

STANDING ON SACRED GROUND

Good morning. My message today, as you may have seen in the order of service, is titled “Standing on Sacred Ground.” When I was asked to deliver a sermon on this date, of all days, that title came to me; it seemed suitable for September 11th.

What is it that human beings consider as sacred ground? A variety of different emotions can sanctify a place in the mind of an individual, or a mass of people. A site may be revered as sacred because of a tremendous battle, such as Gettysburg, or an event that determined the fate of a nation, such as the French Revolution. A specific place may be renowned due to its antiquity - think of the pyramids in Egypt and Latin America. Or, on a more personal note, many of us may think of places where we lived when we were young with such warmth that those old houses, or the sites where they once stood, seem almost holy.

Of course, the major religions of the world each have places they hold as sacred – the Deer Park in Benares, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the Kaaba in Mecca, and the Ganges river in India. These places are revered because of pivotal spiritual events that occurred there. Whether those events are literal or metaphorical is really beside the point.

Each of these sites hold special places in the hearts of religious adherents because of the sheer power of what happened there. These events may have attracted thousands of people when they occurred, or a dozen. They may have caused little impact in the world at that moment, but the ripples affected hundreds of millions of lives for many centuries – for good and for ill.

Moses

In ancient times, the Hebrews and neighboring peoples already revered some pieces of ground as sacred, often due to the presence of a god. Small wonder, then, what happens during Moses’ first encounter with Jehovah, as related in the Book Of Exodus.

And God said, Draw not nigh hither, put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thy standest is holy ground.

This story points to the sacredness of a place, sanctified by the divine presence, made holy by the first contact between Jehovah and Moses. Moses believed he stood on sacred ground.

This theme occurs again, later in the Book of Exodus. We are told that, about three months after the Hebrews departed Egypt, they arrived in the Sinai. Upon reaching a mountain in that area, the people pitched camp and rested.

Moses, receiving a call from Jehovah, went up the mountain and conversed with the new god of the Hebrews, receiving messages to carry back to his people. One of the

things Moses was instructed to do was to sanctify the people, to prepare them for a visit from their god. Clearly, anywhere that Jehovah appeared was to be regarded as holy. During those visits, the Hebrews believed they stood on sacred ground.

Jesus

For mainstream Christians, the core of their faith is the Easter event, marked by the reported resurrection of Jesus. Whatever the exact nature of this event, it draws the reverence of millions to the present.

Even today, we see tourists in the thousands braving the political and military uncertainties of the Middle East to walk where they believe Jesus once walked. They long to tread where they think his feet once passed – to the court of Pontius Pilate, to Golgotha, to the church now represented as the site of his burial and reported resurrection.

Whatever one may believe about what these pilgrims do, it is easy to understand why they do it. Once again, we see the idea of sacred ground. To those who believe that Jesus was God incarnate, or a very unique and holy prophet, to travel where he once traveled, stand where he once stood, and touch where he may once have been entombed, is a powerful tribute. Those who make that journey now believe that they stand on sacred ground.

But in the New Testament, we see defined another kind of sacredness – a sacred space. Jesus is reported, in the Gospel according to Matthew, to have said, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This may have been a new concept at that time – a sacred space that was not necessarily tied to a temple or synagogue, a space sanctified by the power of memory and belief. Any one of that assembled group believed they stood on sacred ground.

Gettysburg

The summer of 1863 was the third summer of the Civil War. After two hard years of fighting, there was no end in sight. The Union was desperate for a stunning victory, a battle that would pivot the war in their favor.

It was that summer that General Robert E. Lee chose to take his army into Pennsylvania. Outside the town of Gettysburg, Confederate scouts searching for supplies skirmished with Union troops. Soon, both armies began moving into position in and around this small town.

After two days of inconclusive but bloody fighting, July 3 dawned clear and bright. On that day, under Lee’s direction, General Pickett led 15,000 men in a full-on charge at the center of the Union line. The line held; only 5,000 of the 15,000 returned. That charge finished the battle, leaving a total of about 51,000 soldiers killed, wounded and missing out of a total of around 160,000 troops. 51,000 in only three days – never

had a single battle in the history of North America been so deadly. But it was a crushing Union victory and marked the beginning of the end for the Confederate cause.

A few months later, the Union dedicated a new national cemetery at Gettysburg to commemorate the many thousands who had given their lives to duty and to a cause greater than themselves. In November of 1863, at the dedication ceremony, President Abraham Lincoln gave a brief address on the site of that battle. In a time known for speeches sometimes lasting for hours, President Lincoln delivered very brief comments, which we know today as the Gettysburg Address. A few extracts from those poignant sentences:

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war ... We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives ...

“But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.”

President Lincoln believed that he, and everyone else present that day, was in a consecrated place. On that day, in that hallowed place, people stood on sacred ground.

Personal Sacred Space

Each of us, during life’s course, acquires memories that remain precious to us. Those memories may be of a person, a place, a feeling – or all of the above.

When we are young, we see the world, perhaps, through a lens of magic and wonder. Everything is new, fresh and bright – sometimes more than once. We have no idea in our youth how transient and impermanent everything is – how important it is to enjoy moments, feelings and experiences that may never come again – and that may depart unexpectedly.

For those of us who are middle-aged – or, um, beyond middle age – some memories have acquired a special poignancy. We carry with us wisps, impressions of things that once were, for many years or for but a moment, and never will be again.

Each of us carries those sacred memories within us. What we have consecrated in our memories is as individual as those memories. We may be stirred into recall by a drive through the neighborhood where we lived as a child. We might feel a pang of remembrance when we smell a particular aroma that reminds us of a parent, grandparent or long-lost friend or lover.

About ten years ago, I had to write a short essay for a Creative Writing class. I chose to write about my maternal grandmother, who died in 1991. I have long since lost that essay, but I remember many of the details.

My grandmother was the matriarch of an extended family of four generations. Every Christmas, her home was, for a few hours, the gathering place for forty or fifty of my aunts, uncles, cousins, and assorted hangers-on. Her home was filled with the emotional warmth of relatives gathered together. Everyone had a chance to catch up on the events of the past year, find out about new loves, old friends, joys and sorrows, and all the gains and losses that come with the passage of time.

The air of her home was filled with the aroma of holiday baking. By the middle of the afternoon, the smell of cakes, pies and casseroles was enough to make anyone's stomach rumble. Then, of course, came the best part of the day – when everyone fought what was basically a losing battle to actually *eat all that food*. Year after year, we gave it our best, and failed – and left in the evening bloated, waddling and sleepy, with leftovers; determined to try harder the next year.

When my grandmother died in 1991 at the age of 93, a lot of the magic and warmth of Christmas went with her. Her death left a void that has never been filled – the cohesion of the extended family disappeared. The first Christmas or two, sure, we tried to keep that feeling alive at our family gatherings, but things have never been quite the same.

I have had a number of years now to think about the reason that Christmas was so enjoyable then, and why it seems to have lost its luster since. I think it has a lot to do with the feeling of community, and the sense of connectedness, even sacredness, that we feel in the physical presence of friends and family.

When we become comfortable with family and friends, open to the treasure and trauma that such relationships bring, we come to depend on those we love for a feeling of stability, a feeling of being rooted or anchored in a world that seems to have become cold and disjointed.

For a while, that root, that anchor keeps us balanced. But then, life happens. An accident occurs, a serious health problem flares up, a loved one in the military is shipped away to a foreign land, a parent is lost to the infirmities of age.

These events break our spirits off at the root, they break our anchor. We are suddenly and painfully reminded of the fragility, the briefness, the unpredictability of human life.

After that disruptive event, even if things try to right themselves, our lives are never quite the same. When we think back later, to what life was like before, we feel, maybe for a moment, a sense of the stability and rightness that was torn from us – but only for a moment. During that moment, though, our memory enfolds us, safe, in a sacred space; mentally, we stand briefly on sacred ground.

9/11

On a bright Tuesday morning in September of 2001, I was walking down the sidewalk in downtown Austin with several of my coworkers, on the way to a meeting. Along the way, one of our work mates pulled up in his truck to let us know that a plane had struck one of the towers at the World Trade Center in New York City. The early news reports were uncertain as to whether it was an accident or not.

By the time we got to our meeting, every TV set in the building was tuned to live news coverage from New York. We watched, shocked, as the same footage was played and replayed – two airplanes, arriving a few minutes apart, smashing into each of the two towers.

Then came news of a third airplane, hitting the Pentagon. And a fourth, which crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers tried to overpower the hijackers.

I can still see in my mind's eye, clearly on this day and probably for the rest of my life, those images from that day. The first aircraft crashes into the North Tower. About 20 minutes later, the second aircraft strikes the South Tower. Both of the planes disappear into a mass of roiling fire and falling debris.

The two buildings begin to buckle. As people on the upper floors realize what has happened, many follow hasty evacuation orders. Thousands struggle to go down lengthy staircases to get to ground level and exit the towers as fire, police and EMS vehicles flood the area.

During that long descent, there are singular tales of heroism, and of loss. The office worker, wheelchair-bound, carried down the stairs by a lifelong friend. The wounded, carried or half-dragged by friends, coworkers, or perfect strangers in the form of cops, firemen and EMS workers, through the long descent to life and hope. Many never made it back to the hoped-for safety of the ground.

I remember seeing those that day that looked almost like ghosts. People wandered through the fog of smoke and debris, covered in what looked like ashes, like chalky wraiths. Many were wounded, all were dazed and lost.

Aboard Flight 93 over Pennsylvania, determined to avoid being another tool of destruction, the passengers revolted and stormed the cockpit. We all still remember the touching instances of several of those passengers, no doubt certain of their fate, calling family members for a last conversation. The collective heroism of those passengers, surrendering their lives honorably, no doubt saved the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, on the ground.

What happened that day wounded our nation very gravely. America plunged into a period of shock and, at the same time, deep mourning. We were shocked over the fact

that several coordinated attacks had been successfully carried out on our soil, and mournful at the huge loss of life.

9/11, I think, marked an historical divide. We were one country on September 10, and another one altogether after September 11. For the first time since Pearl Harbor 60 years before, we had been powerfully attacked on our own soil. We felt nervously vulnerable, no longer protected by two oceans, no longer somehow shielded from the world simply because we were Americans. I believe, I hope, that our national dialogue is not yet over on who we want to be after September 11.

The craters, the vacant space where once the twin towers stood, reflected the tears and the holes in our nation's psyche. Not long after the attacks, ideas were floated for suitable memorials to fill that space. This is a natural human tendency – to create monuments to mark pivotal moments in the history of a nation, moments suspended in time that change us from what we were to what we will become.

Wrapping Up

There is a powerful need in the human mind to feel a sense of place, to feel rooted to physical locations that provide us some sense of personal or group identity. We want to feel linked to something larger and greater than our individual selves.

Our memories as individuals, or as nations, collect around places that shaped our identity or that turned our history in a different direction. Per the Old Testament, the children of Israel experienced several of those moments on the way to their promised destination. The power of what happened in those places, forming their national identity and their religion, rendered those locations sacred.

The early Christians no doubt considered many of the places in Jesus the Nazarene's brief career sacred – where he walked, where he preached, where he died, and where many of them believed he was literally physically resurrected. Each time they stood where he stood, each time they met in his memory, they believed they stood on sacred ground.

In many places around our globe, battlefields mark major events in the lives of nations. When the new national cemetery in Gettysburg was dedicated, made sacred by the blood of those who fell in battle, doubtless the ghosts of memory were present for many who heard President Lincoln's brief address – for those who fell at Gettysburg were friends, fathers, brothers, cousins and sons.

In our personal lives, our memories of people and places in the past shape who we are, what we do, even what we say. Those places where our loved ones once walked, or where they are now buried, or where we once shared a Christmas meal, are made sacred by the power of our memory.

The memorial now taking shape where the twin towers once stood will evoke a different type of memory. For the vast majority of Americans, the more than 3,000 people who died on 9/11 were not friends, loved ones, or co-workers, but simply fellow human beings going about their business, soon to become unwitting victims of mass murder. The day that the towers fell, that the Pentagon was damaged, that Flight 93 went down with its heroic passengers, we, not as Americans but simply as human beings, were reminded that our lives are terrifyingly fragile, that death is always near, that anything can happen at any moment. That day, the spot where the towers fell became sacred ground, a powerful reminder of our vulnerability.

We come together in worship, on this September 11, remembering those thousands who died so suddenly and unexpectedly four years ago. We meet here, today, on ground made sacred by recollection, in a space sanctified by our spirit of community. Let us pause and reflect for a few moments on the power of memory and our own awareness of our frailty and our need for one another.