

NEW HOLY GROUND

Texts on the Second Sunday in Lent

March 4, 2007

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-21; Luke 13:31-35

When was it last that you stood in holy ground?
Don't answer too quickly;
points are not given to the one who says she treads there oftenest.
Holy ground is not in your back yard.
It is not in the church.
It is not Israel either, or anywhere
your feet can follow to.
By "holy ground" I want to suggest a space given to you
by God, you might say—
a space not quite of your choosing,
more like a door left open, you don't know how,
through which you willingly pass into a vastness.
There, in that holy ground, though you are utterly alone,
you crave no company, for there, you are utterly real.
You are present to your own real self
before God, you might say.
In a summer night's middle hour,
a passageway to holy ground opened sometimes for me.
Where four children would be
soundly sleeping in their beds in the big upper room
of an Adirondack cottage,
I was once a boy
who would wake and listen
to the pendulum in the mantle clock downstairs
tock-ticking the dark time.
This boy would kneel at the wood-framed screen of his window
and look up under the towering pines
to share in their windless presence.
He would tune to the tiny sound of a car far
off on the state highway,
and all the while it came
and went,
ponder the night driver, his plan,
and his not knowing that he was attended partway through his night
by a boy.
Under a night sky, Abram passed through
to holy ground, we are told.
In the anguish of his irrelevance,
wandering childless and homeless with his wife,
he comes to himself under a night sky
before God, you might say; the story does.
The passage to holy ground is always like that—

an urgent awareness of your own presence,
your own need,
your own time which turns your inside out to a vastness.
Abram craves to know that his time on earth, his seed,
will matter,
not be scattered in desert sands.
To lay firm hold on this hope against hope,
he is divinely driven to gather creatures from his flock
to slit their throats
to cut them open like fruits.
The odor of blood singes the air.
Then, as the sun is going down,
a deep sleep and a terrifying darkness descend upon him.
He treads then the holy ground
from which arises divine assurance
of his reality in this promised land.
This is how our religion begins.

The ritual of sacrifice told here seems hooded with impenetrable meaning,
but it is clear enough.
It is a holy violence, meant to mark the hands and heart of Abram
as he starts down the dreadful path of his promise,
risking and taking life.
For the Kenites will be killed,
and the Canaanites will be killed,
and the Kenizzites and the Kadmonites and the Girgashites
and the Palestinian nights
will be filled with killing
to give Abram's children a home.

From the start of human time,
humans have molded themselves
into the safety of tribes
by violence,
securing thus their sense of reality and history.
From the beginning,
the blood of the ram must carpet holy ground
to draw down upon the eye of man the awful sense of the blood
we have spilled to make ourselves one, sort of.
In religious rituals, our kind has made a way to keep a hand in
touch with our tragic bleeding heart,
without quite knowing what we do.
A boy beneath a summer sky knows nothing of this holy ground.
But neither do grown men mostly, to their shame.
Addled by television or drink or politics or sex,
they do their religion, or don't,
and make war and children, and war again.

Must this forever go on?
Will every Herod forever want
to kill someone to salvage a future for his tribe?
Will the nations' religions forever repeat
their violent little dramas
to cleanse their people of their dim-felt guilt
so they might, with prodigal certainty,
continue in their slaughters and call theirs holy ground?

The word of God in Jesus Christ sends "No more!"
hurtling down the highway of heaven to earth.
But few attend the coming sound.

Jesus is not afraid of Herod's threat,
not because he has no dread of death; no, he says,
"because it is not possible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."
He is not in the bloody holy ground, not here, not yet, you see.
This Lenten walk we make
shadows Jesus' walk to Jerusalem,
the only place where priests perform each year the blood sacrifices
that bind the worshipers together in obscure holy memory
of the blood they have spilled and will spill forever,
to keep themselves secure and sure of their name.

But if God's only begotten son should go willingly
into the Jerusalem holy ground at Passover;
if it is not just another brother slain to bind the tribe
in strange and awful peace after our deadly deed is done;
if it is not our lamb at all, but the lamb of God, slain;
if we see this, then, when we see this,
we are no tribe at all
who see this,
neither Jew nor Greek,
neither American nor Al-Qaeda.
In the moment we see, we see that Jesus goes to Jerusalem
to pull down the temple, and to build it new;
to destroy religion as the sealing sacrifice for security on earth,
to destroy even the Christian religion so conceived;
to drain from our heart the last drop of ardor
for another sacrifice, another capital punishment, another war.

This is the sound of the chariots of fire coming down the highway of history.
Kneel at the window; attend.
Under the towering pains
inflicted in our names, see what we have done.
Come to yourself
before God, you might say.

Today, when you take the bread—his body—stop;
an open door toward holy ground is there.
If you see it, pass through.
You will need to pause to do this.
Look the one who serves you in the eye
and taste the bread you take as taken from the flesh
of every one you and your tribe ever called enemy.
And taste the cup in which you dip as filled with the blood
of every person you and your tribe have called enemy, ever.
Attend, at least partway through his night, the coming of the Lord.
Then you will see him when you say,
'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'
The time for violence and sacrifice is past. Pass to holy ground.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
delivered at First Presbyterian Church

Central Presbyterian Church
Buffalo, New York