

30th August 2020
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Call to worship

The God of our ancestors calls us to worship.

Praise the Lord!

Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

Let us worship God!

Prayer

God of mystery and might,
whose wonderful works are to be remembered,
move in our lives, change our minds, soften our hearts,
direct our feet,
that we may follow you more faithfully.
Yes, Lord, we seek to follow Jesus,
in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

Psalm 26

Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test my heart and mind.
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in faithfulness to you.

I do not sit with the worthless,
nor do I consort with hypocrites;
I hate the company of evildoers,
and will not sit with the wicked.

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O LORD,
singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all your wondrous deeds.

O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell,
and the place where your glory abides.

Do not sweep me away with sinners,
nor my life with the bloodthirsty,
those in whose hands are evil devices,

and whose right hands are full of bribes.

But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
redeem me, and be gracious to me.

My foot stands on level ground;
in the great congregation I will bless the LORD.

Prayer

Jesus Christ overcame evil with good
so that all people might be saved from sin.
Let us then confess our need for grace,
confident of God's forgiveness.

God of mercy,
we confess that, like the disciples,
we set our minds not on divine things
but on human things.
Doubting your loving care, we grab for
more than we need.
Doubting your loving purposes, we shrink
from living as your followers.
Doubting your loving plan, we become
stumbling blocks in your creation.
Forgive us that we may gain new life in you,
for it is in Jesus' forgiving name we pray. Amen.

Jesus took up his cross for our salvation.
In return for our old life of sin,
he promises a new life of grace.
Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

Hymn Immortal, invisible, God only wise

Exodus 3:1-15

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 of fire 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 to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 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.

Then the LORD said, "I have observed 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 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also 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?" He 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." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Reflection

*Holy Spirit,
who spoke to Moses from the burning bush,
speak to us now in the reading and proclaiming
of your word. Amen.*

Around the world, it is common practice for people of many religions to remove their shoes when they enter a place of worship, whether a mosque, a gurdwara, or a temple; Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists along with others, know that their places of worship are holy places, where they draw near to the presence of something greater than themselves, whether on their own or in the company of others.

In the Christian West, although we certainly regard our churches as sacred spaces in which we come into the presence of God in a particular way, to worship together and to pray, we do not observe the custom of removing footwear, even though we stand on holy ground.

It is different, though, in the churches of south and south-east Asia: in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. In all these countries, it is pretty much the uniform practice to remove shoes or sandals before entering the sanctuary. At St Thomas' Mount, in Chennai in South India, the oldest Christian site in India, the signs at each door quote from today's passage from Exodus: 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground'.

Not that I am suggesting we in Scotland should adopt the practice, but knowing that it is the Christian custom elsewhere should remind us that indeed when we come into church to worship, we enter into God's presence, and for that time of worship, the ground on which we stand, requires of us a remembering, and a respect, for the time and the place.

Moses, of course, did not worship God in temple or synagogue or church – nor did he encounter the presence of the living God in any building or man-made structure, though soon enough God would ordain that the Ark of the Covenant should be housed in the Tent of the Presence during Israel's journey towards the promised land, and later would allow Solomon to build the first Temple in Jerusalem.

Moses encountered God in the wilderness, at Mount Horeb, the 'mountain of God' – and indeed throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament scriptures, and as is often found throughout the world, mountains are indeed holy places, places of divine presence, places where we feel closer to God. Mount Horeb is itself the place where Elijah will later encounter God in the sheer silence that follow the wind, earthquake and fire, and receive God's command to return to Israel to free them from oppression.

Here, in the book of Exodus, it is Moses who receives the revelation, who encounters God in the flame within the bush, and who is commanded to return to Egypt, to set God's people free, and to lead them out of slavery and death towards the life that God has prepared for them in the land promised to their ancestor, Abraham.

It is God's presence in the burning bush that makes the place holy, and it is God's presence with us, in the Holy Spirit that came as tongues of fire on the apostles at Pentecost, that makes our times and places of worship holy, wherever and whenever God's people gather, whether in our hundreds, or only two or three, indeed when we are alone and approach God in prayer; for Jesus himself promised that wherever two or three gather together in his name, there he will be, in our midst – God with us, God among us, God for us.

And that also is the message of the burning bush that God gives to Moses: Moses, in response to this encounter, is to go back to Egypt from where he had fled after killing the Egyptian overseer, and he is to set God's people free. And as Moses removes his sandals, so also he hides his face from the One who declares that he is the God of his father, of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob; the God who chose Israel, and called them to be God's people in the world; the God who has proved himself faithful to his promises, and who guides, protects, and provides – who has done so in the past, and who will do so again for Moses and the people of Israel in the future.

God has seen the misery of Israel in Egypt, and is moved by their suffering to rescue them. To do so, God works through the people who are called to serve God, as God has worked through others in the past, so now God will work through Moses, and it becomes clear that Moses has a special purpose in God's plans. So also has God worked in the world through all the ages, and is still works through us today, the people of God called to bring the good news of release from slavery and death to a broken world in need of restoration and re-creation. In calling Moses and sending him to the people of Israel, in calling and sending Elijah, in calling and sending the first disciples and apostles, in calling and sending us to the world, God charges us with God's command to choose life, and not death.

Not surprisingly, when faced both with the mystery and the power of God, and when faced with the daunting prospect of being sent back into danger, to challenge Pharaoh, to lead a

people who have not encountered God as he has, whose faith and understanding is not bolstered by the revelation of God's power, and who do not know who Moses is, Moses himself is troubled.

How is he to convince them that God has spoken, that God has a desire to save them, that God has appointed him to lead them? Moses asks God – what do I say, when they ask me what your name is? God's reply 'I am who I am' in Hebrew 'ehweh asher ehweh', from which we take the name Yahweh, is in itself a conundrum, hard to understand, and hard to explain. To the human enquiry 'who are you' God's answer is 'I am' and it is left to Moses, and to us, to reflect, consider, and discern what that means for us, for the world, and for all creation. God simply is. God's being is the ground of our being, and the source of all life. God's nature is beyond our human comprehension, although we may at different times and in different places and in different people discern aspects of God's being and nature.

The mystery of the bush that burned but was not consumed by the flames is a symbol of God's greater mystery; a being and a power beyond nature, yet fully manifest within the order of the natural world of which we ourselves are a part. It is the symbol chosen by the Reformers in Scotland in the 16th century to speak to the world of God's creative, reforming, power, as it brought new understanding, new shape, and new life to the church. It is our symbol, of what we believe about God, and God's power to give and renew the life of creation, and which reminds us of God's salvation achieved for the people of Israel in ancient times, and for all the world, in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Listening God, you heard the prayers of the Israelites.
Hear now these prayers, both spoken and silent:

For peace where there is conflict . . .

For food where there is hunger . . .

For hope where there is despair . . .

For health where there is sickness . . .

For faith where there is fear . . .

For life where there is death . . .

We pray in the name of Jesus,
who conquers all that would defeat us
and gives us new life. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
now and for ever.

Hymn God shall endure for aye (Psalm 24)

Benediction