

Text: Acts 22
St Stephen's

April 26,27 2008

Sat/Sun

Holy Ground Questions

Have you ever had an experience of the **presence** of God that has changed your life? Totally unexpected?

Where were you...?

I call that place 'Holy Ground...' and it can happen anywhere, anytime.

Moses had a **Holy Ground moment** like this. He was tending his flocks out in the wilderness and he saw off to the side this burning bush. And it kept burning and burning. It didn't burn out. So he went over to see it:

God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Exodus 3:4-5

He did take his shoes off. He was on his face. And that moment changed the course of his life. Today we are looking at the story of a **Holy Ground experience of St Paul.**

Map: Paul has arrived in Jerusalem at the conclusion of this **third mission trip**. Repeatedly he has been warned that hardship and persecution await him there. **Just a week into his visit**, he is spotted in the Temple area. People who knew his ministry in the synagogues in his years of mission work, people who knew his controversial teaching about Jesus, spotted him and pointed him out, and shouted for help to get him...

All the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

Acts 21:30-31

Look at the phrase, '*the gates were shut*'... It seems to be a comments

not just about the gates to their temple, but also about the **doorways to their hearts**. They were **closed**. Shut. Locked.

They begin to beat him... a riot breaks out, and Roman soldiers intervene... Paul is **arrested** and carried away, but he speaks to the Roman captain and asks permission to speak to the crowd. Permission is given.

What we have in this chapter is **Paul's defense** of his ministry. He starts by introducing himself to the crowd...

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women..."

Acts 22:3-4 (ESV)

- **His Heritage:** 'I am a Jew'
- **His Home:** 'born in Tarsus' The city of your birth shapes you, doesn't it. How many of you were born in **Pittsburgh**? How many of you love people who were born in **Cleveland**? Ha!! See that!!! Not a hand up!!! Lots of you think you better double check everything I say because I was born in Cleveland! Paul was born in Tarsus, and **Tarsus** was the **second educational center** of the ancient Greek world, behind Athens. If Athens was the Harvard square of Greek Culture, Tarsus would have been its Princeton or Yale. "*No mean city*" was Paul's phrase for it.
- **His Education:** '*educated at the feet of Gamaliel*', - insisted that his students learn not only the scriptures and the traditions, but also be familiar with the Gentile writers of his day. Paul spoke Greek, Hebrew and Aramiac, the only intellectual of the Apostles. Known for his "great learning".
- **His Zeal:** "I persecuted..."

Paul is the **prosecuting attorney** for this 'get rid of the Christians' operation. He got an extradition order from the local Jewish authorities so he could go 140 miles to Damascus and have them arrested and

brought back to Jerusalem for trial. That is about as far as from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, without the turnpike. He walked. It would take about 7 days. 20 miles per day. Just to run them down and then bring them back.

But then, **something changes the whole course of Paul's life.** It is a 'Holy Ground' moment.

"As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice..."

Acts 22:6-7

Others were thrown to the ground around him. His companions saw the flash of light and heard a sound, but **Paul alone** understood the voice.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He **doesn't know who** had spoken to him, who had thrown him down. But the speaker apparently knows him. And has an issue to settle with him.

What Paul knows is he is on the ground. He has lost his sight. **And he is in the presence** of something, someone supernatural. And he is no longer in charge. And he is in trouble.

So Paul answers...

'Who are you, Lord?' ('Sir...')

Acts 22:8

It is a good question. I call it a '**Holy Ground Question.**'

Have you **ever had a moment like that?** When you have been **knocked down** in your life and had a sense that something larger is happening – maybe even sensed that something, someone supernatural is behind it all? And there is nothing you can do. And what you have been doing you suddenly know has gotten you into a great deal of trouble. It can frighten you. Unnerve you. Put you on your face...

He **didn't yet know who this was, but he certainly didn't think it would be Jesus.**

Paul thought he knew all about Jesus. He thought that Jesus was a **liar**, an imposter – or **crazy**. No one else would say the kinds of things that he said, unless he was a liar or a lunatic. Or unless people were making up things about him. But **Paul seemed so sure** that the stories about Jesus couldn't be true. And he was **way too sure**.

So he ventures his question. The answer would change his life.

'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

In that **quick answer** was a much **longer answer**, one that was unsaid – but understood - that Paul knew, right away. Maybe the longer answer went like this...

- *You thought I was an **imposter**, a fraud, deceived. I am not. You thought I was dead. I am not. I am Jesus of Nazareth. I am the true and living one. I am right here.*
- *You've been **persecuting** and harassing and beating and arresting and jailing my people. (Stephen – house to house in Jerusalem – on to the city of Damascus) When you do this to them, Paul, you are **doing it to me**. I am Jesus of Nazareth. I am right here.*
- *You thought you were **zealous** for God. You thought you were **right**, Paul. You were not.*
- *And maybe right now you think it is **all over**. But it is not. When it is all over, we're just starting. When you fail, I forgive. I am Jesus of Nazareth. 'Take off your shoes, Paul. This is holy ground.'*

And **Paul's shoes come off**, so to speak. His proud head bows. His heart opens. Tears drop. And forgiveness flows. His real life starts. He is on holy ground.

Paul knew exactly what to say, then.

'What shall I do, Lord?'

And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'

Acts 22:10

"I thought I had it all figured out. But I had it all messed up. Can I really start over? How should I live my life? How can I make it count for you?" It is **another 'Holy Ground Question'**.

Look at the answer.

'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'

One step at a time, he would be led. One step at a time it would unfold. First - 'Rise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told...'

These two 'Holy Ground' questions form the framework of the new life.

There is always **the first question**, *'Who are you, Lord?'*

It was the question **before that mob** in front of the Temple that day. It is **the question challenging our church today**. Is the Jesus of the Bible real? Who he says he is? Able to do today what he did then? Or is this all some story, some well intended but make-believe story? *Who are you, Lord???* Again and again He arranges our lives to draw us back to Holy Ground to be with him face to face. To be sure of Him. To kneel at his feet. To listen to his voice. To be sure of his grace. Again and again we ask, and he answers, *"I am Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth.*

Then comes **the second question**, *'What shall I do, Lord?'*

How shall I live? What shall I do with my days and years. How can I make my life count for you? What of my family, my job, my friends. What of my talents and opportunities? How can I live for you? Again and again we ask, and again and again he answers, *'Get up and follow me. Live for me. Here is the next step.'*

Ask, in his presence, hearts open, lives yielded, and answers will be given.