

“Remove Your Sandals”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 3:1-15
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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What made this place holy ground? Obviously God was there, but if we believe God is everywhere, what specifically made this ground extraordinary? Was it fire, was it the fanfare, was it the miracle bush?

It seems to me the bush, the fire, the flare—those were mere accessories to the real event. What made the ground holy was the conversation, and I do not just mean God’s individual chat with Moses. This is the place God let it be known that the cries and the groans of the people had indeed reached the ears of God and God was responding.

Is this not the deep hope of all our religion—that there is a concerned and empathetic God on the other end of our prayers? That our speech does not wander aimlessly into a void but is *received* by something or someone more powerful and more than ourselves? That our aching longing to be cared for and known is not just a pipedream but a reality we can experience?

God said to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . .”

It is no wonder Moses took off his shoes. God had heard them, and God was answering.

So this is how it feels to be rescued, to be noticed, to be saved. Ye tired, ye weary, ye worn, ye slaves, remove your sandals and worship! You shall be slaves no more!

Of course, you and I know from excruciating experience that not all God’s children receive deliverance in this life. The ground of human suffering can often seem lined with more demons than angels, more silence than response, more ash than fire. Even so, I do not think the burning bush encounter is just a cute little story that denies the painful reality of unanswered prayers.

The Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt were well acquainted with pain and with unanswered prayers. Moses escaped death, but not every Hebrew baby boy did, and you better believe those mamas and papas prayed their hearts out, and to them it did not matter if God answered eventually if God did not answer in time for them. These were a people well acquainted with the pain of unanswered prayers.

To be delivered now—even miraculously delivered—would not blot out the wounds and losses of the past. Deliverance takes you into a future you can embrace, but deliverance cannot erase where you’ve been. I think it is important to note that as awesome as God’s appearance to Moses was, this wasn’t a simple story of answered prayer. It was a complicated story of waiting and longing, crying and moaning, grieving and aching, hoping and praying . . . for a very long time.

Speaking of the past, the lectionary reading for today skipped right over Moses'. From last week to this week, we passed over anything that happened to Moses from the time Pharaoh's daughter pulled him out the water until God reached out to Moses through a bush. Let me read to you the rest of the story, beginning in chapter two, verse eleven:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" They said, "An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread." Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land."

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

If you follow the narrative you might say that Moses took notice of the people's suffering before God did. It certainly looks like Moses acted before God acted, stepping in to defend his Hebrew brother from harm. It's like Moses had this automatic protective instinct wired into him—a trait passed on to him from his mother and his sister, Miriam, and the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who saved his life.

It couldn't have been easy for Moses growing up in two worlds but not belonging properly to either of them. He was Hebrew, but spent his boyhood far from the toil of his people in the luxury of a palace. He grew up in a palace, the home of a king who had wanted him dead.

I wonder, if he had not grown up among the Egyptians, would it even have occurred to Moses to fight back? Would he have dared to risk it if he weren't the adopted son of royalty? Had he been spared the internalized xenophobia that kept his Hebrew brothers from even attempting acts of self-defense, and is that why he had the audacity to intervene? Did he constantly carry around this tension in his soul between his native identity and his current lifestyle, and then when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, the tension finally snapped, and Moses erupted?

I wonder, was it wrong of Moses to use violence to protect another human being? Was the Hebrew's life in danger if Moses hadn't stepped in? How bad would the beating have to be before we'd give Moses a moral pass for fighting violence with violence?

Do you think that was the first time Moses had witnessed an Egyptian beating his kin? Was this rude awakening from his own cushioned life the reason that he snapped? Or had he seen this many, many times before, and all the prior instances of doing nothing had worn down his soul? Or did his violent outburst stem from the fact that despite his cushioned life, deep down somewhere his body remembered lying helpless in the bulrush reeds on the Nile because in those days it was safer for an infant to take its chances with the crocodiles than to be seen by Pharaoh's men? Does Moses the murderer deserve our empathy or our scorn, our applause or our condemnation?

His fellow Hebrews certainly did not render him any kind of hero. "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" they asked in disdain. "Will you kill us too?" It was this point in the narrative that Moses transitioned from not really belonging anywhere to being actively pushed out everywhere. He was no longer a friend of the Egyptians, and to the Hebrews he had become a hothead who was more likely to make it worse for them than to provide any real help. He was forced to flee.

We can see from the way he behaved next with the women at the well that his protective instincts did not altogether leave him, but we know that his confidence was greatly diminished. When God appeared to Moses at the bush, God's declaration ended like this, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." The text doesn't say so, but I bet Moses started looking for his shoes. It was time to escape. The moment had gone from holy to really, really hard, and Moses, understandably, had major objections. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" You can almost hear him thinking, "Haven't you seen how much I've already screwed up? Don't you know I'm not really one of them? Don't you know they will never follow me? Don't you know I'm not the person for the job?"

The writer Glennon Doyle Melton says, "It's appropriate that sacred and scared are virtually the same word, because those two walk hand in hand." Suddenly the holy ground became dependent on Moses' willingness to keep participating.

Which makes me wonder, was this the first burning bush? Or was it just the first burning bush a child of God had paid attention to? Or was it one of the rare burning bushes that began with God's yes and ended with a human yes to match it?

Thinking back, it couldn't have been the first. Shiphrah and Puah had burning bushes along the way somewhere, and perhaps so did Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter—all of whom said yes despite their fears. But not everyone pays attention when a burning bush calls them by name, and not everyone agrees with what the bush has to say about their future involvement in God's care for the world. I reckon millions of burning bush stories never make it to the page, because the people who witnessed them walked away and forgot all about it. So often we hunger and thirst to encounter the holy, but at the first inkling of fear, we close our eyes and shut our ears.

God, deliver us . . . just as long as we don't have to be brave. God, answer us . . . just as long as you don't ask anything in return.

One of my absolute favorite quotes is from the Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem printed in your worship guide: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."

So many times in my life I have been desperate for God to show up. What I don't often see is that God is already there, waiting for me to show up too. What makes the moment holy is the conversation, the back-and-forth, the communion. God is always there, but my mind, my heart, my feet are elsewhere. Sometimes you've just got to take off your shoes, feel the ground beneath your feet, and enter the present moment with God.

One time when I was about to perform spoken word poetry in front of a large crowd, a friend told me that if I got nervous, I should pause, take a deep breath, and look at my feet. No one had ever given me that advice about stage fright before, but it sure sounded better than imagining everyone in their underwear or some of the other weird things people suggest. She said staring at my feet for a moment would ground me, center me, remind me that I am this person in this body, and there is more to me than my success or failure on a stage.

When you are wondering where God is, take off your shoes and stare at your feet, the ground, the intricacies of the earth beneath you. See if, when you get out of your head and back you're your body, you don't notice a slight shift in your consciousness that opens you back up, ever so softly, to the possibility of God in your midst. When you are afraid, take off your shoes and stare at your feet, because when God is calling you forward, this is holy ground, this is deliverance.

I don't know if this is true, but maybe Moses didn't really take note of the people's suffering before God did. Maybe he just didn't pause long enough to take off his shoes and listen before he acted. Maybe God was listening and responding all along, but it took Moses all this time to notice God.

It is so easy to be reactive to problems rather than responsive to God, to take matters into our own hands, to fret rather than listen, to rage rather than work for change. I'm not suggesting we ignore the world's suffering or suppress our feelings about it all and escape into meditation and prayer. If prayer is a way to escape from the world, we're not really praying. But if prayer takes us to that holy place where God both listens to us and calls us back into the world—then we have found the heart of true religion.

It is my prayer for you and for us that when you enter this place, you often will feel the nudge to remove your sandals. That despite all the darkness and evil you see in the world, despite all the unanswered prayers and aching groans of those who suffer, despite all that is unholy and unkind, when you come here, you will pause and look at your feet, look at your neighbor, look at this communion of the saints and choose to listen, choose to stay open to the possibility of God in our midst, choose to keep exhorting one another in love. I pray that in this place you will be called and called again to be people of courage, people of heart, people who listen to God and respond. May it be so. Amen.