



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

## 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2023, 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. **Exodus 3:1-6***

*21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." **Matthew 16:21-23***

### **Sermon: We stand on holy ground**

There are many ways to read the Bible. Each one of us comes to a text with our own unique lens, our own experiences and stories and backgrounds, our own questions, assumptions, and biases. Consequently, we can read the same text and yet interpret things in a very different light.

In the 1960s, we saw the emergence of what's now known as liberation theology in Latin America. Liberation theology as the name suggests was concerned with the liberation of oppressed and impoverished peoples from the socio-political and economic systems that enslaved them.

At its heart, liberation theology recognised that someone's perspective makes a great deal of difference to how they hear the story of the Bible, where they place themselves within it, their imagination of what God is like and what God is doing in the world. Theology done from below – from the perspective of poor, oppressed, or marginalised people – will raise a very different set of questions and yield a very different set of answers.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, alongside liberation theology we've also seen the emergence of other theologies: feminist theology, black theology, indigenous theologies, theology of disabilities, Pacific, Māori and Asian theologies and so on and so forth – each making an important contribution to the rich tapestry of scriptural interpretation and theological discussion.

If nothing else, each serves as a reminder that every one of us has a limited perspective; that there is no one way to read the Bible; that we all bring different questions to scripture. And in turn, we hope – and this is what preaching is about – we hope that scripture will ask questions of us as we allow ourselves to be challenged and opened up to new perspectives as the living God speaks to us ever anew by the Spirit.

I begin with these introductory comments because I would like to do something slightly different over these next few weeks. We are now in the Season of Creation. And so as a way to enter into the spirit of the season, I would like to intentionally engage with our bible readings through a slightly different lens. The lens of ecotheology.

Ecotheology is a relatively new discipline in theology and is concerned with the intersection of the care for the earth – our common home – with our knowledge and understanding of God.

Ecotheology sees a deep connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with the natural environment. It recognises that what we say about the earth from a spiritual perspective can have a profound impact, for better or worse, on how we live on the earth and treat our common home.

Particularly in light of our current environmental crises, ecotheology asks a different set of questions of scripture and, in turn, scripture will ask different questions of us as we consider our own implicit biases in our relationship with the earth.

Over the next few weeks, the lectionary takes us into the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt. It's a well-known story, familiar territory. And yet I've found it incredibly rich bringing an ecological lens to these texts. I hope you do too, and I would really value your thoughts, your engagement, your perspectives.

So, let's begin with our reading today. Moses is shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, and ends up on Mount Horeb, where he comes across the most amazing sight. A lone bush is ablaze with fire and yet is not burned up.

As I'm sure you or I would be, Moses is curious. And as he moves closer, God speaks to him out of the bush, instructing him to stop and take off his shoes for the place on which he stands is holy ground.

Holy ground. What makes the ground beneath his feet holy? Simply, God. God is in this place. And God is holy.

There's something surprising about this claim that something so ordinary as a bush or dust or rock could be filled with the very burning presence of God.

The contrast is heightened because this all takes place on Mt. Horeb which sounds like the Hebrew for wasteland. This wasteland where little grows is, inexplicably, burning with the holy presence of the creator of heaven and earth. "Unprecedented", as we like to say today.

The passage is especially odd, I think, within a Western imagination. And that's because western worldviews have tended to separate the natural world from the supernatural. We tend to imagine God as fundamentally separate from the created world. God is above. God is removed. God is beyond. A kind of old-man-in-the-sky image.

And this imagination has been fuelled largely by the advent of modern science and rise of the empirical method. As we've learned to study the world around us and reduce it to material explanations, we've thrust God more and more into this immaterial, transcendent sphere – if we continue to believe in God at all!

The thing is, this division between the natural and supernatural in the Western imagination has given rise to a particular view of nature and our relationship with it. That view could be described as utilitarian. By that I mean, that because we haven't seen the earth as a holy dwelling place of God, we've too often seen it as expendable; as existing purely to serve the needs and interests of human beings; to be the background for our human activities. We are the centre of the world and the masters of nature, called to study it, to subject it, and to order it for the purposes of our flourishing.

And tragically, this utilitarian view has been underpinned by scripture and theology, perhaps most notably in the translation of Genesis 1:26 that human beings were created by God to have "dominion" over the earth.

It's this worldview that, I think, David Robinson critiques in his sculpture, "On Holy Ground", which you see on your orders of service. The title is a direct reference to our passage from Exodus.

As you can see, a businessman, a kind of representative figure of our modern world, a symbol of capitalist growth, wealth, and success, stands atop the world. He has conquered it. Made it a footstool for his ambition.

And yet, Robinson captures a moment of encounter. The businessman has stopped in his tracks. Something or someone has caught his attention. The

title of the sculpture suggests that he stands addressed, like Moses, by none other than the living God, who commands him to take off his shoes for he stands on holy ground.

In this moment of recognition, the businessman is forced to reckon with the fact that he is not God, the master of his own existence. Nor is the world beneath his feet simply to be used for his own advancement. In this moment of encounter with God, he is invited – nay commanded – to reconnect with the earth. To feel the soil beneath his feet. To be reminded of his own creatureliness. From dust he came and to dust he shall one day return. It is a humbling moment and one that speaks powerfully into our current day and age.

For many – including most of us here – the advancement of humankind has brought immense wealth, comfort, accessibility, quality of life. In many respects, this is the best time in human history to be alive! Technology, modern medicine, food production, consumerism ... have improved our lives in many, many ways.

And yet, we now see that such advancement has come at a cost. We are now understanding that our fixation on unbridled growth and progress has blinded us to the negative impacts of our industriousness and to the natural limits of the place we call home. We are now recognising that our human flourishing is inescapably connected with the flourishing and the wellbeing of the earth. We live today in a time of reckoning. A time of waking up to this reality.

And if the western imagination and its theological underpinning has been the driving force behind our environmental destruction, then we must reckon with the fact that addressing our environmental crises is a spiritual matter, a theological matter, a matter of conversion, as we collectively reevaluate our place on the earth.

I'm reminded of our gospel reading. There's something in Peter that instinctively revolts against the idea that Jesus, his Messiah, had to suffer and die. He rejects the claim that God's victory and that our flourishing could come through weakness and giving up power and control.

There is something very relatable in this sentiment, I think. Like Peter, we want to believe that we are masters of our fate, able to advance our way to victory and success – so long as we keep moving forward, so long as we maintain our control.

And yet Jesus' rebuke is emphatic. Peter, "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." For God, it appears, has never been interested in escaping our earthly plight. No, in Christ we see that God loves us so much that he desires to meet us in the midst of it – his burning presence taking our ordinary, creaturely existence and filling it with holiness and goodness and immeasurable worth.

I want to finish with this thought. You know the Presbyterian Church has long used the burning bush as its logo. We have a stained-glass window of the burning bush out there. And the burning bush is emblazoned on our pulpit fall. And around the burning bush are the words: *nec tamen consumebatur* – and it was not consumed.

The symbol of the bush reflects a very presbyterian conviction that the church and indeed this world – as ordinary and mundane as it is – nonetheless burns with the presence and power of the living God, who has covenanted himself to us. For the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; the God of Moses; the God of Jesus has come to be with us in our earthly plight. And it should be noted that the salvation of Israel is bound up the salvation of the land. God's dwelling place is here among us. We stand on holy ground.

I wonder if the first step in addressing our many environmental crises is simply to acknowledge this fact. To reclaim our presbyterian heritage and be a people who day by day are taking off our shoes, reconnecting with the holy ground beneath us.

Like Moses, may we learn to notice and give praise to the God who is in, around, and beneath. May our gaze be directed downwards to holy earth – our common home, which God has made his dwelling place, and which the power of the Spirit is healing and making new. Amen.