

2 Samuel 7:1-11. 16
Psalm 89:1-4;19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

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Becoming Holy Ground

Have you ever felt as if you were standing on holy ground? There are places I have been in the world, where things are different. Some people call them “thin places.” They are places where the holy is palpable and where we cannot help but get out of our heads and into our hearts. You’ve heard me speak of the place of refuge on the big island of Hawai’i. That is surely holy ground. Another holy place for me is in the heart of the Santa Ynez mountains in Santa Barbara where the Mt Calvary Monastery stood until it burned to the ground 15 years ago. Mt Calvary was a true spiritual home for me, and I spent many treasured days there, studying, praying, retreating, and receiving spiritual guidance from the monks who lived there.

One of those monks, Brother Roy, spent his days praying and offering hospitality to the guests, just like all the other monks did. But Brother Roy’s special gift was calligraphy. He made the most beautiful calligraphy imaginable. His little painting studio sat on the edge of a hilltop, looking over the mountains and on out to the sea, and from there some of the most beautiful passages in scripture were painted in gold leaf and ground lapis and all manner of other exquisite gems. The Holy Scriptures were made even more beautiful in Brother Roy’s care. I have several pieces of his, but the one I love best is this one. It’s so little, I don’t think you can see it, but it’s created in pale blues and sparkling gold. It usually sits on the desk in my office at home and I see it every day. These words are Mary’s “yes” to God. They aren’t the words of her first “yes” to God – her first “yes” came when the Angel Gabriel announced that God had found favor with her and that she would become the God-bearer for the whole wide world. Let it be unto me, according to your word” was her first yes. But just after the angel Gabriel departed from her, she went to stay with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth saw Mary, we’re told the baby in her womb leapt for joy and Elizabeth herself burst into praise! “Blessed are you among women,” she said to Mary, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” In responding, Mary continued her “yes” to God in the beautiful song of the Magnificat...

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in you, O God my Savior,
for you have looked with favor on the lowliness of your servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; you, the Almighty have done great things
for me, and holy is your name.
You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit.
You have brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
You have filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
You have come to the help of your servant Israel, for you have remembered the promise of mercy,
according to the promise you made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his children forever.”*

The first time I spoke these words in the context of a service was in a small chapel, many years ago in Advent. I'd been a priest for just a little more than a month, and I could hardly get the words out through my tears. Mary's words are so real for me, so precious to me, so evocative of the God I love, the God who loves me. There are simply no words in the Bible that move me more than Mary's Magnificat.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in you, O God my savior, for you have looked with favor on your lowly servant..." Those words are as true for me as they were for Mary. This is my experience and my truest response to God. As a pastor, I have the great honor of listening to people's stories of their experiences of God, and even of helping to point toward God when God seems illusive or perhaps absent. I have learned that there are as many ways of experiencing God as there are people of God. I hear words like "I haven't had one job that the Lord hasn't led me to." And "Why is God doing this to me?" And "God is so good, I can't believe my blessings." And "It's too hard. I can't do this, it's too hard. How can God let this happen to me?"

God comes to each of us in different ways, because each of us is unique, because each of us is in a different place in our lives and because we all understand things a little differently. And while God graciously comes to us in all kinds of ways, sometimes we just can't understand God's ways! I'm pretty sure Mary didn't "understand." Not here, in her head anyway. I'm pretty sure Mary didn't wake up the morning the Angel Gabriel came to her, thinking – "Oh, I'm actually going to become Holy Ground today." But as it turns out, in the moment of that first "yes"... Let it be unto me according to your word... she did just that - Mary became Holy Ground – the very house of God. It was her heart that responded to God. Her head might have come up with many reasons about why this venture probably wouldn't go well. Her head might have needed a lot of details about just how it was going to go over with her fiancé Joseph. Her head might have wanted to know how it was all going to come out in the end.

But Mary didn't respond from her head. When the Angel Gabriel told her she was to become the God-bearer for all the world, Mary responded from her heart. When Elizabeth broke into songs of praise, Mary responded from her heart. And each time, what poured out of her when she did was - to my ears - the most beautiful "yes" ever spoken. Mary didn't say "I think this is amazing." And she didn't say "I don't think so!" *I am the servant of the Lord. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.* Now I know myself as God's very own, chosen and favored by God.

Do you feel like that? Do you know in your heart that you are God's very own, chosen, beloved, favored by God? It's true, you know. We really have been chosen, and God really has found favor with each one of us. We don't have to understand this, we only need to experience it. And the only way we can experience it is to say "Yes" to God. Because when we say "Yes," God meets us just exactly where we are – not where we wish we were or think we ought to be. God meets us right where we are and begins to do the amazing and incredible things that can only be done with the unique and particular incarnation that is you. You are the Holy Ground where God abides. You see, we don't need to be Mary, the one so often pictured seated in a chair reading scripture and presenting the perfect holy moment for God to come calling - my guess is that

most of us don't spend our days in that particular pose. And still, there is something very important about recognizing the reality that we ourselves are the holy ground in which God moves in the world. There is something very important about being attuned to God's presence in our daily lives, about expecting and anticipating God's action through us.

There are wrongs that God can right in the world, only through the particular incarnation that is you. There are gifts God can give a starving and broken world, only through the uniqueness of you. There is mercy God can show to the broken and brokenhearted, only through you. And those things can happen only when we recognize ourselves for who we really are, only when we know ourselves to be God's own Holy Ground, only when we make a way to listen, only when we say "Yes."

What is God asking you to say "Yes" to? And how will you say "Yes" to God? This doesn't have to be the complete and total "Yes", doesn't have to be the perfect "Yes", the "Yes" you'll think of when you get home after church. It needs to be a real right here, right now "Yes." Where can you and God begin together? What does your heart want to say "Yes" to? Is it telling yourself the truth? Is it repairing a broken relationship? Is it trusting in God's love and mercy and goodness? Is it a commitment to service, to finding a way to make the world a better place by using your own unique God given gifts? Is it change of attitude? A change of mind? A change of heart? Find the place where you can say "Yes" so that you too will know the joy of your very own soul glorifying the Lord who has done such great things for you. Your "Yes" is your gift, your offering to the God who wants you to know the unspeakable joy of "Yes." Amen.