

“Holy Ground”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 29, 2019

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Exodus 2:11-25; 3:1-15

Much has happened in the biblical story since we left it last week; when we read of Jacob’s night-time wrestling match with God, when he held on until daybreak, not letting go. He went from there and made peace with his brother Esau and prospered. Jacob’s youngest son, Joseph – he of the many-colored coat – was his father’s favorite, which drew the ire of his brothers. They hatched a devious plan and left him for dead and Joseph found himself a slave in Egypt, before eventually rising to power as the Pharaoh’s right-hand man. When, in the midst of a famine, Joseph’s brothers appear before him in Egypt, begging for food, he welcomes and forgives them; and the Israelite people relocate there.

The opening chapter of Exodus describes how things changed over the centuries for the people of Israel in Egypt. The new Pharaoh no longer remembers Joseph; and, seeing how populous the Hebrew people have become, enslaves them as laborers. As a further measure of tyranny, he instructs the midwives to kill off all male children; though – as we will see in the story of the baby Moses, floating down the Nile in a basket of reeds – they resist. In a story we all know well, Moses is rescued and raised in Pharaoh’s palace.

As our readings begin today, Moses is confronted with this dual identity: born a Hebrew then raised as an Egyptian. One day, he sees an Egyptian beating up a Hebrew and, as the text says, “He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” When he realizes that this killing – whether it was a criminal act or not – had left a trail, Moses fled for the land of Midian; a tribal community on the east side of the Dead Sea. There he meets his wife Zipporah, they have a son named Gershom, and he finds work as a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro.

At this point, we are told that the Lord heard the cry of the Israelites, who were groaning in slavery, and took notice of them; remembering the promise made to Abraham long ago that they would become a great people in a land of plenty; and be a blessing to others.

In the course of time, Moses pastures his flock in a distant land, coming to a place called Horeb (elsewhere called Sinai), the mountain of God. And it is there that he spies the famous burning bush, ablaze but not consumed. Then, if that was not enough to get his attention, the bush starts talking!

Moses is told to remove his shoes and put his bare feet in direct contact with the earth from which humans were formed; to dig in and feel the earth below him and remember who created the earth and all that is in it. There seems to be something significant about taking off shoes, especially on holy ground. It indicates a sense of reverence and respect; about making sure that Moses understood how to properly behave in God's presence.

And yet, when we read to and beyond verse 15 and the rest of Moses' conversation with God at the burning bush, it becomes clear that Moses doesn't sound or act like a reverential or awestruck man – even when his shoes are off.

In the verses that follow, God lays out a particular plan for Moses, saying, in effect: I've seen my people and how miserable they are down in Egypt. I know how they are suffering at the hand of their taskmasters, and I've decided that it's time for me to do something about it. I want to get them out of Egypt and bring them to a better land. So, here's the deal, I'm going to send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.¹

If you try to picture Moses at the point, with his eyes cast aside in front of the bush, listening to this announcement from the Lord about the oppression of the Hebrew people and the Lord's decision to act on behalf of Israel, you will notice that every pronoun has been in the first person: The Lord says, I have seen and heard and decided to act and – we can imagine – Moses is thinking, "I'm with you, Lord." But then, the pronouns take an abrupt turn in verse 10 as God says, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."²

God has a plan for Moses. But instead of remaining bowed in awe and humility, as we would expect a shoeless man in the presence of the Lord to do, and saying "Yes, with your help, I will do it," Moses instead says, "wait, just a minute," and then goes on to provide a long list of reasons why he is not the right person for the job. Does this sound like a man who knows how to behave properly in God's presence; or, does it sound like someone who has lots of questions and doubts; someone who would be scared if and when God gave them an assignment like this to do; someone more like you or me?

I had the great privilege to work for 2 ½ years at the local Korean Presbyterian Church and was invited into many of the homes of church members. It was customary, as it is in many of our homes as well, to take off your shoes as you entered. In addition, though, at many Korean homes, there would be – next to the mat where you were to leave

¹ Karla Suomala from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² John Holbert, "It's Your Call"

your shoes – a rack of slippers, of many different sizes, that were there for you to put on after you had taken off your shoes.

This is an ancient tradition in many Eastern cultures and it's done for two reasons. The first is pretty obvious: it helps to keep the floors clean. The second is that it helps people in homes – whether hosts or guests – to be able to relax and be themselves. If your shoes are off you might be more willing to put your feet up on the couch or an ottoman; you can better feel the softness of the carpet or coolness of the tile floors; you might be better able to forget about the work or the weather that you left behind when you entered the door; you may be able to focus more on who is present with you rather than who might not be there.

So, why did God tell Moses to take his shoes off? Surely, there is more to this story than a mere show of etiquette or respect. Cleanliness was not the reason: Moses had been traveling through the dusty desert and tracking dirt from one area of the mountain to another wouldn't make much of a difference.

But let's imagine that second possibility for a moment; is it possible that the Lord tells Moses to take off his shoes because God wants Moses to be himself; to put out of his mind that he is a fugitive from justice, safe and comfortable away from the fray, and instead be vulnerable and open to what God has to say? Is it possible that in calling out to Moses, God just wanted Moses to be himself, rather than wishing or pretending to be someone else?

When Moses says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the people out of Egypt?" he has plenty of objections already in mind. Besides being a wanted man, he now has a wife and a child and a job to do; he is not a public speaker or wanting of any extra attention. The Lord responds, "I will be with you; and this will be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." God does not say if, but when; there will be a time when all of Israel is free from their oppressors, thus free to travel and free to worship.

Moses responds, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name,' what shall I say to them?" The answer that comes from the burning bush translates to something like "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be" or "I am what I will be." The phrase is notoriously ambiguous and that may be part of the point. God is likely not ready to burden anyone with the whole divine identity, let alone this reluctant man who is still trying to figure out his own identity.

For us, holy ground may be that particular place or time when God's presence is revealed or confirmed; those moments when God's call on our lives makes it clear that God truly is and will be. Sometimes those calls are specific and focused – as we see here

with Moses – often, though, the calls we receive are broad and wide.³ Our call may be to care for all our neighbors, or stand with one particular neighbor. Our call may be to feed any who hunger, or it might be to nourish one designated individual – physically, emotionally or spiritually. We might be called to act with righteousness and justice everywhere we go, but we might also hear a particular call to be a peacemaker in one defined relationship.

Whether it is with Abraham or Moses, Isaiah or King David, Mother Mary or the Apostle Paul, scripture offers us a wide breadth of individuals – some of them more flawed than others – who are the recipients of God’s particular call on their lives. Not all of them respond right away, some with little enthusiasm, others with a long list of excuses. But, these encounters that they have with God truly are visits on holy ground: they are asked to offer reverence and respect, but also to go and be themselves; who God created them to be.

Often, God’s command to Moses to take off his sandals is heard as one about submission. But, maybe we can also hear God’s voice, to Moses and to each of us, as being more like: “Moses, take off your shoes. I need you – not Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob; not somebody with a perfect resume or a spotless past. Let’s talk – and talk honestly, because I’m sure you have lots of questions – about this specific plan that I have for you.”

When we take off our sandals and recognize that we are standing on holy ground, we can feel the soil under our feet and between our toes and remember that God created it, and created us from it, and is still at work creating in and around and through us. God’s call on our lives is to this task of being co-creators: of a world that is aligned with God’s nature of love, compassion, and justice. The God who is and will be hears the cries of suffering even today; and asks us to turn our ears to listen to them as well.

People of God, let us take off our shoes and let the earth meet our feet and pay attention to God’s call to us; and for us. Amen.

³ Dave Daubert, “Are You Hearing God’s Call?”