

New Students and Parents Worship
 Austin College
 August 29, 2009
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Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-8a, 9-12

*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 Horeb, the mountain of God.*

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to him
 in a flame out of a bush;
 he looked, and the bush was blazing,
 yet it was not consumed.*

*Then Moses said,
 "I must turn aside and look at this great sight,
 and see why the bush is not burned up."*

*When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see,
 God called him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"
 And Moses said, "Here I am."*

*Then God said, "Come no closer!
 Remove the sandals from your feet,
 for the place on which you are standing
 is **holy ground.**"*

*God said further, "I am the God of your father,
 the God of Abraham,
 the God of Isaac,
 the God of Jacob."*

*And Moses hid his face,
 for he was afraid to look at God.
 Then the Lord said,
 "I have seen the misery of my people
 who are in Egypt;
 I have heard their cry
 on account of their taskmasters.
 Indeed, I know their sufferings,
 and I have come down
 to deliver them up from the Egyptians,
 and to bring them up out of that land*

*to a good and broad land,
a land flowing with milk and honey...*

*The cry of the Israelites has now come to me;
I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them.
So come, I will send you to Pharaoh
to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.*

*But Moses said to God,
"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh,
and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

*God said, "I will be with you;
and this shall be the sign for you
that it is I who sent you:
when you have brought the people out of Egypt,
you shall worship God on this mountain."*

February 17, 2005 was a good day to be Chaplain of Austin College. To be honest: pretty much every day is a good day to be Chaplain of Austin College. But that day especially good.

On that day, about 70 people from around campus gathered here in Wynne Chapel late in the afternoon to participate in a Memorial Service for the victims of the South Asia tsunami in December 2004. The service was organized and executed almost entirely by Austin College students. Dr. Page and I participated – but we basically did what the students told us to.

Those who attended the service saw a PowerPoint presentation outlining Austin College's extensive tsunami relief efforts; and were then led in prayer by Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim members of our community. It was another in the long series of events that make me proud to be associated with Austin College and its students.

But as I started looking at the verses from Exodus 3 that we heard a minute ago, I was reminded of something else that happened on February 17, 2005.

As we were gathering in here before the service, Ashwini Shridhar – a member of the AC Tsunami Relief Committee and 2005 Austin College graduate – remarked to me that – as a Hindu – she felt unusual walking into Wynne Chapel with her shoes on. She explained that it is customary for Hindu persons to remove their shoes whenever they enter a holy place – a place of worship. I told her to feel

free to remove her shoes if she wanted to— because this Chapel belonged as much to her as to any other AC student.

I don't know whether Ashwini kept her shoes on or not that day, but I was reminded of our conversation when I came across God's instruction to Moses in Exodus 3:5 to remove his sandals because he was standing on *holy ground*.

It's not likely that anyone was as proud of Moses that day as we are today of Ashwini and the rest of our students and alumni.

Earlier in Exodus—in chapter 2, verse 12—Moses had murdered an Egyptian who he had seen mistreating an Israelite. And then—when he figured out that there were witnesses to this terrible crime—he high-tailed it out of Egypt as fast as he could. He ended up in Midian, where he eventually got his father-in-law to take him in and let him lay low out beyond the wilderness, taking care of his sheep.

By the time we get to the story that Stacy read to us this morning, Moses was way out of the limelight. He was living a small, petty, very limited life with few prospects and only the most mundane, short-sighted, selfish concerns.

There's certainly no dishonor in being a shepherd, but the way Moses got himself into that situation was pretty cheap. In his efforts to avoid the Egyptian authorities—to avoid facing up to the consequences of his actions—Moses seems to have become somebody whose concerns were pretty small and pretty selfish. As Exodus 3 begins, there's not much evidence that he was worried about anything more than his immediate comfort, safety, and preservation.

I think one could argue that the worst elements of our contemporary popular culture encourage us to live with the same priorities that Moses had while he was out there chasing Jethro's sheep around:

Immediate comfort.
Safety.
Preservation.

A person who knew nothing about this country that could not be learned watching commercial television could easily conclude that we believe that the most important things about individuals are their paychecks, their credit card limits, and their status as potential consumers of prescription drugs.

I don't intend to be the guy who stands up in a pulpit and blames everything on "Society." And there's certainly nothing inherently wrong with comfort, safety, or preservation – with producing and consuming stuff and trying to be as healthy as possible. But when those things become the only things that we are ever concerned about, we are likely to end up with lives that are as small, petty, and mundane as Moses' life was when he encountered that burning bush.

As we get further into the story, it becomes pretty clear that God didn't have much patience with Moses' small, petty, mundane outlook.

We can see in the conversation between God and Moses in verses 10, 11, and 12 that God thought more of Moses than Moses thought of himself. In verse 10 God tells Moses, "I'm sending you to lead my people out of slavery in Egypt." And Moses says, "Who am I to do such a thing?" God replies, "I will be with you." Essentially, "I'll tell you who you are – you're my guy."

What's going on here is that God is inviting Moses to transcend his small-time, unnecessarily limited, mundane outlook.

Back in verse 5, God began the conversation with Moses by informing him that he was on holy ground. The interchange in verses 10-12 shows us what happens on holy ground. Holy ground is a place where the mundane is transcended. It is a place where individuals are invited to see themselves in more than small, unnecessarily limited, mundane terms.

The story that we find in the first verses of Exodus 3 provides some useful language and images to help us think about what we do here – particularly about our attitude toward our students.

One of its lessons is that Ashwini was onto something on February 17, 2005. She was on holy ground that day.

Not because she was in the Chapel.

Not because she was on the campus of a church-related school.

This is holy ground because it is a place where students are invited, encouraged, and enabled to think about themselves, and their role in the world, in ways that transcend the mundane.

That's not language that we typically use. It's hard to picture a professor telling a Statistics or a Biology class to "transcend the mundane." But it's easy to imagine any Austin College faculty member inviting and encouraging students to think about themselves as more than just nameless participants in an unending series of economic exchanges.

Biblical scholar Bernard Anderson describes Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3 in terms that could be used to describe what we hope to accomplish in our encounters with our students here.

"Moses' encounter with God," says Anderson, "sharpened his sense of *individuality* and made him more acutely conscious of the demands of the historical situation."

Austin College received a significant grant from the Lilly Foundation a couple years ago. The language that the Lilly people use to describe the kind of activity they are trying to encourage with grants like ours is "theological exploration of vocation." But—at least on this campus—that language has been difficult to interpret. Some students and faculty members have assumed from that terminology that the college's goal in our Lilly program is to encourage students to pursue careers in ministry, or to engage in serious consideration of what God is calling them to do.

Actually—although we are certainly eager to work with students who are considering ministerial careers and to welcome students whose process of vocational discernment involves serious and earnest consideration of what they believe God is calling them to do—the best way to describe the goal of the Lilly program we've designed here is to talk about transcending the mundane. The goal of our Lilly program, and of much of what happens throughout this campus, is to invite, encourage, and enable to students to realize that they are much more than paycheck stubs, credit card limits, and potential consumers of prescription drugs.

To borrow language from Bernard Anderson, our goal is to sharpen our students' sense of individuality and to make them more acutely aware of the context in which they live their lives.

This is holy ground because it is a place where—not only are students repeatedly reminded that they are really beloved and really gifted—they are also invited, encouraged, and enabled to *act* like beloved and gifted people act; to live lives characterized by respect, responsibility, caring, service, and gratitude.

I know a bunch of stories about people who came to this place and were invited, encouraged, and enabled to transcend the mundane – sometimes for the first time in their lives. That doesn't always happen. And we've always got more things to learn about serving our students.

But it happens a lot.

And it will happen again this year – with this class.

It's okay if you keep your shoes on – but this *is* holy ground.