



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“The Ground We Walk On”

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Centering Thoughts

Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. Exodus 3:5

Treat the earth well...We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors; we borrow it from our children. Native American proverb

Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads. Henry David Thoreau

This place, if I am to live well in it, requires and deserves a lifetime of the most careful attention.
Wendell Berry

Sermon

There was a time when people only saw the earth and its rich soil and mineral resources as something to possess. The rich earth, capable of bringing forth life, was treated like a commodity and something to be dominated. Humans abused the land and destroyed its protective vegetation. Dust bowls and desertification resulted in the loss of significant habitat. Humans also mined into the earth, stripping mountains of their natural beauty and polluting streams. Humans did not uniformly mistreat the land, but on the whole the ground beneath our feet which supports and sustains us was not considered holy ground. But this view has changed over recent years. Earth is holy once more.

When Moses was keeping his father-in-law's flock, he came to the mountain of God, called Horeb. There he encountered the miraculous bush that burned without being consumed. Moses saw this and thought to look at it more closely. When he stepped aside from his path, God warned him, saying, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

God's command to Moses to keep his distance and remove his shoes tells Moses to show respect and humility. Removing shoes is a common sign of respect in the Near and Middle East.

You may recall when George W. Bush was President someone threw a shoe at him during an overseas press conference? That shoe toss was a great sign of disrespect. Similarly, Iraqis stomped their shoes on Saddam Hussein's statue and pictures after he was ousted from power.

God declared the ground Moses stood on as holy because holy means something godly or set apart for sacred purpose. Holy places the world over are associated with divine spirits known to live or be seen or felt in that particular place. According to the Bible, Moses stood on God's mountain in the presence of a divine being. He noticed something special and he reacted with awe and wonder. He *was* on holy ground.

We recognize many holy places set apart from everyday use. We view a cemetery as holy ground and we set it apart from profane uses. We'll never play a soccer game or hold a political rally on top of people's graves. Ground Zero in New York City became holy ground after the tragic events and deaths of 9/11. Gettysburg Battlefield remains holy ground 150 years after the Civil War. Lakota Sioux Indians consider the Black Hills in the badlands of South Dakota their sacred land and they continue to battle the US government for its return.

Land can be holy even if it is not set apart for some sacred purpose. As people have become more aware of our interdependence and interconnectedness to the environment, the soil, mountains, forests, marshes, rivers and streams have taken on new and greater holiness. Our greater respect for our planet has led us to recover past damage and reduce current defilement. Our own Green Sanctuary efforts are motivated by greater reverence for our home planet and a desire to maintain Earth's sustainability. By referring to earth as Mother or Gaia we imbue Earth with a nurturing feminine personhood, thus elevating Earth from an 'it' or object to something animate and subject to greater respect. 'Mother' Earth demands we care for her and in return she will take care of us.

Connecting with earth-centered and pagan spirituality has also contributed to our change in attitude. Wiccans name earth as Lord and Lady or god and goddess echoing the ancient understanding of Gaia. The idea that humans were put on earth to dominate creation rather than be stewards of it is less prevalent, too. Our own Unitarian Transcendentalist ancestors taught us to connect more intimately and divinely with the natural world in ways we still find meaningful.

More recently, Unitarian Universalism's Seventh Principle affirms our interdependence with all that exists. The Green Sanctuary movement bases its work on this understanding. Even our First Principle may someday reflect a change in attitude. Some advocate the wording in our First Principle be changed from referring to 'the inherent worth and dignity of every person' to become more inclusive by substituting 'every person' with 'every being'. For these many reasons, we are making the ground we walk on holier.

In addition to sites of great tragedy and death, we humans have set aside land and water to be kept pristine and natural. Sanctuaries, refuges, and even parks are places set aside for birds, fish, mammals and other animals to live without fear of being hunted or having their habitat destroyed. We also call this very room a sanctuary for it is a refuge from whatever might threaten

you beyond its doors. In this sanctuary we welcome everyone, no matter what you believe, whom you love, or how much money you have in your pocket. We are a sanctuary from those who would persecute you or marginalize you for being who you are.

We also set this place aside for sacred events such as marriages, unions, child dedications, and memorial services. We scatter human cremains on our grounds and we plant trees in memory of loved ones.

Most significant and sacred, here you share some of who you are. You bring your whole self here to grow and change as you explore what it means to be human and make meaning for your life. There can be no holier or important activity than to make meaning for our lives. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens may not have seen any burning bushes, but we stand on very holy ground.

Moses was called by God to serve the cause of freedom that day on Mount Horeb. We are called to greater service here, at 780 Timothy Road. We are called to serve our shared values. In doing this, we find meaning and make connections which contribute to our happiness and ability to live better lives.

Sixty years ago a handful of people heard a call to serve our values. They established this Fellowship. They met in homes, then, as more like-minded people joined, they moved to larger spaces. In 1992, after committing a great deal of time and financial support, they bought this land and built this building. For 22 years this has been holy ground for religious liberals, a sanctuary for those who wish to share our values in a supportive community. UUFA's founding families had the courage to dream and the will to make their dream come true. We have gratefully inherited that dream.

Please show your gratitude for the gift we have been given and for your commitment to its continuation by participating in our annual budget drive. Be courageous. Take off your shoes. Feel your connection to this holy place. Then dig into your net worth, at whatever level your means allow, and pledge your support. Make our beacon of religious freedom shine brightly so that we can continue to protect the ground we walk on, the air we breathe, the fruits we eat, the wonders we witness, and, most importantly, be a sanctuary and refuge, a caring community and loving spiritual home for ourselves and those who follow us.

May it be ever so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe your relationship to the earth, the ground you walk on. Is the ground holy somehow?
2. What are you most grateful for as a participant in this community, and at this particular site?
3. What are your dreams for *your* future at UUFA? What foundation are you building for the next generation?