

“Take Off Your Shoes”  
May 15, 2011

Exodus 3:1-12

Those of you who know me may not need to guess why I have a deep personal connection with this story in scripture. Yes, I do have a call, and want to respond to God as Moses did, and was sent. But I think its a little more surface level than that...it has to do with the phrase, “take off your shoes.” For those of you who see me walk around the church during the week may even think this is my personal motto, because I walk around barefoot a lot. I even received some friendly joking from the choir on one of my first Sundays here last July, when they saw me step down from my chair, slip off my shoes and step into the pulpit...now none of *you all* saw that, but they did, and kidded with me afterwards. I think my taking off my shoes has a lot more to do with being born and raised in North Carolina, than it does for any holy reason.

But if we look deeply at the scripture reading for this morning, there is a theological reason to take off your shoes. As we hear in the story of Exodus, Moses, that same Moses who as a baby was pulled out of the Nile, finds himself a grown man. He continues to be in Egypt, though he's gone into hiding after the episode a chapter earlier in which he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was being cruel to the Hebrew slaves. While he's hiding out, minding his own business, tending the flock one afternoon, and comes to a bush that's burning. And he has to look, and when God sees that he looked at the bush, God calls. God caught his attention, and called to Moses. And the first thing God said was, “Come no closer. Stop. Take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground.”

I think if we think about times in our lives that we've experienced God's presence, in a way that really touched us, that we can also connect with that idea of holy ground. Maybe you've had a burning bush experience – something that really caught your attention and brought you into a new awareness of God's presence in your life. And maybe the place that you were when you had that experience is really special and has a connection for you. I've heard people say this about places like Montreat, where our youth have attended conferences. Or maybe it was a camping experience when you were young, I've heard people talk about Camp Hat Creek in our own Presbytery in this way. Or maybe its not a real place like that, a time in which you shared with a family member or someone close to you, that you were able to be present with them in the midst of life's struggles, or in a hospital room as someone is dying. We realize the presence of God and that a sense of holiness pervades the atmosphere and changes us by the experience of God in that moment.

And the ground that Moses stood on, on the ground in our own lives that is holy, isn't holy because of something we did, it is holy because God's presence is there. This sanctuary, where we gather to worship and to experience God's presence and respond to God, is itself saying it is a holy ground, *sanctuary* from the Latin *sanctus, holy*. We set this place apart, because it is dedicated to God's purpose. But this sanctuary isn't any more holy or less holy than any other sanctuary around town, it's not holy because it's beautiful, or because we sing good songs, or pray right prayers or anything that *we* do. It's holy because God is here. God's presence is what brings holiness into a place, into people, into a ground. Because, if we think about it, we can worship anywhere and many of you have worshipped in lots of different places. As we are still in the Easter season, the story of the disciples' walk to Emmaus comes to mind. The disciples, in the days after Jesus' resurrection, encounter a man as they were walking and their eyes are kept from knowing that it's Jesus. It says there in Luke's gospel that their hearts burned within them as they were talking to this man and the man was talking and opening scripture for them. And they stayed and shared a meal, and when the man took bread and blessed and broke it, their eyes were opened – and they realized it was Jesus. They realized that all along that God had been with them and God was speaking to them. Not in a sanctary, but in a holy conversation,

wherever Christ is is holy. Wherever God is can be holy ground. And like Moses, we are called then to respond.

And we have a special opportunity to respond to God when we come together in worship. We gather together as God's community. I find that often when people think about worship, they think about it in a certain way. We talked about this in our Confirmation class this past year, and I remember being taught about it in Confirmation myself. When we worship, we tend to think that the congregation is like an audience, sitting out in the pews, all facing one way, toward the front. And the choir, pastors, readers who are up front then are like performers on a stage. But worship is not a play. And so, we need to turn the analogy around. Instead of the congregation being an audience during worship, the true audience of our worship is God. The whole gathered congregation and community are the “performers” the doers of worship. And the choir and the pastors and the folks up front are like cheerleaders, and cue-givers, so that we can all worship together. We bring the Word, offering signs of God's presence so that we all can praise God together. In songs: in new songs, in old songs. In prayers, in the quietness of our hearts. Our worship is all of our work, we all come here to offer worship, and we're all truly involved in responding to the presence of God we sense in this place when we are gathered together.

And again, our worship isn't holy because of anything we do, we get that out of the way at the beginning of the service. We come and confess our sins, and we don't come into this place because we're so good or great, we come into this place to acknowledge God's greatness. God's holiness, and we pray that we can be changed to reflect that. God tells Moses, take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground. As we respond to God, we then need to honor God's holy space and take off our shoes. It is a sign that it is not our ground to tread on, but God's. Some of you may be aware that this past week, in the life of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that we have made the news, so to speak. We were featured in the New York Times, and I hear also there was a mention in the Roanoke paper, as well as on the internet. Since last summer the PC(USA) has been in the process of voting on changes to the Book of Order. One particular change has drawn a large amount of interest, not just over the past few months, but has been an issue in the life of the church for the past several decades. And just this past week, the change that was approved involved a change to our denominational ordination standards. It takes out language that specifically barred gays and lesbians from ordination. And I mention this, because I think whatever “side” you are on, that what our job now is is to go forward in faith, recognizing God's presence in the midst of that conversation.

Just as we do in worship, we need to take off our shoes, because we are on holy ground. The conversations that we have as a church, here as we gather as the body of Christ to worship, or when we study, but especially when we disagree – we are always on God's holy ground. And so we tread lightly, we tread respectfully. And to take off one's shoes, is a sign that we are vulnerable, a sign of humility. We are called to recognize God's holiness., the holiness that comes from God's presence, not because any of us are able to reflect it fully. In conversation, in worship and in service – the sense of holy ground that God's presence imbues is something we are called to respond to as people of faith. And we respond differently! We worship differently. At this church we worship in two separate worship services – some in a contemporary style at the early service using different songs and styles of prayer. Some in the later service with other prayers and songs. And I hope and pray that we are able to see and honor the gifts that are presented in both – the gift of new songs and a deep appreciation for the rich tradition that has nurtured us.

God's holy ground extends beyond worship. For in our Exodus reading, God speaks to Moses and says, “So I will send you.” I will send you to my people, for God knows their suffering. God knew the

suffering of the Israelites, and God knows the needs of our world today. The holy ground that God's presence creates doesn't stop at the doors of our church. It extends into our community, it extends beyond us into our world, for God is truly there and we go forth to meet God. God promised Moses that Moses wasn't going alone. God said, "I will go with you," and since God was with him, the holy ground was extended to all people – that they too might know and experience the presence of God.

In St. Louis, I served a church that was located in an urban area of that had experienced decline in recent decades. In that area there were several congregations that came together, congregations of different denominations and even different faiths. Many of these congregations had been there long before the neighborhoods around them changed. Once new and stylish spots of the city, they were now in disrepair and economic decline, neighborhoods that had experienced violence and racial division, now considered dangerous, forsaken. And they realized that they were called to respond – together. So Unitarians joined hands with Presbyterians, Baptists with Reformed Jews, and they formed a group called the Holy Ground Collaborative. They would gather together to share worship, share meals and break bread together, serve the neighborhood – visit the elderly, fix up homes, and be a presence of God's presence. I think we too can follow in that example. Whenever we join hands with brothers and sisters in Christ in our community, here in Martinsville, we show signs of God's holy presence and live and honor God's holy ground.