

## **Barefoot on Holy Ground**

Exodus 3:1-6

04 25 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

### **Introduction**

Old Testament **shepherds** led lonely, solitary lives. They spent days—even weeks—alone with their sheep. The nomadic flocks wandered through the wilderness from one grazing place to another.

With only his thoughts for company, **Moses** had time to contemplate what might have been. The Hebrew baby set adrift on the Nile had been rescued by the daughter of the Egyptian king. Moses grew up as a privileged member of the Pharaoh's household.

Then one day he saw an Egyptian soldier beating a Hebrew slave. In a murderous rage, Moses killed the soldier. Then he fled his home as a fugitive. Now the former prince wandered in the desert, caring for sheep—and they weren't even his own sheep. They belonged to his father-in-law. Men, you KNOW that had to hurt!

His regrets were obvious. Moses named his first-born son "**Gershom**" which roughly translates as "*I am a stranger in a strange land.*" Gershom never made the "*Top Ten List*" in a Baby Name Book, but it accurately reflected Moses' state of mind.

Then one day . . . Moses led the flocks near **Mount Horeb**. On the hillside, he beheld a strange and wondrous sight. A **burning bush** blazed in flames but was not consumed by the fire. The shepherd drew near for a closer look.

Then God called the shepherd by name, "*Moses, Moses!*"

And Moses answered with a trembling voice, "*Here I am.*"

The Lord said, "*Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground.*" Moses' close encounter with God would change his life—and the world—forever.

### **I. Holy Ground**

We began worship today with a Bill Gaither song reminding us that "*we are standing on holy ground,*" and "*there are angels all around.*" We are called "*to praise Jesus now.*" This time and place are declared sacred by God "*for we are standing in His presence on holy ground.*"

"**Holy**" literally means "*to be set apart for God's use.*" This place and time are holy ground because this building and hour are set aside for the Lord's purposes. Weekly worship is important in part because it reminds us of God's presence here and now.

The Celtic people believed "**thin places**" exist in the world where the distinction between the natural and supernatural is blurred. In these special places, people intuitively sense the divine.

This sanctuary is such a "thin place." Winston Churchill said, "*We shape our buildings; therefore, they shape us.*" The space has been designed to remind us of God's presence in our lives. A church steeple is designed to lift our eyes beyond earth and towards heaven. Each symbol and sign in this place performs the same function.

Perhaps we have never encountered a burning bush like Moses, but all of us have found ourselves standing on holy ground. I'm not surprised to discover that some of the most meaningful moments of my life have occurred inside a church.

- Baptized as an infant at Capitol View Methodist Church
- Confirmed as a seventh grader at Columbia Drive Methodist Church
- I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior at the Camp Glisson Chapel
- I felt God's call to the ministry at an evening worship service kneeling at the altar
- I was ordained as a deacon at Kennesaw Methodist and an elder at Glenn Memorial Methodist
- Tracy and I were married at Unity . . . Baptist . . . Church!
- We celebrated my sister Margaret's life at Little River Methodist
- Our children were baptized at Mossy Creek and Summerville Methodist
- And the list goes on.

Where have YOU stood on holy ground? When are the moments you realized God's presence in a special way? Close your eyes and prayerfully spend a few moments in sacred memory.

## II. All Around

In grace filled times and places, we experience the Holy Spirit in meaningful ways. Like Moses, we realize that we are standing on holy ground.

God IS in special places like this . . . but God is also in all places. The Lord may touch us at particular moments . . . but the Lord is present in each moment. In theological terms, the Almighty is **omnipresent**—present in all times and places.

If this is true—and we believe that it is—, then EVERY time and place is sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Everywhere we go is sacred space. We are always standing on holy ground.

Notice when and where the Lord spoke to Moses. God called him in the midst of his ordinary, humdrum, daily routine. The shepherd was tending his flocks in the wilderness. From a worldly standpoint, there was nothing to mark midday at Mount Horeb as a sacred time and place.

The Bible describes a variety of ways that the Lord called his servants. A few occurred in church—Samuel heard God call him by name as a child in the temple. Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned over his people in the Holy of Holies. More often, however, people experienced the sacred in the midst of the secular.

Abraham entertained angels while hosting strangers outside his tent. Jacob wrestled with the Lord at the Jabbok River. Joseph dreamed about God's will. Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John away from their fishing nets. Matthew left his tax collector position behind. On Easter, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room. Paul met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus.

So if God is present in every time and place, why don't we encounter the Lord more often in our lives? Perhaps it is because over time we have developed calloused hearts and souls. We have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear. Maybe it's a

fanciful question, but how many burning shrubs do you suppose Moses passed before God finally got his attention?!?

**VIDEO CLIP: Moses, the burning bush, and the cell phone.**

I often use this poem in sermons by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
And only he who sees takes off his shoes  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Sometimes the Lord has to do something dramatic just so we pay attention for a moment: a burning bush, thundering voice, Damascus Road experience, etc. But those with sensitive spirits encounter the divine all about them.

Last year **George Strait** released a song entitled “*I Saw God Today*.” The lyrics chronicle the story of a man whose wife has just given birth.

*I got my face pressed up against the nursery glass  
She's sleeping like a rock  
My name on her wrist wearing tiny pink socks  
She's got my nose, she's got her mama's eyes  
My brand new baby girl, She's a miracle  
I saw God today.*

*I've been to church, I've read the book  
I know He's here, but I don't look  
Near as often as I should, yeah, I know I should.  
His fingerprints are everywhere  
I'd just slow down to stop and stare  
Opened my eyes and man I swear  
I saw God today.*

So here's the good news/bad news. God is in all times and places. All time is sacred space, and every place is holy ground. Therefore, we are NEVER truly safe from a divine encounter with the Almighty! And as we've seen previously, it can be a life-changing encounter with the divine! This can be an awesome and frightening prospect. Regardless of what happens, life will never be the same again.

### **III. Barefoot on Holy Ground**

The Lord finally got Moses attention with the burning bush. THEN God commanded, “*Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground.*” So Moses removed the sandals from his feet.

This was the first of two occasions in Scripture when someone was commanded to take off his shoes on holy ground. The second time occurred after Moses' death when **Joshua** led the Jews into the Promised Land. No doubt the new leader was nervous as he led Israel's armies across the Jordan River to besiege the heavily fortified city of Jericho.

As Joshua debated his plan of attack, an angel appeared to him with sword in hand. The angelic messenger identified himself as the commander of God's army. Then he said to Joshua, *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."* (Joshua 5:13-15)

Then the Lord gave Joshua the most unlikely military plan in the history of warfare. Israel's army was to march around the city six days in a row. The priests were commanded to blow the trumpets loudly. Then on the seventh day the army was to march around the city one more time. When the priests blew the trumpets, everyone was supposed to shout loudly. THEN the walls of Jericho would fall.

Can you imagine the army commanders' expressions when Joshua told them THE PLAN? From a worldly standpoint, it was less "shock and awe" than "aw shucks!" But Joshua submitted to God's plan, and the walls of Jericho "came a'tumblin' down!"

Both Moses and Jacob took off their shoes on holy ground. The gesture was equal parts **humility and submission**. They humbled themselves before their Lord, baring the soles of their feet and the souls of their lives. They also submitted themselves—at times reluctantly—to God's will for their lives.

Frankly, Moses' submission to God's will did not come easy. He was not thrilled about God's call; and many times he wished that he had ignored that burning bush. Moses had no desire to return to Egypt and confront the latest Pharaoh.

## PP10 NO EXCUSES

Moses disguised his fear and reluctance in a series of seemingly reasonable objections. He gave **five excuses** why he could not possibly go. However, God equips those he calls. For each human point Moses made, the Lord offered a divine counterpoint.

1) Moses' first objection takes the form of pious humility. He asks, *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

Moses' resume was hardly impressive up to this point. Accidental royalty. Spoiled by luxury. Murderer. Fugitive. Shepherd . . . and even the sheep he watched belonged to his father-in-law. His objection is justifiable from a human perspective.

Through either false humility or accurate self-analysis, none of us believes we are fit, equipped, and outfitted for the Lord's work. Surely there is someone better suited for the job. The question, "Who, me?" really asks "Why me?" There must be some mistake--we are not up to the task.

But God has a strange habit of making the least and last into the most and first. Being chosen by God tells more about who the Lord is than who we are. Divine election is based on heavenly grace and not earthly ability. God does not always call the equipped, but God always equips the called.

The only assurance God offers and the only assurance Moses truly needs is the promise: *"I will be with you."* If the Lord is on our side, who can possibly oppose us?

2) However, Moses is not finished yet. A second question quickly follows. *"Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"*

Names were important in that time and place. Moses seeks to quantify and qualify God . . . and in the process to reduce the Lord's claim upon his life.

Yet the Lord God is above and beyond all names. He identifies himself by saying: *"I am who I am . . . I am has sent me to you . . . The Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you."*

Moses also attempts to transform this personal call into a general discussion of theology. Interesting concept, this call thing God, but let's talk about your divine nature, instead! But the Lord is not interested in a theological debate. He first demands Moses' obedience to the call.

3) *"What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'"*

Of all Moses' excuses, this one was the most legitimate. False prophets and messiahs have appeared in every generation. The natural response to his message would be skepticism and doubt. When we are called by God, it is hard enough to believe it ourselves--much less convince others.

Signs: staff into a snake. Leprous hand. Yet signs are ultimately secondary to God's work. A sign is a symbol that points to a reality beyond itself. The miracles Moses performed point to the awesome power of the Lord God Almighty. Nothing can overcome us in his name.

4) *"O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."*

This excuse is an oldie but a goodie. We operate under the mistaken notion that God always calls us according to our strengths. Certainly we are stewards of the talents and abilities we are given. The Lord can use our unique strengths in marvelous ways. Yet on occasion, God invites us out of our comfort zones by using our weaknesses so that we depend upon the Lord's strength.

God answers Moses by asking: *"Who gave man his mouth . . . Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."* This is not a human thing--it is a divine thing. The Lord God Almighty, Creator of the heavens and the earth, is at work. Those whom he calls he equips for his purpose.

5) Out of excuses, Moses gets to the real reason: he does not want to go. He blurts out: *"O Lord, send someone else to do it!"*

Like obstinate children, we did in our heels and stubbornly mutter, "Don't wanta!" Someone--anyone--would be better than me. We stand before God and say, "Here I am, Lord, send someone else!"

God grows angry at Moses' reluctance. But then relents and assigns Aaron to serve as Moses' spokesman.

With no more reasons to excuse him, Moses submits to God's call. He returns to Egypt, and the rest is history. His Story. Not Moses' story. But God's Story.

## **Conclusion**

The Lord continues to call his people today. Even in this time and place. Here and now. You and me. Sometimes in dramatic, burning bush sorts of ways. Particular time and place. Signs and wonders. Hear God speak, see God act. Know beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Other times much more subtle. A glowing twig rather than a burning bush. Divine hints and holy hunches. Conscience is pricked and your spirit is stirred. Circumstance and opportunity open doors. What might be circumstantial is actually providential.

The bush burns and God invites us closer to hear his voice. We can turn our backs and walk away. Or we can draw near and hear. Cannot tell you what we will hear or where we will be sent. But we won't walk alone. Those whom God calls he also equips. But even more importantly, he accompanies.

Good traveling company for an adventure of a lifetime . . . and beyond. Brothers and sisters, we are standing on holy ground. Amen.