

The Holy Ground of Christmas, Part One

Luke 2:8-20

Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner once wrote a book entitled *A Room Called Remember*, in which he tells of taking a friend to a forest of maple trees in early March when the maple sap was being collected. In the stillness you could hear the sap dripping into the buckets. His friend wanted to taste the fresh sap which Buechner noted is like rainwater—“It is soft and has a slight sweetness to it.”

With sap dripping in the buckets around them, with sunlight coming in shafts through the trees, Buechner held a bucket of sap for his friend to drink. The friend paused and said, “I have a feeling you ought to say some words.” It felt like a communion to them. Neither of them had been talking about spiritual things. It just welled up in his friend—the sense of the sacred, the hunger to go a little deeper.

That was an example of something we could call a “Holy Ground Moment.” Perhaps you remember a moment like that. A Holy Ground Moment is a point in time when you are vividly aware of the Presence of Almighty God, when you sense that He is real, that He is with you, and that He loves you. Yet the more of God we know and experience, the more we realize how much of Him we do not know. We grow in our understanding that He is infinitely more than we are, or more than we are capable of knowing.

Perhaps something like this has happened to you: you were going about your usual business, when suddenly you found yourself in the midst of a special experience that made you sharply aware of the majestic presence of God at that point in time, in that place, at that moment. In the days—or even years—which followed, you may have returned to the exact location as before, only to discover it was impossible to recapture the feeling you had earlier.

Or perhaps you have heard of the Holy Ground Moments of others, and you tried to duplicate those experiences in your own life. In frustration, you may have wondered if something was wrong with your faith.

Maturity in Christ, however, brings with it the knowledge that God cannot be confined to one singular experience, nor can He be boxed into one person’s lifelong experience of Him. The Lord God is much more than that. And while He may be experienced while one is drinking from a maple sap bucket in early spring, He certainly is not limited to that. Nor is His Infinite Being defined by any one

individual's finite knowledge of Him. He simply cannot be pigeonholed that neatly.

The life Christ offers is so rich, so varied, so multicolored, that none of us can claim to have fully known everything about Him or about living for Him. Regardless of the length of time one has been a follower of Christ, or the depth of maturity a person may have reached, or any claims a person may make about his commitment to Christ, there is always so much more to be known and experienced.

After a lifetime of even the most faithful living for Christ, a person may arrive at the end of his allotted time here on the earth and realize that there was so much more to know about Jesus than he or she may have known. This does not excuse spiritual laziness or lack of commitment to Christ; it merely points out the inexhaustible riches of His grace and character.

We come to the closing hours of this year engaged in a celebration of the birth of our Savior, and in the Gospels which tell us all we know about that glorious event, we find that Holy Ground Moments come in many different varieties:

1 The Holy Ground of Promised Joy, vv. 9-14

The story has become so familiar to us across the years that perhaps we have forgotten the holiness of that moment when the veil was lifted and an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds on the Judean hillside. They reacted as would any of us should we be confronted with the sudden appearance of an angel of God. The shepherds were terrified! The King James Version reads that they were "*sore afraid*," but what Luke literally wrote here in his Gospel is that they "feared a great fear."

The angel spoke soothing words to them: "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" Luke used the word for "evangelize" here, so what the angel literally said was "I evangelize to you a great joy." That heavenly being was proclaiming to them that in that very hour had been born the Savior, who was the Messiah. The shepherds received instructions as to where they could find the baby, and how they would know that He was the One.

Suddenly, the shepherds found themselves surrounded by a great company of the heavenly host. Now listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you. Some Bible scholars claim that the translation of verse 13 would seem to indicate that the entire host of heaven was praising God, but that only a portion was actually visible to the shepherds. Can you imagine it any other way? Picture an event so grand, so

glorious, so worthy as to command the praise of the entire host of heaven! Not one was silent! They were praising God and saying, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.*”

It is true that the Scripture does not say that the angels were *singing*. But I find it difficult to envision the announcement of the birth of the Savior *without* singing. In fact, the fifth chapter of John’s *Revelation*, verse 12, we read that the angels *sang*, “*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*”

And this would surely be the most glorious singing ever heard by the ears of mortal man. The Promise, centuries and centuries old, first given in the opening chapters of Genesis, reiterated to Abraham, seen by the prophets, desired by the angels, had been fulfilled. The Promise-Giver had kept His Promise. The Joy For All People had now been born in Bethlehem, just as the prophecy had said.

It was truly Holy Ground! In this case God chose to use the singing of the entire heavenly host to announce the birth of His Son. It is unlikely that any of us will ever hear the combined voices of the entire hosts of heaven until we reach the other side of eternity. God chose to reveal Himself through this Holy Ground Moment experienced by the shepherds in a manner unlike any He had used before. He was not limited to the ways human beings had experienced Him before. Yet He chose that particular way to announce that the Promised Joy had been given.

When we pause to reflect on the awesomeness of what really happened that night in Bethlehem, when we comprehend that God became flesh, the Promise becomes Joy for us in our lives today.

2 The Holy Ground of Urgent Curiosity, vv. 15-16a

After the angels left the shepherds and went back into heaven, the shepherds did not hesitate. They didn’t say, “Did you see what I think I saw?” as if they were actors in a low-budget ghost movie. The reality of what had taken place grabbed them, and they could not break free.

Their response was one of urgent curiosity. They said to one another, “Let’s go! Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.” They didn’t say, “Let’s go see *if* this thing has really happened,” just “Let’s go see it!” Then verse 16 begins, “So they hurried off...”

I believe there is a certain kind of curiosity which has been ordained of God. He has created us in such a way that we are able to search out the deeper truths of life, and find them! These shepherds were possessed with that kind of curiosity which has about it a sense of excitement and urgency. “Let’s go—*now!*” What they did with the flocks we can only guess. But this was important, even urgent. They must go *now* to see for themselves.

But stop just a moment. The Greek word translated “see” in verse 15 means “to see so as to comprehend the meaning of a thing.” They weren’t going to be sightseers. They were saying to each other, “Let’s go so that we might comprehend what God has done! Let’s make this a personal experience.”

The Lord God may invade your heart and life with a truth so forceful and blazing that you are unable to concentrate on anything else until you have been able to comprehend His truth for yourself. It may block everything else you try to think about. It may come in the early dawn, or in the silent darkness of midnight. It may come to you when you are immersed in the pages of Scripture, or when you are driving along the highway. The point is that it comes, and when it does, often we are struck with a sense of urgent curiosity to make the experience more personal, to capture the moment. When that happens, we find ourselves standing on a third kind of Holy Ground:

3 The Holy Ground of Amazing Discovery, vv. 16b-17a

When the shepherds hurried off, following the directions the angel had given them, they found Mary and Joseph, and The Baby, Who was lying in the manger. Now shepherds were socially outcasts, for their work rendered them ceremonially unclean according to Jewish law. It is quite possible that these shepherds were tending the flocks owned by the Temple, that their’s were sheep intended for eventual sacrifice.

Can you imagine the holy hush that must have descended upon the stable when these social outcasts came creeping up, and then realized that they were in the presence of God Himself once more? Can you imagine the feelings of awe and worship that must have overcome them as they understood for themselves that the Messiah actually had been born?

It was truly an amazing discovery. It was beyond doubt a Holy Ground Moment. It was unlike any they had experienced before, and unlike any they—or anyone else—would ever experience again.

Do you remember what it was like in the first moments you knew Christ as your Savior? My memory is not nearly as good as it used to be, but I remember that vividly. No, I didn't see Him as a baby in a manger, but I discovered Him for myself, and it was an amazing discovery. Through the preaching of a 17-year-old, under conviction by the Holy Spirit, with the rain pounding on a windowpane just to my right, I gave my life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And there have been other times I have made amazing discoveries in my relationship with Him. There was the amazing discovery that I was worth something to Him, even if no one else, including myself, thought so. There was the amazing discovery that He died on the cross for my sins.

There was the amazing discovery that He rose again, and that He would one day be returning from Heaven just as He left. There was the amazing discovery for me personally that God actually wanted me as one of His ministers. There was the amazing discovery that He still loves me even when I fail. There is the amazing discovery that He is so very patient with me. And on and on it goes.

The growing life in Christ is one amazing discovery after another. And when we stop long enough, we realize during those moments that we are standing on Holy Ground.

During this season of the year, we stand on Holy Ground as we do at perhaps no other time—that of Promised Joy, Urgent Curiosity, and Amazing Discovery. Your experience of Holy Ground may be totally different from that of the next person, or even from one period in your life to another, and that's okay. We have learned from Scripture that the experience of the Holy comes in many different circumstances, shapes and sizes, each of them tailor-made for us in that particular moment, in that particular place, in that particular time.

God longs to break through into your life at this moment. Will you open up yourself to Him, that He may come in?