

The Body of the Earth, The Body of God
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Acts 7:30-34

30 “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai¹, in the flame of a burning bush. **31** When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: **32** ‘I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. **33** Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. **34** I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt.’

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare a sermon.

So full of God is every creature.

Meister Eckhart

In the early hours before dawn, they walk barefoot up the gentle slopes and rocky paths of a certain mountain. They breathe in the moss and early morning dew. They climb with shepherd’s crooks and pilgrim’s staffs and

¹ The Mountain of Horeb and Mt. Sinai are assumed to be the same place. Stephen uses one term in Acts; the other is used in Exodus 3, the passage to which Stephen refers. For more info, see Coogan, Michael David. *The Old Testament: A historical and literary introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2017: p. 108

hiking poles. They scramble on all fours, helping one another. They wander in the fog before the sun rises, reaching for the place that - it is said - St. Patrick stayed for forty days and forty nights - just as Moses did on Mt. Sinai. They remember the tale of Patrick sending all the snakes in Ireland into the sea from this summit, never to return to the emerald isle. They walk, for hours, many barefoot, to the summit of Croagh Patrick, above Clew Bay and the craggy coast of the Atlantic ocean.²

Historians think that this mountain has been holy ground for pilgrims long before St. Patrick. There is a place where, twice a year, the sun seems to roll down the side of the mountain.

These days, every year on the last Sunday of July (Reek Sunday), people climb up to the summit and arrive at the chapel at the top to receive Communion. Or, perhaps, to be in communion with God, on holy ground.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes this kind of sacred landscape: The “holy trees, holy wells, holy mountains” of this part of the world are “thin places as the Irish call them - places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through.”³

It is no wonder that pilgrims climb this mountain, for it is surely a Celtic thin place - there may be no burning bush but there is a bright emerald mountaintop drawing people forward, and the “blue, blue water of Clew Bay [seeming] to reach halfway up into the sky.”⁴

Perhaps you have been on holy ground like this, taken a deep breath and realized you were breathing in the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps you have been on holy ground like *this*, in the pine trees just there (point), in the meadow just there (point), under the Japanese maple right

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croagh_Patrick,
<http://www.museumsofmayo.com/teach-na-miasa/croagh-patrick-information-centre.html>,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34475325>

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Thin Places,” in the sermon collection *Home By Another Way*.

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there, on the rocky hilltop just a mile that way. The ground doesn't have to be across an ocean to be holy.

Stephen told the story of Moses on the mountain, encountering God in the burning bush. Take your shoes off, Moses, you're on holy ground - as the country tune sings it.⁵ Later, Stephen talked about where people should worship.

Perhaps Stephen was trying to get people to understand that we can encounter God anywhere and everywhere - and especially in the natural world. "Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands..." he said later in Acts 7. As Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "The *world* is charged with the glory of God."

May I suggest that we not just consider where we might encounter God - but let the miracle that the world is charged with the glory of God inspire the form of our worship. That is to say, let our worship live into care for creation, the body of God.

The late Christian theologian Sally McFague spoke of the Body of God - the sacred ground of the earth as the *Body of God*.⁶

We have spoken of bodies, and the care of bodies, this Lent. We have spoken of Jesus' own body - human and fragile and in need of tender care. We have spoken of the human bodies Jesus' tended to. We have spoken of our own bodies, which are temples, Paul wrote, and worthy of care. And today, let us speak of one more body: the body of the earth, the body of God.

Dr. McFague wrote: "If we and everything else that exists in the universe are matter, are body, then can we also speak of "the body of God"? In fact,

⁵ J. D. Jarvis, "Take Your Shoes Off Moses."

⁶ Sally McFague, *The Body of God: And Ecological Theology*, Kindle Edition.

must we not do so?...we might see that all of us "live and move and have our being" in God, in the body of creation, the universe."⁷

She asked: "What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere) but as the visible reality of the invisible God?...If the earth is an aspect of God's body, and if the paradigmatic story of Christianity is that the Word became flesh to liberate, heal, and include all who are needy, then Christians have a mandate to love the earth. God, in the model of the universe as God's body, makes her home in the universe (and in our planet) and gives us... in the story of Jesus of Nazareth some clues as to how we should live in our home. The most basic clue is to love it..."

If the earth is God's body, then what we do to the earth is what we do to God. When we stand barefoot on holy ground, in awe, we are worshipping our creator. When we tend to the needs of the earth, we are tending to the body of God. When we stand for preservation of creation, we are worshipping God.

You have heard me preach many times on the idea that care for the earth is care for our neighbors. But to understand the earth as the body of God is many ways a more radical concept. Neighbors are precious - but we worship God.

What we consider holy, what we treasure, is what we protect.

Let us go back to our Irish mountain for a moment.

Those who climb Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday now number in the tens of thousands. Food stands and souvenir stalls and parking lots cover the base of the mountain. Too many people walk this mountain, these days. "Nature's greatest cathedral in the west is being severely damaged," says a local priest.⁸ Shall we keep walking up the mountain, if doing so harms that holy ground?

⁷ Sally McFague, *The Body of God: And Ecological Theology*, Kindle Edition.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34475325>

We cannot simply be in awe, walking barefoot on holy ground, using up the resources of the earth for our own pleasure, convenience, satisfaction. God sent Moses back down the mountain and to Egypt to save the people. And God is asking us to act in the face of all that destroys holy ground, sacred earth, the body of creation, the body of God.

What we consider holy, what we treasure, is what we must protect. Amen.

Benediction:

Let us join with the Earth and each other – To bring new life to the land, to restore the waters, to refresh the air, to protect the animals, to treasure the trees, to gaze at the stars, to cherish the human community, to heal the Earth, to remember the children. Let us go forth to put our words into action.

-Dianne L. Neu, [Return Blessings: Ecofeminist Liturgies Renewing the Earth](#)