

Lent in Plain Sight: Shoes
Fourth in a Lenten Series
Exodus 3:1-6
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Rev. Dr. Jenothy Irvine

Intro

You are taking a walk when the cluttered path in your mind becomes more clear and you see a way through the struggle, decision, or pain.

You are reading a book when a word or a phrase speaks a truth so deep it lingers with you for several days - causing something to shift inside you.

Your life circumstances, pressures, and demands seem to be caving in on you when you receive a “just thinking of you” card or email.

Your depression and anxiety seem to be winning the battle when the phone rings and a friend tells you how appreciated, meaningful, or inspiring you are to them.

The kids are driving you crazy when one of them curls up next to you or takes your hand and says “love you.”

The ocean rolls up on the beach and you somehow feel the weight of your burdens wash back out to the rhythm with the waves.

You can't make a decision about a job when something falls into place with barely any effort on your part.

The smell of home-cooked food, line-dried sheets, their favorite shirt still hanging in the closet, a certain perfume, or even the air in spring brings a sense of comfort, a memory, a moment that no one else can understand.

You are mad at the world, frustrated with how things are going or not going. You feel stuck, and just want one thing to make sense or be easy, when you step outside and catch the last rays of day as they slip beneath a glowing horizon.

Sacred moments or coincidences? Holy ground or chance encounters? Divine intervention or simply good fortune? What makes a moment sacred? What makes the ground we walk or stand on holy?

Prayer: Dear God - teach us to pay attention to the burning bushes around us and to not be afraid to take off our shoes. Amen.

Message

It is one of the most familiar passages of all scripture. He is one of the most recognizable figures in the Old Testament. It is one of the most popular stories of all time. But what is the object used to identify the significance of this epic story? What item illustrates such a remarkable encounter? What thing comes to symbolize the moment as holy?

Listen and with God's help, seek to understand.

Read Text: Exodus 3:1-6 MSG

What a sight it must have been. The side of a mountain. Late morning sun warming the rock and valley below; or perhaps the beginning of late afternoon with its rich and vivid glow. Untouched - ungrazed green patches of tender grass and scattered clumps of bushes and shrubs nestled against the rock. As if that wasn't enough, God then

shows up - actually, I think God was there all along, so I'm going to say, God's presence broke in and revealed itself to a shepherd named Moses. Right place, right time? Lucky day? Coincidence?

A little background on Moses in case you haven't read Exodus chapters one through three lately, or didn't see the Disney movie, *The Prince of Egypt*. Moses was born at a time when the Hebrew people were under the rule and oppression of Egypt. On the backs of Hebrew slaves, some of the greatest Egyptian cities and sites were built. The more oppressed they were, however, the more they grew in number. This made the Pharaoh at that time, Ramses II nervous. The solution? Order the midwives who helped deliver the Hebrew babies to kill any baby that was a boy. Lucky for Moses, the midwives of the village believed in, feared, and put their faith in the God of Israel, and therefore they told the King that the Hebrew women were strong and delivered their babies before they got there. (how fortunate)

Nonetheless and to be on the safe side, Moses' mother put Moses in a basket and set him afloat down the river and who should find the bundle? Pharaoh's daughter. (lucky break) She takes him out of the water, sends for a nursing Hebrew woman to feed and take care of him until he is about two, and guess who just happens to be nearby in the reeds of the river and offers to go and find a Hebrew nursing mother? Moses' big sister, Mirriam. (what a coincidence) And who does she go find? Moses' mother, Jochebed; Jo-ka-bed (what are the chances).

Once Moses was old enough to be weaned off his mother, he was taken to Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her own. His Hebrew life was put behind him and practically erased from his memory. He was groomed to be the King and take Ramses place as the ruling Pharaoh. He received the best education and training and was privileged to a life of luxury, influence, and authority. When he was about forty years old, he went to see for himself how the Hebrew people - his people were treated. He

witnesses an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew worker. An unexpected wave of anger and a sense of injustice rose up and Moses killed the guard! The next day he returned and saw two Hebrews fighting each other and asked them “why do you fight one another - you are not the enemy?” They basically said who died and made you boss?! We know who you are. They didn’t trust Moses. They saw him as a traitor, looking for an angle. After all, they knew he was in line to be the next Pharaoh. Then Ramses found out what happened and went after Moses. Moses escaped to a place called Midian.

Time went by and he met and married a woman named Zipporah. Together they built a life, raised a family, and Moses helped take care of her family and their livestock. He lived his life in relative peace in Midian. He grew comfortable and moved on from his past life. He didn’t want anything to change, be different, or get stirred up. He was secure. Life was predictable. Life was good. He knew what to expect. He knew how things worked and that was enough for him.

But it wasn’t enough for God. Not when God heard the continual cry of God’s people back in Egypt. Not when God had saved Moses for this very purpose. Not when God knew what it would mean to reveal God’s presence, faithfulness, and power to God’s people through the life of Moses.

That brings us back to where we started today - with Moses, standing in amazement gawking at a bush that was engulfed in what appeared to be flames but it was not burning up. When he went near to investigate, the Spirit of God said “take off your shoes, this is holy ground.”

Take off your shoes. That’s odd, most people believed that when you stood in the presence of a proclaimed god, king, or great ruler you brought riches, extravagant gifts, or something of great value to the one giving it. Not that Moses had much, but God didn’t say throw down your nice, warm, well-made shepherd’s coat, remove your hand

woven head covering, or get those stinky sheep off my mountain. God said, “take off your shoes.” Sandals in this case - nothing more than old dusty, probably well worn, straps of leather tied to a solid piece for the sole that protected the foot from the rough terrain.

It was customary during that time, and still is in many places of the world, to remove your shoes upon entering a holy place. Many cultures remove their shoes upon entering someone’s home as well, as a sign of respect and honor. It is a way to say to the homeowner that as a guest you honor them and that you are not bringing in anything that could hurt or bring shame upon them or their family. You respect their home and who and what is in it. It is also a sign of humility to show that you stood on the same ground as your host.

In holy spaces, it is believed that the removal of one’s shoes symbolizes the removal of anything that would keep you from drawing near to that which is sacred. It is the taking off of that which keeps you from being fully present, aware and accepting of the experience. It is a sign of honor and respect for what is holy.

The story of Moses and the burning presence of God has been told thousands of times in a thousand different ways. Yet when was the last time you heard a sermon about his shoes?

How often do you think about your shoes? Oh, I know there are some who obsess over their shoes (or maybe have too many boots) and I am fully aware that the question I am about to ask is a first-world kind of question: How many of you own more than two pairs of shoes? More than four or five? I would imagine you have various dress shoes. Work shoes. Yard work or lawn-mowing shoes. Everyday shoes. Going out shoes. Athletic or sport-specific type shoes (golf, running, dance, etc.). Summer sandals.

Winter boots. Spring in Indiana boots. Lounge around the house shoes. Just for fun, “I had to have them” kind of shoes. Slip ons. Tie ups. Velcro closure.

But have you ever thought about the shoes sitting in your closet or lost under the bed as symbols of your walk with God? Have you considered the metaphorical message your shoes might be telling you? We talk about taking off the masks we hide behind. We talk about taking off that extra layer of guilt or resentment that we wear like a heavy coat. We talk about taking off or setting down the baggage we carry with us. But what about our shoes?

We can take off and let go of all that other stuff but it strikes me that if we don’t take off our shoes and touch the very dust from which God created us and ground ourselves in God, then we still walk in or walk from a place, mindset, or paradigm that keeps us from experiencing the fullness of God.

Have there been times in your life you needed to take off your shoes - take off that which kept you from fully experiencing what God had for you? Is now the time? Could this season of Lent be a time to take off the false narratives you walk around with? A time to take off the dirt of gossip, cynicism, and judgmentalism that keeps you from enjoying the good around you? Or that keeps you from hearing and seeing others as God sees them? Do you need to take off your shoes of control and recognize God’s faithfulness? God’s timing? God’s way? Is it time to unlace / untie certain expectations, assumptions, or speculations and feel your feet sink into the presence of God; being grounded once again?

I think part of what Moses had to remove was his being comfortable. I think he needed to take off his security and learn to trust God. Moses could not approach God until he took off that which was stuck to the bottom of his shoes. It is not until we do the same that we can stand on the holy ground and recognize God in our midst; recognize

God revealing God's self to us in ways you don't expect; recognize that God may not be what we have always thought God was. It is then we see more clearly what God is doing and how we are a part of it.

You'll notice Moses doesn't take off his shoes, step in that moment with God and then stay there barefoot and blinded by what God is doing and asking of him. He steps back out and does what? He puts his shoes back on. But here's the thing, I bet they felt different. Once you have stood on holy ground, your shoes don't fit the same.

Maybe they feel lighter. Maybe they fit better than before. Maybe you have more room for growth or maybe they were reshaped for the journey ahead. Maybe they don't fit at all and you have to put on new shoes - different shoes for new understanding, new insights, new ways of thinking, doing, and being. Maybe you feel stronger, more determined to walk on; or maybe you feel like what I like to call confidently terrified yet ready to take those next steps. The point is, those ordinary shoes illustrate an extraordinary encounter with the holy.

May we, like Moses, take off our shoes, and be transformed, inspired, challenged, affirmed, and encouraged. May we continue to see God in plain sight. Amen.

Resources Consulted

Ellison, H.L. The Daily Study Bible Series Exodus. Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 1982

Williams, Michael. The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, Vol. 2. Nashville: Abington, 1992.

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