

**THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT**

September 11, 2011

**“Holy Ground”
Preached by the Rev. Elissa Johnk**

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, the great I AM, our rock, our creator, our redeemer. Amen.

There is a place in Western Iowa that is impossible to find unless you have already been there, a bit like Brigadoon. But if you go out the back roads, you will find hidden in the overgrowth a set of concrete stairs. They don't go anywhere. They still have their metal railings. But they just go up. One. Two. Three. Thin air.

There was a church there, but in the early 1900s it burned down. And all that is left is a small patch of graves and these steps.

Local legend has it that if you go at midnight on a full moon (like, say, tomorrow's harvest moon), and take off your shoes, and walk up the stairs once, twice, three times, and then jump off backwards, you will feel the bottom of your feet start to burn a big, raging, unmistakable burn.

You can imagine how popular it is with the high school students – particularly in Iowa where there is little else to do. And sure, it's a good scare-your-date spot, but I also think that it's popular because there's something in all of us that is craving to *know*. To *know* that there is something else. To know that God is. To feel it in our bones.

Isn't that a bit of why we come here?

Each time I am out there I am tempted to go. Not because I believe there are special places that hold secrets about the world beyond us, but precisely because I think that *every* place is a special place that can hold secrets about the world beyond us. Secrets about God. Some places there are just burning bushes to help us see.

Largely, I think, this is because there are these places where we let the little kid out in us, that little part of us that allows for the impossible. On a normal basis, we are very grounded. Grounded by the deadline we didn't meet. The harsh reality that we call the news. The principles of physics – which, to me, might as well be magic.

But there are these moments that stop us, that back us up, that force a distance.

When I was 8 or 9, my mom and I went out to lunch, like we always did, after church. And I remember sitting down, and I was in the middle of dipping a fry in ketchup when she took my hand.

She took my hand and put it in hers and held it and said “take good care of these, okay?”

I was confused. So she put my hand down and she put the tips of her fingers together, and pushed her palms inwards. “Look,” she said, “I can’t get my palms together anymore.” I was still confused. “But look, mom,” I said, with all the innocence of youth, putting my hands together, “it’s easy, just do this.”

It was the first time I had ever noticed that she has big, beautiful hands. Very big knuckles. The rest of her was so dainty. But these beautiful, big, hands with beautiful, flat nails. And in that moment, something began to shift. My mom wasn’t just my mom, this being that existed to feed me french fries, but a person who had these hands – that had seen things, touched things, known things I would never know.

At the time, she was the age I am currently. Notice, now, how difficult this is for me.

Fifteen years later I realized they were her father’s hands. The same shape, strength, feel. The vertical ridges on the nails that he used to say were signs of wisdom. The long fingers that made spanning an octave on a piano look easy.

My grandfather was very sick and we all knew it was the end. And so I climbed up next to him, curled up with him in the hospital bed, feeling his sickness radiate from him like heat, thinking maybe I could absorb some of it – thinking maybe I could absorb some of *him*. And I did. I wrapped my arms around his back and took his hand in mine, and I saw it. It wasn’t a trick, it wasn’t an illusion, or a vision, or a premonition. It just was. There, on that hospital bed, I was holding my mother’s hand. I was holding *my own hand*. Flat, wide, ridged and beautiful, they were burning up, I was burning up, and like that bush, I wondered whether I would be consumed.

God was screaming at me through that hospital Johnny, tread carefully little girl, pay attention to this, remember this, you are standing on holy ground.

And – of all the moments to think of on that holy hospital bed – it was that moment in Hardee’s that came flooding back to me. Suddenly I understood what all those years ago I hadn’t. It wasn’t *my hands* my mother was worried about. It was time.

I don’t know what it was that provoked her, but watching me obliviously dip my fries into the ketchup, I know she was looking straight into a time when my fingers would be knotted and pruned with age. Looking straight into a time when she couldn’t protect me, hold me, shield me, but knowing that her hands, my grandfather’s hands, would be there.

And just like that, just by paying attention, at that moment in 1988, Hardee’s was holy ground.

We all have those moments in life when that veil between heaven and earth slips away, just a little. We know to look for them in some places – like a hospital bed, or abandoned church steps – but they can be anywhere: waving goodbye to your baby on the first day of school, making cookies using grandma’s recipe, hearing a special song, holding a newborn’s tiny little hand in your finger, watching an entire state show up to sandbag – if you pay attention, any time can become this moment where all too clearly you can see that veil between past and present, between life and death, heaven and earth slip, just a crack, just enough. Just enough to catch your breath with its significance.

Just enough to hear God whisper out to you, come no closer. Remove your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.

Ground 0, so to speak.

We all know where we were on that day, if we *were* on that day. And there is no way to be in sacred space on this anniversary and not mention it. It was the day when collectively time stopped, and any illusion of a separation between our past and our present disappeared, and suddenly the future opened up before us and this decade of pain and rhetoric stretched out in front of us. Wherever you were, you saw the burning that wouldn't stop – that quite literally in some parts of the world still hasn't stopped – and wondered whether we would be consumed.

This isn't to say that time hadn't stopped elsewhere long before that day. Violence overseas was nothing new. In fact, what it *is* to say is precisely this – as people of faith, we are able to go through history, to look at events like September 11, without fear, or at least, with less fear, because we know they have happened before, and each time, just when you expect silence, God whispers *I am*.

But who are you, Moses asks? I have an entire enslaved people, here, God, tell me what to tell them. I have a people wondering how to go forward after slavery, after terrorism, after tragedy. I have a people scraping out mud from their basements.

Relax, Moses, *I am*.

I am the God of your grandparents, and your grandparent's parents. You see me in the hands that bundled you up and put you in a basket and floated you down the Nile. In the hands that bathed you while you were in Pharaoh's house. I am in the hands of the first responders that carried your body from the rubble, that are building a fountain of grace where ashes once stood. I am in the hands that fed you fries with ketchup, that appear to you now in this time and place, and will hold you again when you are aged and in a hospital bed, and will sit with you when you return to this mountain with your freed people and say to them *I am*. The God of your ancestors *is*. Because you are.

Just pay attention, take off your sandals. You're on holy ground.

How many of you have ever driven into the parking lot and known that this place was special? You smell the woodstoves, the familiar faces, and it is unmistakable. You don't have to walk up stairs and jump off backwards to know you're on holy ground.

So as we begin a program year together, as we come into the very, very fast pace of our daily life, as we face the world around us – the hurricanes, the politics, the school systems, the homework, the meetings – I'm getting exhausted just reading this list – I have a challenge for you.

Make this place in your life holy.

We are going to make mistakes with each other. Occasionally, I am going to do things in a way that you *really* don't like. Teaching Sunday School or going to confirmation, or heck, getting up early enough to come to church will feel like an obligation. This place might start to feel like the world out there – a little too grounded, a little too real.

And when you find that happening, take off your sandals. Remind yourself that this is a place in your life where you pay attention. Let this be a place in your life where you allow for the impossible. If you need a sign that you can burn and not be consumed, metaphorically or literally, well, sit a little closer to the woodstoves. Because if you do, you just might hear what I hear in this place. The voice of God, saying *I Am*.