

“STANDING ON HOLY GROUND”

Exodus 3:1-15

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Wilton Presbyterian Church

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I've been taking a course this month called, *“How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going”* or *“Leading in a Liminal Space.”* The teacher, Rev. Susan Beaumont tells the story of a faithful woman in her home congregation. Her name was Anna B. Quick. And she lived some years ago.

Anna's portrait is on the legacy wall. Stories of the 175-year-old congregation always include her. They say, “She saved the church – almost singlehandedly.”

The story is told most often by members this way: It was in the great depression... church had run out of money; they couldn't do any ministry whatsoever. They couldn't even afford to pay for a pastor. But the building was there. Still, Anna showed up every Sunday. She lit the lamps and she threw open the doors of the church so that anyone who may want to enter in and pray together with her would find a welcoming soul. She did this week after week. And annually she filed the articles of incorporation as well as all of the paperwork required to keep the church a legal entity. She did that for a number of years – until the church was revitalized and discovered its new chapter. The story ended there for many, many years.

Beaumont says by telling the story that way, the values of perseverance and the power of what one individual can do – even a singular woman, who saved the church in a congregation of all-male leadership up until that time, are highlighted. Perhaps the lesson is even about the power

of positive thinking, and never giving up; always hoping in God's redemptive spirit.

When I hear that story, I think of all those years that Anna B. Quick sat and prayed, by herself, in the sanctuary, week after week, waiting, listening for what God wanted to do there, in that place. And I think of our scripture lesson this morning...

Holy ground... that's how God defined the space where Moses stood when God called out to him through a burning bush..." Remove the sandals from your feet, for you are standing on holy ground." I think Anna B. Quick was on holy ground for a very long time.

Have YOU even been on holy ground? A space where you know/feel the presence of God? What did it feel like? Would you know it if you were in such a place?

I have experienced it quite often when I have been talking with someone who is ill or even dying, and they have no pretenses about them... when they are vulnerable and honest about what they need. I've experienced it when I have talked with people who are in prison... and again, the vulnerability is palpable. I've seen it when I have witnessed someone coming to a life-changing realization and something shifts... in a moment. And... I've seen/experienced it during worship when the Spirit is in the air and moving people to consider something new.

In all of those times, people are in what we call a liminal space... that space of threshold between the now and the not yet. That spiritual state which tells us something is happening beyond what we can explain... it's mystical and it has God's signature all over it.

I come away from such times with awe and wonder. I come away with gratitude and peace.

But the scripture doesn't end there, leaving Moses or us, for that matter, feeling all goose-bumpy and tingly. The story continues with God calling Moses to go out from that safe, holy place and risk and do some pretty scary things... return to the land from which he has fled (because he killed a man); confront Pharaoh; and free the Israelites.

Susan Beaumont's story doesn't end there either. She wondered to herself... how DID the church come back to life? She felt a chunk was missing in the way it had been told all those years. So, she went to the current minister who looked back into the archives.

It turns out, a core group of leaders had given sacrificially of their own funds to be able to call a new pastor and then did a massive capital campaign where everyone gave lots of money to build a new building... and Anna B Quick led the charge in personal sacrifice and giving.

That reminds me of our story here at Wilton Presbyterian Church. Our church, as it has been told, started in the 1960's, when eleven Presbyterians began an informal gathering in local homes for study, song, prayer and a strong sense of mission to the larger world. This gathering quickly grew under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Stewart MacColl beyond a single house into the American Legion Hall, and subsequently into the music room and gym at Cider Mill School before moving to the Parish Hall on our current WEPCO campus. Rev. Steve Jacobs continued to lead our congregation as a thriving church community, actively engaged both inside and beyond our building. In fact, money was raised for a sanctuary at one point... but after discernment, the congregation took a huge risk, and sent the money to a congregation in Kenya Africa so that they could build a manse for their pastor. The shields of that tribe rest right outside in our church narthex.

Years later, after much discussion and more discernment, the congregation decided to build our current sanctuary. In November 2004,

following a capital campaign which fully- funded its construction, WPC dedicated this space to the glory of God, under the visionary leadership of the Rev. Dr. David Graybill. Since then, over these last years, we have continued to see our way forward, welcoming in many young families whose presence has reinvigorated our mission and vision. We have continued to stand for inclusion of the LGBTQ community; we are in relationship and dialogue with people of other faiths, having worship together. Even here on our campus, we live out the importance of ecumenism... by sharing space across our courtyard with St. Matthews Episcopal Church. We have continued to serve those in need both near and far, in other countries with hands-on work; and we have continued our partnership and friendship with an African American Baptist church – which has continued for well over 15 years. But is there more to the story?

Stories have interesting ways of being told, depending on who tells them. Susan Beaumont was curious as to why the story at her home church had changed. She says, the congregation was stuck in its history, in its past. They were comfortable in doing what they knew how to do, even with their number dwindling. They looked at the story of someone showing up, filing the reports, and then assumed that God did the rest... through the faithfulness of one woman. And wouldn't it be wonderful if we imagined God doing that again?

In fact, she says, “the powerful story of individuals who dug deep and took risks to revitalize and reenergize that church is a much more powerful story to tell. The pastor started retelling the story, but people didn't want to hear the part of giving sacrificially and that God had used the risk, faithfulness and sacrificial giving of the congregants to make that happen.”

What are our stories? And what will the story be 10 years from now?

This coming Thursday, our elders, deacons and committee chairs will be coming together, virtually, of course, for a two-hour period of discernment... asking God to show us where we are going next. We'll ask, who are we now and how are we to minister in this new and changing environment? We are standing on holy ground in a liminal space as we listen.

The thing is... if we listen and discern for what God is doing... we're going to be called out of that liminal place into something exciting, some new ministry... but it also may be scary. In fact, it probably will be scary. It was for Moses...

But what does God say? God answers with five words... I will be with you...God will be with US.

That same God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Rachel... is the same God who will see us through, and has seen us through time and time again.

Where will God call us next? What risks will we be asked to undertake? If we listen... we will discern... God's movement... we're walking on holy ground.

Alleluia! Amen!!