

Have you ever met the holy in the ordinary? When have you seen the presence of God in an everyday (but surprising) activity?

The story of Moses and the burning bush is among the best known in the Bible, but its message has been obscured by generations of legend, lore and glorification- so much so that we no longer see its original meaning and message. This sermon will help to correct that to bring this story more relevance than you'd ever guess.

This account of Moses includes unforgettable images made popular in film and song, stretching the message of the story far beyond its original intent. In the way this story is presented in the DREAMWORKS version of Moses in "The Prince of Egypt" or in Cecilie B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," you would think that this is the only time in Scripture that a person was called out from their normal, daily tasks for a holy purpose.

Far from it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ds9y3IJGig>

The theme of our sermons from now to Lent will be "Hineini"- "Here I am"- words Moses says when he realizes that he's being beckoned by God. While he is doing something mundane and all-so normal (tending sheep), he finds himself surprisingly and undeniably in the presence of the holy. This is not



the only time these words are uttered in Hebrew Scripture. There are upwards of fifty instances where the word Hineini is used (some are more memorable than others). In every case, the speaker is acknowledging the presence of God in their life, opening themselves up to a new, unknown and previously unexpected possibility.

Hineini infers attention, willingness, a readiness to be fully present, attentive to the needs at hand and the call to walk forward in faith. But it comes in response to the unexpected, which makes it a story worth telling.

Two earlier times when this word is used in scripture are fitting examples. The first is when Adam has just eaten the fruit given him by Eve in the Garden of Eden. "Where are you?" God asks, "Ayeka?" (in Hebrew.)

The question is not about physical location, for we can assume that God knew where Adam was. Rather, the question poses an existential challenge: where are you in your life? Where are you spiritually, emotionally, morally? Adam is too ashamed to answer. The question carries with it far too much drama and baggage for Adam to answer straightforwardly, yet the dialogue between humanity and God has begun, never to end.

Another example of Hineini comes later in Genesis, when uttered by Abraham as a response to God's call at the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. God calls to Abraham – "Avraham, Avraham!" – and Abraham, always ready to do God's will, responds, 'Hineini', here I am! God's call carries with it a new hope and promise, a future far better than the situation that Abraham was then facing.

As we return to the story of Moses, the drama is less extreme, but just as interesting.



Wandering along the heights of Mt. Horeb, (also, confusingly, called Sinai) tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep, Moses is literally minding his business,

tending the herd, driving them up the side of the mountain seeking fresh grazing. It's clear that Moses is **not** out looking for God. He's been on the run from God for some time now. He'd killed an Egyptian supervisor who'd beaten a fellow Hebrew and then escaped to the mountain country to start a whole new life.

Then and there, unannounced and unexpected, the angel of the Lord appeared in the form of a burning thorn bush which was not being consumed by the fire. There's deeper meaning here than we know, part of a play on words.

The Hebrew word for 'shrub' is 'SNH' - is a surprisingly similar word as Sinai, made of the same three basic consonants. There's got to be more than an alphabetical connection going on here; there must be a deeper message (and there is!)

God appears to Moses in more than one place and in more than one way; now in this lowliest of shrubs and later at the summit of this mountain to deliver the Ten Commandments. God's presence is everywhere; no place is absent God's glory.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem called 'Aurora Leigh'; it's beautiful and very long. One of its great lines is this; "Earth's crammed with Heaven and every common bush afire with God," and she's thinking about Moses and the Burning Bush. "Earth's crammed with Heaven and every common bush is afire with God."

Through the centuries Rabbis have commented that more than one person had passed by that burning bush before - but it was only who Moses who made the extra effort to take a closer look.



According to one Rabbinic tradition, Moses took three steps off the beaten path in the direction of the bush to have a closer look. When God saw that Moses had taken the trouble to see, God recognized that Moses was worthy of having the Divine presence revealed to him. After that little extra effort, that exercise of curiosity, Moses was rewarded with a revelation that he was indeed in the presence of the Lord. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." With that (even with Moses hiding his face from God), a new relationship was born; an unbreakable connection was forged that would forever change the history of God's people.

Could it be that if we turned aside more often God would speak to us more often, too? I wonder.

And I wonder what it would mean for you — to take three steps off the well-worn path you trudge every day, minding your own business. What would that look like, feel like - where would you turn aside, where would you go?

As much as any message from this passage of scripture, I think this is the point now worth examining. We don't know what ground we're standing on is holy until after we've ventured out to go there, and it is not where we currently stand.

We surely know what places we now consider holy- and we could begin to make a list of them right now. Think about this for a second... examples in your life...

Here in church, at the font for a baptism; here, for a funeral (which can make it very hard, emotionally, to return), or perhaps even out in the front of the sanctuary where I've seen some couples have their wedding pictures taken on their anniversaries (very touching indeed!)



What other places are holy for you?

A cemetery you visit now & then? A house you once lived in?

Picture that place in your mind's eye- a place when you go there- you have to stop and be still to take it all in; the past, the story, the memories...

So then, where will then next holy place for you be? Who can know? Where do we go from there? What extra step are you being invited to take (or three?) It surely doesn't have to be any place special.... like Moses, you will be called while doing the most everyday, mundane things.

Where will you be drawn off the beaten path to seek out something else? Where might that place in your life be? Where could it possibly be that God might beckon you, to take another step (or three) to have a look? Perhaps it's not for us to know these places, but to begin to call up a willingness to venture out, curious as to where that call might appear.

Hineini. "I am here." Responding to the call of the Holy, the sense of something or someone urging us to take an extra step (or three) out of the ordinary, is all that it takes.

And only after we take those extra steps, we hear the call, 'Ayeka!' "Where are you?"

What would happen if we were able to answer the call, to declare, Hineini?

Friends, the time is now, the New Year asks – Ayeka? Ayeka! Where are you? Are you where you want to be? Are you the person you ought to be?

It is not too late. There is no better time than the present to say, Hineini, “here I am.” Amen.

