

Message for August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15

In one of my messages this past May I made reference to Alastair McIntosh's book, "Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey". As I said in that message, this book is about the author's nine-day hike from the southern tip of Harris to the northern tip of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The book is a glorious mixture of travel, history, nature and theology but there is a common theme to it all; where is the sacred to be found? What is it that makes a place sacred? McIntosh includes an episode from the life of the late, very well respected BBC journalist, Finlay MacDonald.

MacDonald grew up in Harris and about two miles from where he lived there was a small loch or lake with an island in it: Eilean na Caillach or in English, the island of the old woman. The woman referred to in the place name was a nun who lived there hundreds of years ago and was thought to be a 'holy woman'. When growing up, MacDonald, like all of the other kids in the area, was warned to never go there but what often happens when you tell a young, high-spirited boy not to do something? The odds are good that he will go right ahead and do it!

One morning MacDonald told his parents that he was going fishing and off he went with his rod and faithful dog beside him. Of course he had absolutely no intention of fishing; he was off to explore the forbidden island. The only way for him to get to the island was by walking along a partially submerged causeway and this he did, using his fishing pole as a staff to keep him upright. Part way across though his dog, who had refused to follow him, started to howl like the Hound of the Baskervilles. When he looked back he saw that the dog was staring at the island and that his fur was standing up on end. Even so, Finlay was undeterred and kept picking his way across.

Once on the island he started poking around and had no trouble finding the stone ruins of the holy woman's hut but then it happened. In Finlay's own words:

"And then I heard a voice. Or rather, I felt the voice. It came from my ears but at the same time it came from within my head. It said 'Put off thy shoes from thy feet for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'"

Well, that did it; he dropped the fishing pole and fled. He frantically splashed his way back across the causeway and then raced back home across the moors as fast as he could with his dog right at his heels. Finlay later discovered though that his experience was not unique and that many of the locals had had similar experiences on the island; indeed few of them ever went back to it. Finlay himself certainly didn't. To quote him once again:

"Why I wouldn't go back – it was that one sentence that was common to all of the stories. Put off thy shoes from thy feet for the place whereon you stand is holy ground."

The big question of course is what happened to Finlay and all of the other people who claimed to have had similar experiences. Was it all just the product of over active imaginations or was there something else going on? In the end we have to decide for ourselves but as for Finlay himself, the well-respected man of the world that he was, he firmly believed that something out of the ordinary had happened that day. He was absolutely convinced that that island out in the middle of nowhere was and is a sacred place.

Now I am sure that all of us can see the parallel between this episode and this morning's scripture passage. That passage of course relates the well-known story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses was out in the middle of nowhere herding sheep and he saw a bush that seemed to be on fire and yet was not consumed. He went closer to have a better look and when he did so he heard a voice saying much the same words that Finlay MacDonald claimed to have heard thousands of years later: "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals for the place you are standing is holy

ground.” Moses though, far from running away in terror did as he was told and went on to have his famed encounter with God himself.

In the years since then many people have tried to figure out where this happened. Most people believe that it happened on Mount Sinai which is the same place where Moses would later receive the Ten Commandments but where was it? There is one mountain in the Sinai peninsula that is often said to be ‘The Site’; indeed a friend of mine brought me back a rock from there years ago but is it really the place that the Bible calls ‘The Mountain of the Lord’? The truth of course is that no one really knows but suppose that we did know the exact spot where Moses saw the burning bush, would it be a sacred place or would it seem rather ordinary and perhaps even disappointing? To return to the theme of McIntosh’s book, what is it that makes a place sacred? This is certainly something that I have reflected upon during these long months while we have not been able to worship in what many of us consider our own sacred place.

In the end though, I don’t think that any place whether it is the island of the old woman, Mount Sinai or anywhere else is in itself necessarily sacred. Rather, what makes a place sacred is the realized presence of God. We can for example sit in a church but as old, historical or as beautiful as it may be, it is still just a building. If however we sense the divine presence of God then it becomes a special place, a sacred place. Or we can stand on a beach and watch the setting sun. It is just a sunset like millions before and millions yet to come but then ... we sense the reality of God. At that moment that beach becomes a sacred place. Of course what is sacred one day may be totally ordinary on another; indeed what is sacred to one person can be totally ordinary to another, even at the very same time. This was brought home to me a few years ago.

While on holidays Susan and I along with two of our children visited Ottawa. We had a wonderful time but a high point for me was touring the Parliament buildings. We saw the old historic East Block and that really appealed to the historian in me, seeing such as Sir John A. MacDonald’s office and the one used by all of the other Prime Ministers up to 1976. The Centre Block was so impressive as well, seeing such as the House of

Commons and Senate Chambers. Of everything that we saw in the Parliament Buildings though, the one place that had the most impact on me was the Memorial Chamber.

Located in the Peace Tower, the Memorial Chamber is dedicated to honoring our nation's war dead. The room is full of symbolism ranging from the stained glass windows to the sculptures. In the centre of the room is a glass case that contains the Books of Remembrance which lists the names of all those who died in World War One and Two. There are also other books in glass cases in the room that list the names of those killed in other conflicts. Every morning at 11:00 the pages of the books are turned over so that every person's name will be displayed at least once a year. The room is very small, only 24 by 24 feet and so only a few people were allowed in at a time. I noticed though that some people just breezed through giving everything a quick glance but for others? Although no one was permitted to linger for long it was obviously a special place, a place full of Christian symbolism and imagery where they sensed and even experienced a higher greater reality than themselves; in short it was a sacred place.

Sacred places is the theme of a "Poacher's Pilgrimage" and this morning's scripture passage as well. But what is a sacred place and what makes a place sacred? Is it what happened there or who lived there a long time ago? Is the Memorial Chamber in the Peace Tower a sacred place? Is a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula one? Is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or the church over top what is said to be Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem sacred places? Is an island in a loch on the isle of Harris one? Is a church or even our church a sacred place?

All of these places can be sacred but in the end what makes a place sacred is not whether it is 'religious' or associated with Jesus or a holy person. What makes a place sacred is the realized presence of God. A sacred place is one where, figuratively at least, we realize that we are standing on holy ground, a place where we are "called to be still, and know that I am God."