other world going on that seemed so different from the one going on inside the church building. Ants were roaming around looking for food, birds were singing, squirrels were scampering about and a wasp was finding a place on a bush to rest for a while. The wind was gently blowing through the trees and in a brief moment I had a sense of God’s quiet presence coming through this other world. Now the only reason it seemed like an “other” world was because I had to stop my busyness to notice it. An interesting thing happened a few minutes later. As soon as I began to treat it like work – “oh, this is a good sermon illustration” – the presence of God, the sacred space it had become seemed to fade away.

I don't believe God's presence disappeared. What happened was my mind took over and I lost the sense of the sacredness of God in nature.

Have you ever known a place where you felt unexpectedly inspired or comforted? Or a place where your spiritual sense seemed to be heightened or where God seemed to speak? If so, you probably have reserved this in your memory and can recall most of the details about that experience. Paul Stroble refers to these as God's wide places – the places where God meets us in the various places of our lives. His book is called, *You Gave Me a Wide Place*, taken from Psalm 18:36: "You gave me a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip." These "wide" places are also called by other names. In the Celtic Christian tradition they are called "thin places." They may simply be referred to as "holy ground" as we have already heard from the Exodus story.

When I was in Israel last summer, I recall having a heightened sense of awareness of the history of the land and the sites that we visited. I picked up some rocks from a few of those places to bring home with me out of appreciation for the amazing history they represent. The rock I brought from Jericho is from one of the oldest known civilizations in history. Jericho dates back to approximately 7,000 B.C. We have no history in the U.S. like that! When I look at these rocks I think of all of the rich, spiritual history of the places they came from and the events that took place there and I feel connected with them as a person of faith.

I must say that although I was in awe of the biblical tradition and history attached to the land and the holy sites, the places that have the power to stir up memories of God's grace are very ordinary. They are the places attached to my life story. If you think about

how this may be true for you, you may realize that a particular place resonates with you because it is part of your story. There are two of these places for me.

The first is my childhood home and neighborhood. Recently I drove through the streets of my youth and saw the small home I grew up in. There are so many places around it that stand out as powerful memories. Riding bikes on summer evenings on Seavy Drive, including the spot where I did a double flip over my handlebars after a dog ran out in front of me, the streets where my two best friends and I walked to the local shopping center to hang out at the drug store on Saturdays. We also walked these streets to our elementary school everyday.

Looking at the front doors of Toney Elementary school I suddenly remembered the day that I proudly proclaimed to some friends in that very spot that “there is a real Santa Claus!” Of course, what I didn’t know then was that my defense was a moment in time that signaled that I was growing up and reality was breaking into my childhood fantasy world. I think God is just as much in these “experiences” as he is in a religious setting. I know there is a tendency to think of God being removed from certain segments of daily life and only showing up when summoned or in when it is a “religious” atmosphere. I wonder if that is a false impression we have regarding the sacred vs the secular. Can you think of any place where God is not present?

The neighborhood I grew up in was a place where we knew our neighbors. My two best friends lived across the street and behind me. Those were the days before cell phones and text messaging. When Jan wanted to talk to me, she would call me and tell me to meet her at the fence. Our back yards met and we would stand at the fence that separated our yards but not our ability to talk intimately about life.

These places of my childhood give me a special feeling because it was home – a place of security – a place where I was known. It was a “wide place” where God was in the ordinary moments of my life – in the relationships of my life.

The second significant “wide place” I experienced was my grandmother’s house. She lived in 3 houses in her adult life and I knew all three. I always looked forward to going to spend time at her house. You know what it’s like to go to grandma’s house – you get to eat whatever you want and stay up as late as you want! As I was thinking about this, I realized that it was not just her house that was the special place – it was her. She embodied God’s unconditional love to me my whole life – as a place of security and trust just like my neighborhood. Children form a lot of their impressions about God from the significant adults in their lives. God can use these relationships if the adult is open and aware of how powerfully unconditional love, acceptance, forgiveness and encouragement can be communicated to children in their formative years – and these things happen in everyday life.

When we can see God in the ordinary everyday places of our lives, we may become more open to how God is present and active in everyday life. Recently, I was standing in a check out line at a grocery store behind a young, Hispanic man. I was not paying close attention to what was going on in front of me at first. I was doing what most people do and just waiting mindlessly for my turn while glancing at the magazines and the ridiculous scandal publications in the rack in front of me. When it became obvious that it was taking too long for one person to check out with only a couple of items, I tuned in to the conversation between the clerk and the young man. She was trying to explain that he owed her two cents more than he had paid. He was having trouble

understanding both the English and maybe the currency too. When I realized what was happening, I quickly reached into my purse for two cents and gave it to the clerk. If I could use this fanciful description: it was as if an angel was hovering over me and hit me over the head as if to say, “wake up, there is a situation here that needs your attention!” The young man looked puzzled for a second but finally understood that it was those two cents that completed his transaction. He looked back at me with a big smile and put his hand over his heart as a way of thanking me without words. You don’t need words to understand that kind of wordless language.

I call this experience a God moment. In this simple exchange between complete strangers, world’s apart, a wide place opened up and it was briefly sacred. And, I might add, that it was the first time I ever felt good about giving anyone my “two cents.”

Martin Buber says that “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity surging between them.” In other words, God is in the space between human beings where two people are present for one another, in relationship. I experienced God in the prompting of my decision to respond graciously and patiently to this stranger whom I am sure is not always treated in such a way.

Now you may think that this brief moment in Publix doesn’t qualify for the designation of “sacred space.” Ponder this question: How does God communicate grace? Think about a time when you were the recipient of God’s grace. How did it come to you? No doubt it was through a person – demonstrating an act of kindness, generosity, acceptance or forgiveness. God mediates grace through people. Certainly it should be said of people who follow Jesus that we are channels of God’s grace wherever we are and in whatever the circumstances. This leads us out of political and cultural expectations

into a higher level of what Christians call “Kingdom” principles. Jesus said, “the Kingdom of God is among you.” Some translations say it as, “the Kingdom of God is within you.” That means all of the ways that God is breaking into human life and relationships to bring about his will “on earth as it is in heaven,” as the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples states.

What kind of “wide” places will you encounter this week where God will be present between you and another person? There will be so many opportunities that will occur between you and your spouse, child, co-workers, a clerk behind a counter, someone in a line in front of you and the strangers on the same road with you.

Our challenge in this busy world is to be alert to daily activities that can make a place sacred and holy because God is present in it with you. If we lose our ability to see God in the ordinary moments of life, we risk seeing God as distant, remote, unknowable. If we all could respond to our daily encounters at the Kingdom level, it would transform us and our world.

Think about it . . .

God,

Open up a wide place for us this day and everyday that we may sense your transforming presence in all relationships and become channels of your grace. Amen.