



“Take Off Your Shoes”

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Exodus 3:1-15

“Take off your shoes,” is a common command in my house. Any time the girls and I get home and step through the door, we immediately take off our shoes. There are two large baskets, one at the front door and one at the back, where we can deposit our soiled sneakers and sandals. The research is clear that the bottoms of our shoes pick up a lot of nasty dirt, debris, and germs from our steps out in the world. That’s reason enough to keep shoes in a basket rather than on our feet spreading filth throughout the house. However, I think I have come to appreciate the simple act of taking off my shoes when returning from a meal at a restaurant, a long day at work, or a walk in the neighborhood. Taking of our shoes forces us to pause, take a breath, bend our bodies, and appreciate the act of coming home. Taking off our shoes asks us to leave behind the stresses and stumbles of the day and experience a reality where our feet are in direct contact with the floor, where we feel the closeness of family, safety, and home. Taking off our shoes beckons us to a place of vulnerability where nothing separates us from being present to ourselves and to God. “Take off your shoes,” Amanda always says. I think I will.

Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground. These are the words that Moses heard in this week’s text as he stood before the burning bush. This was not the “let-my-people-go” Moses who defiantly stood before the hardened Pharaoh. No, this was the satisfied, “shepherd-in-hiding” Moses. This was the Moses content with his nomadic life. This was the Moses who had run away from his past, chased out of Egypt for killing an Egyptian who was brutally beating Hebrews. This was the Moses who was sent away from his Hebrew people. This was the Moses who had carved out a new life, who day in and day out shepherded the sheep for his Midianite father-in-law. This was the Moses who had a wife and child and a comfortable life but had neglected the burning passion for God that smoldered deep within him. This was the Moses who, out in the wilderness, stumbled upon "the mountain of God" known as Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai, where he would later receive the commandments of God. This was the Moses who was going about his business, his daily routine on the mountain, the home of the divine, and encountered an unquenchable burning bush.

Moses didn’t walk right up to the burning bush for this divine dialogue. He wasn’t really paying attention to it. Moses was out in the desert, a place filled with dry plants and the hot sun. And in an environment like this, an occasional brush fire was bound to happen. Maybe there were burning bushes all the time, smoldering shrubs sizzling under the intensity of the dry, desert sun. Maybe there was a campfire that wasn’t extinguished. Maybe there was a lantern abandoned on the road to illuminate the way. Moses probably passed by this burning bush several times in order to water his sheep and tend his flock. But he finally realized that this burning bush was not being consumed by the flames. He finally realized that God was right in front of him if he would only turn aside and notice.

When God set that bush ablaze, God didn't choose the bush right in front of Moses. God didn't choose the bush that Moses was about to stumble upon. It was within sight, but at enough distance that Moses would have had to go out of his way to explore it. And he did. And it was this curiosity and craving for home that brought Moses to God. The burning bush was something that broke Moses's comfortable routine. It was something that caught his attention. He needed to turn aside. He needed to go off the beaten path to see where the power, the illumination, the heat, and the heart of God was ablaze in the world.

And ablaze it was. Fire is a common biblical symbol of God's existence. The fiery bush was an icon of the divine, a portal into God's presence that both reveals and hides. This ever-burning blaze out in the wilderness signaled God's closeness, coming down from the mountain to meet Moses. At the same time, the inextinguishable flame was a sign of God's awesome holiness, a fiery power that was both dangerous and attractive, frightening and comforting, untamed but reassuring.

And in that powerful presence, God instructed Moses to take off his shoes, to remove the sandals from his feet. This gesture of removing footwear was an ancient practice when entering a holy place. For Moses, it was a gesture that honored the holiness of this particular ground, this particular mountain, and this particular God. Removing shoes in a holy place was a show of reverence and is an act still practiced in Islam and many other religions.

However, just as I take off my shoes at the front door of my house, removing his sandals meant that Moses had also found a home. He had come to the threshold, the end of his wandering journey. He declared earlier in the book of Exodus: "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land." Wherever Moses went he was an alien, an outsider, an outcast. The Hebrews had rejected Moses as one of their own because he grew up in the household of the Pharaoh, the Egyptian family that rescued him from the Nile River. But Moses's heart for his Hebrew heritage amplified his resolve and he killed an abusive Egyptian. Then, the Pharaoh sought to kill him, and when Moses ran, the Midianites saw Moses as an Egyptian and a foreigner. Moses was not fully home in any country, in any community. Thus, here at the foot of the mountain of God, Moses the alien, had at last found a place to take off his shoes, a true home. Moses found his true home with God, the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Sarah, Rachel, and Leah.

In 2010 Arthur Jones, a filmmaker from England, embarked on a year-long mission to live his life barefoot. Known as "Sole Man," Jones spent the year traveling the world, walking through freezing snow in Norway and standing on hot pavement in Shanghai. He embodied this story of Moses in a way that most of us would not imagine possible. When we take off our shoes we become more aware of the world around us, we feel it in a different way. We become aware of what we're standing on, we can feel every rock, every surface. "It opens your eyes," Jones said. "You're suddenly in touch with everything around. And it feels like you're a little child discovering the world for the first time." We need to take off our shoes, for we are standing on holy ground.

Rob Bell said, “Your life matters: how you prepare your food, how you deal with your neighbor, how you handle conflict. You are on holy ground. This is not a random, accidental phenomenon we know to be you, but your entire life takes place under a wide horizon of holiness and sanctity. Respect the mundane and the everyday because it is there that the divine is found.” As Arthur “Sole Man” Jones traveled the world barefoot he learned to open his eyes and experience the world around him in new and unexpected ways. As Moses took off his shoes he discovered that the ground did not suddenly become holy. Moses took off his shoes and discovered that the ground had been holy the entire time. Or perhaps more accurately, Moses took off his shoes so he could feel and experience the holiness that was always present, just beneath the soles of his feet.

But the plans and purposes of God aren’t always right in front of us. Sometimes we need to follow our instincts off the predictable path to get a closer look. And sometimes we may simply need to pause, pray, and notice the voice of God. We are called to look more closely, to listen more intently, and search out the nooks and crannies of the world around us, hearing the cries of people we might not normally hear: families scared about the dismantling of DACA; neighbors who are now subject to wide-spread immigration checks; our law enforcement officers who have the added strain of enforcing a law they may not agree with; the grief of our LGBTQ friends who have been wounded again by Christian leaders who refuse to see God’s deep and wide and accepting love. We are called to follow the commands of Christ to help the our fellow Texans as they spend the next days, weeks, months, and perhaps years rebuilding their towns and cities. We are called to turn towards the voice of God, to set the world ablaze with God’s love. We are called to break the chains of oppression and call out to our political and religious leaders to “let my people go!”

19th century poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit around and pick blackberries.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God” because I’m busy picking blackberries. I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God” because I’m distracted by the routine struggles and strivings of my day. I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God” because I’m hitting the snooze on my alarm or lost in Facebook on my phone. I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God” because I’m worried about the credit card bill for next month or the medical bills of this month. I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God” because I’m hiding in my comfortable privilege instead of taking the risk of sharing life with someone different than me. I don’t want to miss the “bush afire with God.”

When Moses encountered God through the burning bush, he was told to remove his shoes. He was told to take off the covering that protected him, guarded him, and comforted him. He was asked to clear away the barrier between himself and the earth so that his bare feet and his bare soul could touch and sink and take root in the holy ground. And we must do the same. We must let the living soil of God’s love seep between our toes. We must let the warm glow of God’s grace illuminate our lives. We must let the power of God’s presence reverberate in our ears and out into an unjust world. We must dig in and find our footing upon the mountains, so that God’s life becomes our lives, God’s fire becomes our fire, and the sacred sand and soil and rock become our sanctuary hope, become our home. We must take off our shoes.