

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
September 3, 2017

While I studied for the priesthood, Travis and I attended a small, sweet little church just outside Chicago. It was small enough that most everyone had done most every job in the parish. We were there just about a year, and I received that phone call that many of you have also received—a call from the rector asking me if I'd take on a certain ministry. In this particular case, the church needed someone to work with the high school youth for two years and then accompany them on a pilgrimage—kind of as a capstone experience for the two years of study and a long-standing tradition in the parish. I was working full time. Travis was working and in the middle of his master's degree studies. The last thing I wanted was to take on another project. But, when the priest calls...you know how it is.

So, I met my high school students, and we learned about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit for two years. At the end of the course—after car washes and bake sales to raise money—we left for a pilgrimage to the British Isles to learn about how Christianity flourished there. On the day of the flight, I remember distinctly one of the young women, we'll call her Lydia, lined up in front of the church with two big suitcases. I was kind of surprised because we were just going for a week, and I thought two suitcases seemed excessive. Lydia explained to me that the second suitcase was empty and would be mainly for souvenirs. And I started to think that perhaps I hadn't explained the nature of a pilgrimage very well. This was a foretaste of what was to come.

The whole time we traveled, I got the sense that Lydia was not particularly connected to what we were learning. We prayed Evening Prayer every night, and we saw several places of deep spiritual importance to Christianity's history. Several of the students felt connected to all the Christians and saints who had traveled before us, but Lydia just didn't seem moved.

Toward the end of our trip, we traveled to a Holy Island right on the English-Scottish border called Lindisfarne. This is where Saint Aidan planted a monastery and launched missionary efforts into all of England in the 600s. You can see the island from the mainland and just make out the ruins of the monastery. Pilgrims for centuries have come here and walked to the island, barefoot, at low tide. It was a muddy and slightly terrifying experience. We all were barefoot, and I looked over, and Lydia was wearing galoshes. She had literally packed boots so that she wouldn't get her feet dirty on a holy pilgrimage. It took everything I could do not to roll my eyes.

The group made it to the monastery after about two hours of walking in sticky, sea-weed-laden mud. Our feet were filthy; Lydia's were not. The sun was shining, and I'll admit that the place was starting to cast its spell on us. Heaven and earth seemed closer there, and I noticed that even Lydia seemed to be caught up by something difficult to explain. Near the monastery was a tiny little Anglican church, and I noticed the kids had gone off into one of its corners. They were quiet and not causing too much trouble, so I didn't pay them much mind. After a few minutes, I finally figured out what they were doing. They were digging through their pockets and fanny

packs for change to put into the charity boxes at the back of the church. I almost couldn't believe it. Lydia, who seemed the most unlikely to be moved by holy ground, suddenly seemed to get it. We experience God on Holy Ground—not because it is kind of a spiritual rush—but rather as a first step in the lifelong project of loving our neighbor. Lydia and all the kids were reminding me that the experience of the holy is itself just a step. We experience the voice of God, and our very next act is to reach out with mercy, charity, justice, compassion and grace.

God doesn't seem too particular about what constitutes holy ground. Wildernesses, clouds, islands, ladders, altars, mangers, and bushes. Sometimes, at first, folks need to wear galoshes. Sometimes, if we're brave enough, we take off our shoes.

You know today's story. Moses is the child of Hebrews slaves but is raised in splendor inside the palace. His people are tortured and killed in service to the merciless economy of the Pharaoh. Young Moses is walking in the countryside, somewhat oblivious to the suffering of the Hebrews, when a bush right next to him begins to burn but is not consumed by the fire. God speaks out of the first and tells Moses that this ground is holy and to take off his shoes. God reveals to Moses the suffering of the Hebrew people and tasks him to go and lead them out of the clutches of Pharaoh. Moses hesitates but eventually agrees, and we've been following God out of bondage ever since.

In God's economy, stories never really end. There is always a Pharaoh—that shadowy entity whose sole purpose seems to be to advance the suffering of the poor or the powerless. And there is always God speaking to us from unexpected places telling us to join with those in need so we can all leave the land of Egypt. There are burning bushes all around—for you, for me, even for young Lydia who I didn't think had a religious bone in her body. Each of us is called into solidarity with the people who live on the margins. That's where God's love and attention focus, and that is where God's epiphanies call us.

I am utterly convinced that God is talking to you today. I don't quite know what that burning bush will be for you this week, but I know that there will be one. And when God makes ground holy, we had best take off our shoes and pay attention. Because, once we are on holy ground, the very next thing God will say is that we need to pay attention to those who need our help. Moses was unlikely. Lydia was unlikely. You might be unlikely. But when has that ever stopped God from calling? Amen.