

5-1-2010

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Mary LaVoy

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

LaVoy, Mary. 2011. Standing on Holy Ground: A Reflection on Exodus 3:4-10 Offered at Midday Prayer. *Obsculta* 4, (1) : 21-21. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol4/iss1/8>.

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Standing on Holy Ground: A Reflection on Exodus 3:4-10 Offered at Midday Prayer

Mary LaVoy

Mary is pursuing a Masters of Arts degree with a concentration in Scripture. She has a rich history having spent two years in the novitiate of the Cistercian sisters of Our Lady of the Mississippi in Dubuque, Iowa and having practiced as a nurse for over fourteen years. In 2004, while working as a nurse, Mary became involved in prison ministry. What began as service has become a passion for her. She wishes to pursue chaplaincy following her study of theology.

When I started joining the men for communion services at the prison, I learned that it had been two years since they had had Eucharist. I sent an email to every priest I knew plus the five who had recently been ordained, asking if any of them thought they might have enough energy for one more Mass on a Sunday evening. I received only one reply, from a priest who had been ordained the previous summer. This young and pious priest was known to prefer the extraordinary form and to have refused girls as altar servers.

I was a little hesitant about how this might go. Many of the prisoner's only experience of Mass was that of a prison service, and I hoped that they wouldn't be intimidated or distracted by fancy vestments or unfamiliar Latin prayers.

After much planning and prepping, security clearance and obtaining a "guest volunteer pass" the day arrived, and we made the hour's drive to the prison. It took a full hour to clear security that evening. Fr. David brought what have must have been a "cathedral-version" of a mass kit. It had more places to hide contraband than any smuggler could need.

When we finally got to the "rec" building where the men had been waiting, Fr. David announced that he had to hear confessions first. I suddenly worried that we were not going to have time for Eucharist. Everything stops at 9pm whether you are done or not. Some of the men were visibly nervous about the time being taken for confessions – they wanted reconciliation, but they knew they could not miss "head count" in their cells at nine pm.

Finally, we started Mass. It was well after 8:00 pm and we should have been done by eight. I was worried that the guards would stop us somewhere in the middle of the Eucharistic prayer.

The mood changed, however, after the Gospel. Everyone relaxed. Fr. David started his

homily by telling us that we were standing on holy ground. Suddenly I realized how much I had been preoccupied by what might go wrong. Fr. David went on to tell us that because "God is here, in this place, with us now, we are all standing on holy ground." The message could not have been clearer or more heartfelt. And I remember feeling so humbled and so close to God. And the men were absolutely silent.

When God met Moses at the burning bush, he was there to tell Moses (and us) that God IS. Through all our worries and insecurities, and through all that we believe to be impossible, God does call to us. God IS.

God is here. God is present. God hears our cries for help. And God helps us to respond properly, with shoes off humbly knowing that we are on holy ground.

No doubt Moses had not only the worries of a shepherd on his mind, but also all the worries that come with knowing that there are people crying out for justice and mercy and it seems that no one, not even God is responding. Yet God says I AM. I WILL BE WHO WILL BE. To borrow a phrase from Fr. Dale, everything surrounding that Sunday at the prison had God's fingerprints all over it - the calling everyone I knew for help, the response of an unlikely helper, the suspense of the timing, and the words that finally convinced us that God indeed had been there well before our arrival.

We are on holy ground here as well. We don't take off our shoes, but we do show our reverence in our disposition, our prayer, our silence. Some mornings we can't say for certain that we would even notice a bush burning unconsumed in our midst, but God's fingerprints are all over what goes on here in Emmaus as well.

Lord God, help us to be still and to notice your power and your glory right here in this place.