

Barefoot on Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

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Kelly and I just celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary. We had an Alaskan cruise planned, including a three-day excursion to Denali. But thanks to the pandemic that didn't happen. Then I made outdoor reservation at a restaurant in Guntersville for this past Friday evening. The storms blew in, and that didn't happen either. We ended sitting on the back porch and eating Hardee's hamburgers.

The smartest thing I've ever done was to ask a pretty little girl named Kelly Pody to marry me. I've always felt like the luckiest man in the world. If someone had been able to tell me in August of 1980 that in forty years I would be carrying a phone-computer in my pocket, I would have been incredulous. Back then a computer occupied a whole room, and telephones hung on the wall. Besides, why would I want to carry it with me? If someone had said, "And that's not all, David. On your fortieth anniversary, the world will be in a pandemic. Nearly a million people worldwide will have died from it, and you will have to wear a mask everywhere you go." Again, it would be almost impossible to believe.

I want us to go back ever further this morning, to the world of the Old Testament, to a world far different from ours. Our world is highly technical and scientific. We value precision, verifiability, and order. Not so in the world of the Old Testament. It was written during a pre-scientific age, a time of mystery, story and imagination. Truth matters in both ages. But to discover that truth, we must honor the age out of which it was born. If we try to put the Old Testament stories through our scientific filter, we might find them rather hard to believe and miss the greater truth they exist to communicate. Like a bush that burned but was not consumed by the fire. And a God who spoke out of the burning bush, saying that His name was I AM THAT I AM. Some people might dismiss this story as just primitive mythology, folklore from ages past that has no bearing upon life in the twenty-first century. Well, I'm not one of those people. When read and understood critically, these ancient stories have profound meaning and a deep message that intersects with our own story. A man had a mysterious meeting with God, and the place of that meeting became holy ground. To honor the profundity of that moment, the man removed his shoes. He was barefoot on holy ground.

Can that happen to us?

Journey with me to an ancient land called Midian, where a simple people lived from the earth, where shepherds wandered the wilderness with flocks of sheep, and where the word of God came regularly and clearly. And let us meet a man named Moses whom God called to deliver God's people from a life of slavery in a foreign land.

It was just an ordinary day for Moses. He was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, who was a priest in the village of Midian. Moses led the sheep into the wilderness and to the mountain named Horeb, sometimes called Mt. Sinai. The Hebrew word for Horeb means "wasteland." I have been up Mt. Sinai. We went two-thirds of the way on camel back and the rest by foot. I can verify it is a wasteland. By the way, we left about 2 a.m. and got to the top just as the sun was rising. It was amazing.

Look at the picture this text presents. Moses was out in the middle of nowhere, a wasteland, on just another day. This was not a religious pilgrimage. There was no temple, no priests, no religious community. There was nothing to suggest that this place or this day were holy. And yet it was there, in the middle of nowhere on just an ordinary day, that Moses had an extraordinary experience with God. Listen:

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.

Notice how important seeing is in this experience. Five times words related to "seeing" are used in just these two verses, a total of ten times in verses 1-9. On Mt. Horeb, Moses was paying attention. He saw something he had never seen and turned aside to investigate. A bush was burning, and yet the bush was not being consumed by the fire. Moses does not appear to be frightened, only curious. God used that curiosity.

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see (again notice the importance of seeing), God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'

Those are the only three words Moses speaks in this text. He speaks more later, but in this section he speaks only three words: here I am. There is a reason for that. Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar from Minnesota, says that Moses' minor part calls attention to the One who is in charge of this scene. God speaks; Moses listens. God is the One who does the calling, not Moses. It was by divine initiative that Moses became the prophet who said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

But that's not the end. Something that may seem odd to us happened next.

Then [God] said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'

Why the sandals? What was so important about removing the sandals? You may remember that Joshua was given the same command. He met an angelic messenger who told him, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." (Joshua 5:15) Shoes were not a fashion statement in the day of Moses. They were purely functional. Shoes protected the feet, especially for shepherds who spent so much of their time traveling rough terrain. To take off one's shoes meant to become vulnerable. One's ability to flee a wild animal or a robber was hindered. Over time being barefoot became a sign of reverence, that one was vulnerable to God, surrendered, connected. That's why the Jewish priests performed their priestly duties barefoot.

Now look at this picture of Moses. He is no longer in the middle of nowhere on just another day. He's barefoot on holy ground. There was nothing between Moses and God at that moment. Yes, he was a shepherd, but this was a priestly moment. He was completely connected to God.

What a great story! So, what does this ancient, pre-scientific story mean for us in 2020 as we negotiate a global pandemic? Let me make a few observations.

This story is a reminder of the importance of ordinariness. It began as just an ordinary day for Moses. He was in a wasteland. No temple. No priests. No religious community. He was up to his neck in ordinariness when he had an extraordinary experience with God.

The same is true for us. You don't have to go to seminary. We don't have to make a pilgrimage. This pandemic is teaching us that we don't even have to go to

the church building to be with God. God is in the ordinariness of your life and mine. I argue that God is always with us. Every moment of every day, God is with us. So, we don't need to pray that God will be with us as we do this or that or the other. It is God's nature to be with us. What we should pray instead is that we would be with God, that we would be tuned to God's presence. That we would discipline our hearts and minds to be with God, who is ever present, to find God in the ordinariness of life. As you weed a flower bed. Wash dishes. Cut the grass. Drive the kids to appointments. God is there if we're paying attention.

Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century monk who wrote the classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, was fond of saying that God is in the kitchen, which is where he worked in the monastery. I call it ordinariness. Brother Lawrence called it "our common business." No matter how mundane or routine, he used to say, God is with us in our common business. We can find God there, if we're paying attention. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was right. Every common bush is afire with God, if we would have the eyes to see.

Here is another observation. When with God, tuned in, paying attention, we should listen far more than we talk. Moses had three words: here I am. If Moses had been like me, he would have informed God of the great misery the people were enduring in Egypt. He would have gone into detail about the misery of a few people in particular because preachers must have some good illustrations. Then we would have given God a plan for liberating the people.

Not Moses. This story reminds us that God is the One who speaks. We are the one who listen. Maybe this should be our prayer. Here I am, Lord. Then silence. Here I am, and then listen.

One more observation. It has to do with removing the sandals. Remember, that act was not just about removing shoes. It was about becoming vulnerable, open, surrendered. It was about moving outside one's comfort zone. With God.

When was the last time you were barefoot on holy ground? It can happen to us, if we are really paying attention.

Folklore from ages past that has no bearing upon our lives? I don't think so. Rather than trying to prove this story true by scientific method, let us enter into its mystery. Let us use our imaginations. And we will discover that this ancient story

has profound meaning and a deep message that intersects with our own story. Perhaps when we read this story, we too should remove our shoes.

Closing Prayer

God of the wilderness, the thought of finding You around every corner seems at the same time absurd and perfectly natural. Give us eyes to see, a heart to respond, and a will to follow. Amen.