

HOLY GROUND
July 14, 2013 –Exodus 3: 1-12
The Church of the Covenant

We really are in God's country. I know it sounds rather parochial and maybe even a little trite but Western PA really is God's country. It's the Northern Bible Belt. It's the heartland of Presbyterianism. There are more Presbyterians in one county here, Allegheny, than in entire states in most of our denomination. People in this area really are God's people. God has done marvelous things here in Western PA over the years. And the best is yet to be; the best is still ahead of us. Kathleen Norris has a wonderful little book entitled, *Dakota*, which is about the spirituality of the plains out in the American Midwest. She makes a rather compelling point that specific areas have specific, as she calls them, "spiritual geographies". God chooses, for His own perfect reasons, to bless particular places and to use them over and over again for His glory. We see this in scripture –Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah but God interposes at the last moment a ram and the ram, not Abraham's only son, is the sacrifice. God directs King David to plan to build the Temple in Jerusalem, you guessed it, on the very spot of Mt. Moriah, the place where God provides another sheep for the sacrifice. And there on that mount lambs without blemish are sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins. O yes, and also it is at this very same place where Jesus, the Son of God and the Messiah, enters into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to reclaim the Temple for His Father in heaven. Another male sheep, a lamb without blemish, is about to be sacrificed, this time at Calvary, and the blood of this Lamb is why we are forgiven and freed in Jesus' name today. Mt. Moriah is part of God's "spiritual geography". There are special places in God's spiritual geography; specially chosen by God for special purposes. I believe Western PA is just such a place. Why do I say that Western PA is a specially chosen place?

You have to go back to 1802 in order to begin to understand. The Presbyterian Church in 1802 was conducting a series of communion preparatory services in advance of communion. While Presbyterians celebrate communion relatively infrequently by comparison with other churches, we always used to emphasize that you needed to be spiritually prepared to receive the sacrament; so on Saturday there was a preparatory service where people would confess their sin and spend time in the presence of a Holy God seeking to prepare their heart to receive the sacrament the next day. These preparatory services took on new meaning in 1802; people began to truly repent; they were cut to the heart; the Spirit began to move in their midst; God was up to something in this new Promised Land. You can read about it in the spiritual biography of the life of a Presbyterian minister, The Reverend Elisha Macurdy, written in 1848. (*"The Life of the Rev. Elisha Macurdy"*, by David Elliott, professor of Theology at Western Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA, 1848 --see generally pp. 71 ff.) On November 14th 1802 at the Presbyterian Church in Upper Buffalo where the Reverend John Anderson was pastor is where it all began. Upper Buffalo is that little bend in the road off Route 844 as you're heading toward West Middletown. Make a left and you'll see a very large brick meeting style church with a large flat meadow to its right that is today a cemetery; this was the site of God's visitation in Western PA 111 years ago. There had been gathering spiritual ferment in the area; more and more prayer meetings; people more and more touched by the presence of God; greater attendances at preparatory services and then it happened. 10,000 people showed up for the communion service at the Upper Buffalo Presbyterian Church on November 14th. To put this in perspective all of Washington County in 1802 had perhaps 25,000 residents; to put this in perspective that would be like if 250,000 or more people showed up this Sunday at The Church of the Covenant today. So the meeting house was full to overflowing, standing room only; and the large tent they had set up expecting an overflow crowd was full to overflowing, standing room only. So Dr. John McMillan, the Presbyterian frontier Evangelist and founder of the Presbyterian Church in Western PA and by the way also the founder of Washington and Jefferson

College, directed Rev. Macurdy to go out in the field next to the tent and begin to preach. Macurdy climbed up into a wagon because there was no place else to preach from. Macurdy obviously had not prepared a sermon in advance so he just opened his Bible and it fell open to Psalm two, "Why do the heathen rage?". This was his text and he began his sermon by saying he was certain folks thought it odd he was preaching a political sermon but he had just received word of an insurrection, that measures had been undertaken to suppress the rebellion, and that a general amnesty was declared for all who would repent of their ways. I am sure the crowd must have thought that a second Whiskey Rebellion had just broken out, since the first had occurred just little more than a decade before. But inspired by the Holy Spirit, without a note or any forethought in advance, Macurdy then did a brilliant preaching maneuver, the envy of any pulpiteer, and declaimed that the rebellion was of these people and their rebellion was against God, and that God had sent His Son Jesus Christ as the plan for their redemption, and that only through the blood of Jesus would there be a general amnesty declared in Jesus' name. As the book notes: *"(Macurdy) then proceeded, in a strain of fervid eloquence, to describe the character and condition of sinners, as rebels against God, insurgents against (God's) government; the measures adopted to counteract their rebellion, and the amnesty which had been proclaimed through the blood of the Son of God."* (Life of Macurdy, pp. 74-75) What happened next was most remarkable because many listeners then lay prostrate on the ground crying out that they were insurgents against God. It was henceforth always referred to as "Macurdy's war sermon" because of the number who had swooned in the Spirit, were cut to the heart and repented. There were also idle jesters, the curious, the drunkards, the malcontent and the critics who showed up on that day, intent on criticizing and mocking what was going on. But as it says, they too, lay prostrate in that field and through the Word of God proclaimed, became the subjects of "God's converting grace". If you want to understand why there are so many brick meeting style Presbyterian Churches in our area you have to understand what went on, November 14, 1802. The Lord God Almighty blessed God's country and drew God's people to Himself. Beloved, this is God's country and we are God's people. This is our spiritual geography.

Shift now to another holy ground. Moses was minding his own business, tending the sheep on Horeb, called *"the mountain of God."* Obviously, it is a special geographic place. There a messenger from the Lord appears to him and he sees before him a bush that is burning but is not consumed. This is always in the Bible a sign of the call of God. And it is then that God called to Moses; He speaks in that still, small voice; God whispers –*"Moses, Moses!"* God is no impersonal force out in the universe; our God is a personal God; our God is a living Being. And we are not a mere number, a faceless non-entity and a bunch of unknowns. No. God knows our name. God calls us personally. God calls us personally and by name. *"Moses, Moses!" "Stuart, Stuart!"* We are called by name; the hairs on our head are numbered; God knows us better than we know ourselves. God says to Moses: *"I have seen the affliction of my people... (I) have heard their cry...I know their sufferings...I have come down to deliver them and to bring them... to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."* (Exodus 3: 7) I have watched as your steel mills have closed, I have seen your downtown boarded up, I have watched your young people die of addiction and violence, I have heard their cry and I have come down to deliver them, to call My church to do something about it, to pour out my Spirit, to bring them to a new and Promised Land, to fulfill the plan I have for you, to bless you, and to grant you a future and a hope in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. *"Moses, Moses!...put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is HOLY GROUND."* (Exodus 3: 4,5) *"Washington, Washington, put off your shoes; for the place on which you are standing is HOLY GROUND."*

O, Stu, that's so negative. We don't want to hear about the 4 young people who overdosed from heroin the past couple of months; we don't want to hear about more capital murders in the past couple of years than in the decade before. La, la, la, la, la If we just close our eyes and our ears and bury our head

in the sand, deny that anything is wrong, then somehow, some way, magically it will all fix itself. How's that working out for you? DENIAL is not just DE river in Egypt. Beloved, there have been a lot of plans over the years to fix things, but all of those plans have somehow forgotten God...and that we are God's country...and we are God's people. If believing that God is able to do something is negative, if believing in you as God's people to do things to make eternal differences in our community is negative, if believing that all of this is possible because of this being God's country, this being HOLY GROUND, if believing in the love of God sent into the world through His Son Jesus Christ is negative, if that somehow is negative, I'll eat my hat. This fall begins a three year effort to engage our congregation in becoming more missional, in involving us in God's plan for the reclamation of our community and world, of us not just talking about it, but actually doing something about it, of us moving from denial and good intentions, to possibility and hope. That's what you said you wanted to do through the congregational survey and visioning day back in January. Be careful when you say something, 'cause I'm just ornery enough to hold you to it. Why am I optimistic? Why do I have such hope? Why do I believe that through God all things are possible? Because Western PA is God's country; and we are God's people; and through God's power and God's Spirit we will be part of unfolding God's plan for our community. That's not negativity; I believe in YOU. And I believe in God. That's positivity!

I love that program on WQED where the airplane flies over Pittsburgh and you see Western PA from the air. You see God's country from up above. You see God's country, you might say, as God sees God's country. As Genesis notes: *"The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."* (Genesis 1: 2) God's Spirit is moving over God's country. Over the rolling hills, green and verdant with grass, hills and small forests, creeks swollen with rain down in valleys, the landscape dotted with homes and small collections of houses and always a brick meeting house, generally Presbyterian, in its midst. And we follow along 844 past Upper Buffalo and see the large open field to the one side of the meeting house where God visited His people. And there's LOWER Buffalo and North Buffalo and at least 5 Buffalos to see. And we fly over Cross Creek dam and toward the holy city, "Wash PA". The farmland gives way to more and more houses, and empty steel mills, and the Wild Things Stadium and we see the courthouse, beautiful and second to none in the country, and we see the jail, and the Washington Hospital, and Trinity and Wash High, and the church towers, IC and The Church of the Covenant; God is looking down on the holy city, on God's country, on the new Promised Land. As the gospel of John says: *"The wind (of the Spirit) blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."* (John 3: 8) And it goes over Washington Cemetery where are buried the saints of the church, the great communion of saints urging us onward and upward, "you can do it; you CAN do." *"You can do all things through HIM who gives you strength."* The church has been anointed to proclaim the Good News, Good News to the poor, release of the captive, sightedness to the blind—Good news for those who are poor in Spirit, who need release from all that binds them, and vision for all those who are blind to the purposes of God. We are God's people. We live in a very specially chosen place; we call God's country our home. We are God's solution through God's plan and God's power for the reclamation of God's country for the Lord God Almighty.

Rise up, O men of God. Rise up, O women of God. Rise up and claim this land for the Lord. God's country plus God's people plus God's power equals God's victory. "Church of the Covenant; Church of the Covenant! Take off your shoes, *"for the place on which you are standing is HOLY GROUND..."* Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!