

***"If the Root Be Holy, So Are the Branches"***

Gaye Strathearn

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*This address was given Friday, April 29, 2016 at the BYU Women's Conference*

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For further information write:

BYU Women's Conference

161 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: [womens\\_conference@byu.edu](mailto:womens_conference@byu.edu)

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

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Almost 30 years ago, as part of the Jerusalem Study Abroad program, I embarked on a three-day excursion into the Sinai Peninsula and the traditional site of Mount Sinai. This mountain is in the middle of a mountainous desert, miles from anywhere. We arrived there in the early evening and had dinner in a Bedouin camp and then bunked down in some tents, waiting for 3:00 a.m. to arrive. That is when we were to make the 2,500-foot ascent. The goal was to reach the summit in time for sunrise.

Somewhere along the line, I ended up being the one who carried a huge first aid kit up the mountain. It was hard work climbing that mountain, especially with the extra weight of that pack. It took us about three hours, and toward the end I was not even sure that it was worth continuing on—after all, I thought, I was up pretty high and I had a great view of things. Why not just watch the sunrise from where I was? Besides, I was not sure that my legs would carry me another step. But somehow I kept telling myself that I had come this far, I may as well finish it out.

At the point where I could see the end in sight and thought that there was some chance of reaching the summit, I came to the famous (or infamous) seven hundred steps, built by monks centuries ago. Now, when people have been climbing a mountain for some two and a half hours and their quadriceps are already like jelly, the last thing they want to experience is seven hundred uneven steps! But my friends wouldn't let me give up and encouraged me to keep going, although they didn't offer to take the first aid pack! I think those stairs were the hardest part of all, but as I collapsed at the top I looked up just as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon. What a tremendous sight! I don't think that I will ever forget that sight. Somehow, as I stood up and surveyed God's handiwork in its pristine glory, I forgot about the weight of the first aid kit, I forgot about the past three hours of torture, and I forgot about my jellified knees. Somehow those bodily inconveniences had lost their significance.

We then divided into three classes, took out our Bibles, and studied the accounts in Exodus of Moses's ascents into this holy mountain and then we had a testimony meeting. What a tremendous experience!

Mount Sinai was sacred space, set apart both geographically and spiritually from the rest of the world, because on that mount Moses entered the presence of God. My time on Mount Sinai was a very sacred experience for me. In a sense, on that day we also entered the presence of God, because the presence of the Holy Ghost was so strong it was almost palpable. As hard as the journey up the mountain was for me, in retrospect, it was worth every step.

I have since contemplated the events of that day and thought about what would have happened if I had decided to stop halfway up the mountain. Certainly the sunrise would have still been magnificent, but I would have missed the supernal experience of the class discussion and the testimony meeting and the Spirit that attended both. Thirty years later, I am so glad that I kept going.

Recently my thoughts have frequently returned to that experience and more particularly to two of the major events that Moses' experienced on that mountain. Mount Sinai is not like any other mountain; Exodus 3:1 describes it as "the mountain of God." When Moses first climbed Mount Sinai and approached the burning bush, the Lord called to him, and said, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is *holy ground*."<sup>1</sup>

The next time that Moses ascended Mount Sinai was just after he had led the Israelites out of Egypt. While they camped at its base, Moses again climbed the mount to enter into God's presence. The Lord then informed Moses, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel."<sup>2</sup>

Notice that in both of these encounters the Lord spoke of holiness. On the first occasion He used holiness to describe a geographical area, but on the second time, He used it to describe a human condition; both nuances are important aspects of holiness that I would like to discuss today.

### **"Graded Holiness"**

In the Old Testament there were different levels of holiness. Perhaps the most obvious example was the tri-fold levels of holiness found within the Tabernacle: the outer court was divided from the holy place (*haqodeš*), which was in turn separated by a veil from the holy of holies or, the most holy place (*qodeš haqodašim*). The different levels of holiness were reflected both in the architecture (i.e, the increasing ornamentation as one moved from the outer court to the Holy of Holies), and in the decreasing number of people who could enter each area. It should not be surprising, therefore, that there is also a distinction in the type of holiness between the Lord's command to Moses to put off his shoes because the ground was holy and his hope that Israel would become a holy people.

Although the King James translators chose to use the same word “holy” in both verses, the underlying Hebrew words differ. In both instances the Hebrew root is *qdš* (*qoph, dalet, shîn*), but each account uses different forms of the word. When describing the ground as holy, Exodus 3:5 uses the noun form *qodeš*, which “always describes a state and not an action.” In and of itself the ground was not holy, but God’s presence and His declaration made it holy. In the Old Testament *qodeš* is also used to describe at least four other states.

For example:

1. Qodesh is used to describe other geographical areas, such as the Temple (including temple accoutrements such as the priesthood garments; the Temple altar and the laver), and the holy mountain.
2. Qodesh is used to describe holy festivals, such as Passover, the feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, and also the Sabbath Day.
3. Qodesh is used to describe objects that were devoted to God, including tithes; the covenant; worship; and
4. Qodesh is used to describe particularly the people who were devoted to God: the people of Israel.

When the Lord speaks of His desire for the children of Israel in Exodus 19:6, however, He doesn’t use *qodeš*; instead He uses the adjectival form *qadoš*. In the Old Testament this is the word that is ALWAYS used to describe God and His holiness. Unlike *qodeš*, which describes a state of being, *qadoš* is much more dynamic. God is *qadoš* not only because He is holy, but because He is the source of holiness. He is *qadoš* because He enables others to also become holy.

In mortality God has also designated other people to be *qadoš* when they are instruments in His hands to help others become holy. The priests who officiated in the temple are described as *qadoš* and, as we saw when Moses was on Mount Sinai, he hoped that the Children of Israel would also become *qadoš*. On three separate occasions in Leviticus God specifically declares to covenant Israel: “Ye shall be holy [*qadoš*]; for I the Lord your God am holy [*qadoš*].”<sup>3</sup>

As I have thought about these Old Testament teachings I have tried to understand what might be some of the implications of all of this for me. I believe that the Lord’s directives to Moses on Mount Sinai are still incumbent upon us today: he still wants us to stand in holy (*qodeš*) places, but more importantly, he wants us to become holy (*qadoš*) like he is holy (*qadoš*). I would like to discuss each of these in turn.

### **God Also Invites Us to Stand in Holy Places**

Today God continues to invite all of us to stand in holy places. The Lord declares in Doctrine and Covenants 101:22, “Behold it is my will, that all they who call on my name and worship me according to mine everlasting gospel, should gather together, and stand in holy places.” We all know that we live in a world that is filled with iniquity and that the world’s pull on us is real and

powerful. Therefore, the call to stand in holy places is even more poignant today. President James E. Faust taught, “We unavoidably stand in so many unholy places and are subjected to so much that is vulgar, profane, and destructive to the Spirit of the Lord that I encourage our Saints all over the world, wherever possible, to strive to stand more often in holy places.”<sup>4</sup> The Lord goes even further in Doctrine and Covenants 87:8 when he commands us to “stand ye in holy places, *and be not moved.*”

How we respond to this command is a choice that we all must make. In fact, the choice to stand in holy places is a very important way for us to use our agency. By choosing to stand in holy places we make a statement to God, to ourselves, and to all around us that in a world of choices, first and foremost, we choose the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

Some holy places are created for us, but others are created by us. They may include geographical areas that have been formally set apart, dedicated, and declared to be holy, such as temples, or they may be ordinary spaces where we create an environment where we invite the presence of God and his Spirit into them.

The latter certainly includes temples, but extends beyond them and ideally also includes our homes. Let me return to the Moses’ story to identify two ways that might be helpful as we choose to stand in holy places.

First, in the Mosaic temples the High Priest wore, as part of his priestly robes, a turban or mitre on his head that had a gold plate engraved with the phrase, “HOLINESS TO THE LORD” (*qodeš ladonai*). The placement of this phrase over his forehead was a constant reminder to him that his thoughts must constantly be focused on both the holiness of the space where he functioned and was also a reminder that he himself had been declared holy by God. We all know that the same phrase, “Holiness to the Lord” is engraved upon our modern temples. In our day also it is a reminder that all who enter, like the ancient high priests, should have this phrase engraved upon their minds and hearts as we enter and participate in sacred ordinances.

I think that the Lord also hopes that we are mindful of this phrase as we enter our homes. Yes, as I’m sure you can relate, my home is frequently filled with the hustle and bustle of life. Yes, it is a place where I can let my hair down and put my feet up. But in the midst of every-day life, God’s hope is that I will also find the time and space to make it a place of holiness. Unlike Mount Sinai and modern temples, it may not be a place where God invites me into his presence, but it can certainly be a place where I can invite him into my presence. I have opportunities to do that as I make time to pray and study and meditate on the things of eternity. Sometimes that happens formally; a lot of times it happens though when I’m vacuuming or doing the dishes. Frankly, some really significant divine communications have happened while I was in the shower or just before I fell off to sleep; perhaps because those are the moments when I am quiet and the still small voice of the Spirit has a chance to reach my consciousness.

Last December I was at work. The end of the semester was rapidly approaching and I was busily trying to get exams written, grade papers, do all of the Christmas preparations and pack to go home to Australia. I was just about to leave the office for the day and my phone rang. There was a lady’s voice on the other end that I did not know.

She said that she was calling from the Provo temple. My immediate thought was that I had left my temple recommend there. But no, she said that I had been recommended by my Bishop and Stake President to be a temple worker. I was not ready for, nor expecting, that. I know that I hesitated as my mind tried to comprehend what was happening, and frankly what the cost would be to serve in the temple. I knew that the next semester was going to be busy. I was working on a major, time consuming project; I would be teaching two different evening classes; Saturdays were the only days that I have to look after my yard and that takes me hours; so it would mean another night out. My mouth said yes, because that was what I was taught to do, but my brain was still reeling. How could I really commit to something more?

Can you appreciate the irony of this situation for me? I was being asked to stand in a holy place but the pull of the world was exerting its power over me; and that pull was strong. Now I've been working at the temple for four months. It was indeed a very busy semester; but in many ways this opportunity has been sweet. There have been a couple of times in particular when the Spirit has born witness to me that I was indeed standing in a very holy place and that I had the supernal opportunity to be an instrument in God's hand.

In retrospect, it was easy for me to think of reasons why I should not accept the invitation to stand in a holy place, but I have learned through many experiences that the more important thing to do is to think of why *I should* accept invitations from the Lord. They have *always* brought blessings into my life.

Second, when Moses first ascended Mount Sinai, the Lord directed him to remove his shoes. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with shoes. We assume that Moses had been wearing them for most of his life and he would continue to do so as he journeyed back down the mountain and for the rest of his life. But shoes physically carry the dirt of the world on them, and thus symbolically they represent the world. God's command to remove them was a symbolic reminder that Moses must not allow the things of the world to encroach upon and desecrate holy ground.

The same principal also applies in our day. Again, the engraving of HOLINESS TO THE LORD as we enter the temple should serve as a constant reminder that while in the temple we leave behind anything of the world that would distract us from experiencing its holiness.

In addition, we change our clothes, in part, so that the world's standards of success are left behind. In the presence of God it's not the clothes that we wear but righteousness, covenant keeping, and the intents of our hearts that are the important standards.

But what about in other places of holiness besides the temple: in our homes and chapels and any place where we set apart time and space to be focused on holiness? I sometimes wonder if Moses' experience on Mount Sinai had happened in the twenty-first century if the Lord might have said something other than "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground"?<sup>5</sup> I wonder if he would have made it relevant for our time. Maybe he might have asked us to leave our electronic devices in the car?

Just as there was nothing inherently wrong with shoes in Moses' day, neither is there anything inherently wrong with electronic devices in our day. And yes, I am well aware that now most of us have our scriptures and church manuals on our devices. But the question is: when I bring them into holy places am I strong enough to resist the allure of the world that is also on my devices? Can I use them for reading my scriptures and lesson manuals without quickly reading and responding to a text message? Am I strong enough to not surf the web during Sacrament meeting or Relief Society? Because each time I do, I bring the world into that holy ground and I desecrate it—not in the same visual sense of graffiti, but the spiritual impact is the same.

There is a question that I frequently have to ask myself: Is my desire for holiness strong enough that I can self-regulate and reject the pull of the world? All of the admonitions from the pulpit won't make any difference until I make the choice that when I stand in holy ground, I will not allow myself to be distracted by the things of the world, whatever they may be.

### **God Also Desires Us to Be *qadoš* As He Is *qadoš*.**

As important as Moses' experience was during his first ascent of Mount Sinai, it was never God's intent that Moses should be confined to a small geographical area even though it was holy ground. He knew that Moses would have to descend the mountain and return to the world and to an imperfect covenant people. Nevertheless, it was always God's hope that again, in the midst of the world and all of the choices that would be available to them, his covenant people would choose him, not just in superficial ways, not just in going through the motions, but that they would choose to be transformed; that they would choose to become *qadoš* as He is *qadoš*.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught, “the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something”<sup>6</sup>—and I would suggest that, in our context, that something is to become *qadoš*. Now, my dear sisters and brothers, I fully understand that becoming *qadoš* doesn't happen overnight; it is a process. But as we progress through our journey of mortality we have to have the spiritual vision of what the goal is. President Russell M. Nelson has taught that, “It may be easier to ascribe holiness to a building than it is to a people.” He continues, “We can acquire holiness only by enduring and persistent personal effort.”<sup>7</sup>

In some ways, the call to become *qadoš* may seem as daunting to us as the children of Israel's feelings when they stood on the west bank of the Jordan River and contemplated conquering the mighty city of Jericho. But as Joshua gathered his troops together he pleaded with them: “Sanctify yourselves: [and the Hebrew word here for sanctify is the causative form of *qadoš*] for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.”<sup>8</sup> Sisters, I believe in that promise! I believe that as you and I individually and collectively choose to be transformed and become *qadoš* that we will experience the power of God in our lives, in the lives of our families, communities, and in the kingdom of God. We will become instruments in God's hands to bring his holiness to the world.

### **Conclusion**

Almost thirty years ago, I climbed Mount Sinai. It was a difficult physical challenge for me. There were many times when I thought that “near enough was good enough” as I ascended the

mountain. That journey required a strong measure of commitment and endurance on my part. I am so grateful that I had people surrounding me, encouraging me to continue until I completed the journey. While the memories and feelings of that physical journey and the experiences I had on top of Mount Sinai have stayed with me all these years, I have tried to better understand the nuances of the Lord's call for holiness. In an address on becoming a Zion people, Elder Christofferson taught that "We are to become not only good but holy men and women."<sup>9</sup>

Sisters, I am a very imperfect person. No one recognizes my imperfections more than I do. But, as the hymn states, I plead with my Heavenly Father: "more holiness give me."<sup>10</sup> I want to not only stand in holy places, I want to become holy as he is. I understand that the spiritual journey up Mount Sinai is even more difficult than the physical one. But my hope is that the day will come when I will complete that journey and stand before my God and that when I do so I will find that I have indeed become like him.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:5

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:5-6

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 11:44, 11:45, 20:26

<sup>4</sup> James E. Faust, "Standing in Holy Places," April 2005 general conference.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:5

<sup>6</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," October 2000 general conference.

<sup>7</sup> Russell M. Nelson, "Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings," April 2001 general conference.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua 3:5

<sup>9</sup> D. Todd Christofferson, "Come to Zion," October 2008 general conference.

<sup>10</sup> "More Holiness Give Me," *Hymns*, no. 131.