

# BAREFOOT ON HOLY GROUND

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Based on Exodus 3:1-5 and Psalm 19:1-4a

Earth Day Sunday / Drama Sunday

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In today's drama, Todd and his Dad are discussing the facts of life. But the particular facts of life they are exploring are not the ones that Todd's Dad had planned on. No, it turns out that Todd is much more interested in the origins of the universe than he is in how babies get here. Todd really wants to know about God! How is God *behind* everything and *in* everything, creating, guiding, sustaining this vast, mysterious, complex universe of ours? His Dad is not so sure he has the answers to that, but together, under the stars, father and son begin to investigate these deep and ultimate questions about life.

Whenever people spend a bit of time in nature, whether it's a campout in the backyard, a hike through the woods, a nature retreat at Aldersgate, or a just an evening of lying on the grass gazing up at the stars, we can begin to feel very deep feelings – deeper than our ordinary experiences usually allow us to have. We slow down and gradually, as our cares and preoccupations begin to slip away, we become aware of the wonder and incredible beauty of the world around us. We can't help but feel awe, amazement, and a kind of quiet reverence for the sacred splendor that surrounds us and sustains our lives here on earth. Many people's discovery of God begins with a deep experience in nature.

The state of mind we enter when we take some time in nature must be very much like the feeling Moses had when he came upon a burning bush in the mountain wilderness. He was so awed by this bush, wrapped in flames yet never consumed, that he stopped what he was doing and suddenly came into an alert state of stillness. From this place of watchful silence within himself, he became aware of God, the Holy Presence that subtly resides behind all our experiences. And God spoke out of this stillness, saying, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

When Moses encountered God in this way, he realized that his usual approach of just plowing through life without any consciousness of God wasn't going to work anymore. He now needed to take into account this awesome Presence which formed the backdrop to

all of life - this Presence that was so much greater than himself, so much wiser than himself - this Presence that radiated from the wilderness, the sky, the wind, the burning bush. For this Presence was silently calling out to him. Moses was humbled. He knew in that moment that he was standing on holy ground; he was standing on the ground of God. He just had to take off his shoes, grow still and alert, and listen.

Think of a time when you were outside in nature with your shoes off. You can feel so much more when you are barefoot. You feel the coolness and texture of the grass, you feel every little unevenness in the ground, you feel the softness and warmth of the earth, the tickle of stray leaves, the bumpiness of little pebbles and sticks. It's a secure, grounding feeling. We may find ourselves feeling more centered and rooted in the earth. We may just begin to feel a part of something much larger than ourselves.

I remember a woman at seminary who shared that, in the months following her husband's death, she was having a very hard time releasing her grief. But once spring came, every afternoon she would go outside with her gardening tools and start digging in the dirt, planting a flowerbed. Feeling the soil on her hands, getting the dirt under her fingernails, she began to have a deep, secure feeling of being one with the life around her. She realized God had not abandoned her. God was right here, in the soil, in the sun, in the fresh air and green grass. Gradually, she became healed of her deep grief simply through her simple daily act of putting her hands into the earth. When we approach nature this way, with our bare feet and our hands empty and open and ready to dig into the soil, we begin to come in touch with the holy, healing gift that this earth is for us.

It is with this barefoot, humble attitude that we honor and celebrate Earth Day Sunday today. As we think about the gift we have each been given in the form of this beautiful, whirling blue-green planet which supports and sustains our lives and all we hold dear, we realize we must grow very humble and very alert to take it all in. When we grow humble, when we grow still, that's when we begin to feel the subtle Presence of God. And out of the stillness, God speaks. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," proclaims Psalm 19, "and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4a). Through the silence of nature, God speaks, teaching us to appreciate our planet earth, and to take care of it.

"Take care!" Those are the words we sometimes use to end our conversations after a chance meeting at the store or a talk on the phone..."Take care!" we say as a kind of blessing upon the other person. I never really thought about the power of those words until one summer when Ron and I had the chance to visit "Caretaker Farm," where the whole point of farming IS to "take care."

This small farm nestled in the Berkshire Mountains in Williamstown, Massachusetts, was begun by Elizabeth and Sam Smith in 1969, who were not only a husband and wife farming team, but also two deeply committed Christians. From the beginning, they grew all their crops organically, and the farm has been running for 40 years, now under the capable management of a new family now that the Smiths have retired. The farm continues to flourish.

On the day Ron and I visited, inside the old farmhouse by the side of the road, a few college kids were baking half a dozen different kinds of bread, and the intoxicating aroma wafted outside to the little outdoor stand where abundant rows of fresh corn, succulent peas, beans, squash, potatoes, green peppers, home made breads, cakes, jams and honey were all lined up for sale. People were stopping at the stand and buying the bread still hot from the oven, wrapped in towels as it was brought over from the house.

As Elizabeth gave us a brief tour of the farm, Ron asked her, "In all your many years working this land, haven't you suffered a lot of crop loss since you don't use chemicals?" "Quite the opposite," she said, smiling, "Mother Earth doesn't need all kinds of chemicals pumped into her to grow food. She knows how to grow food very well all by herself, and we, the farmers, are just here to assist." For decades, Elizabeth and Sam would hop on a plane for India in January of every year, working with the rural farmers for 3 months in a poor section outside Bombay, helping them improve their crop yield and feed their hungry children.

It is clear that Elizabeth and Sam's lifework as farmers has been a deeply spiritual one, and you can begin to understand why they named their property, "Caretaker Farm." A caretaker is one who maintains and protects property owned by another. Elizabeth and Sam were always humble enough to realize that the Earth belongs to God, and we humans are here simply to be stewards, caretakers of this precious home we have been given on loan.

Sometimes when we hear the frightening statistics about pollution, dwindling natural resources, and global warming, we are thrown into a kind of quiet panic and a secret feeling of hopelessness. How can one person make a difference, we wonder? It is tempting to grow hopeless. But if instead we grow alert and still, as Moses did on the mountaintop, something new and quite remarkable begins to happen. If we dare to step out of our shoes and stand barefoot on the holy ground of this present moment, we begin to hear God giving us instruction. "Take care...take care of your corner of the world. For the place on which you stand is holy ground."

God's power gets unleashed within us whenever we just get simple like this, standing barefoot on the holy ground of our lives, and listening. The power God gives us usually doesn't make headlines. In fact, it works invisibly, silently, humbly, unobtrusively, and is unleashed in us as soon as we dare to listen and to respond.

In these turbulent times for our earth, God is asking us to take care. With each prayer, with each small act of respectful stewardship and conservation, with each humble effort to make a difference, from our environmentally friendly light bulbs to our energy efficient appliances and the myriad other ideas we are implementing for our homes, our schools, our church, our community, we are taking care, of each other and of our earth. The task God gives us to do may well seem as small as a mustard seed, as hidden as a cake of yeast in the dough, as silent as a sprouting grain of wheat. But it is actually the quiet little actions that DON'T make the headlines that have a way of changing and healing the world. As we each perform those innumerable, unnamed little acts of care - recycling, reusing, simplifying, beautifying - that have been entrusted to each of us to do, we are helping God give birth to a radically new order of life, as the kingdom gently and quietly breaks in, on earth as it is in heaven.

In all our seeming smallness and insignificance, as we take our stand, barefoot on holy ground, we are actually standing up to the dark principalities and powers of the world's fears and hopelessness, to profess, "In Christ my tiny efforts count - my efforts join with the efforts of countless others on this planet who also love this earth - and together we WILL preserve and protect our world, we WILL allow the kingdom of God to gently dawn, we WILL safeguard a place for our children and our children's children."

We can take our cue from Todd, the inquisitive boy in the drama. When his Dad complains about the inconvenience of recycling, Todd challenges him: "Why aren't we recycling, Dad? We just throw everything in the garbage, and then it just gets buried in the ground someplace. That's gross!" Out of the mouths of babes comes the voice of truth that sets us free.

As you leave this sanctuary this morning, let your caretaker spirit shine through. Be serious about your small, loving acts; each one is helping to build a new earth. Above the noise of self-interest and fear and hopelessness, dare to hear God's simple reminder to you and to all of us: "The place on which you are standing is holy ground." Once we know this to be true, what else would we want to do but to take tender care of this holy ground entrusted to us by our tender God?

*Let us pray. O God, you care so much for us that you have given us this beautiful earth in which to live and love and create and bless. Teach us to take good care of what we have been given, not just for ourselves, but also for all future generations. AMEN.*

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