

Sermon: Removing Shoes and Opening Eyes**Scripture: Exodus 3:1-15****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 11, 2016**

There were some beautiful places in our holy ground slide show, weren't there? As you think back over your summer, here at the start of a new school year, were there moments or places for you that were deeply meaningful? Did you have an encounter with God at some point this summer? Did you have a moment when the veil between this dimension and the spiritual was particularly thin? Was there a specific time when your heart was so full this summer that it was near overflowing; a place where you stood and wept, for joy or even sorrow – sometimes it's tragedy that makes a certain ground holy as Ground Zero has become in New York City for what happened 15 years ago today. Did you stand on holy ground this summer and hear what could have been of the voice of God addressing you?

That is what happened to Moses in the desert when he discovered suddenly that he was standing on holy ground. He was not looking for God at the time or any great adventure for that matter. He was tending his flock in the land of Midian where he had built a new life for himself after having fled as a murderer and fugitive from Egypt. He had become a husband and a father and was passing his days in honest work far from the troubling world of Egyptian masters and Hebrew slaves and the building of empires. He just notices it out of the corner of his eye, this strange sight. And basically says "hmm? what's that?" He could have dismissed it as his eyes playing tricks on him and kept on walking. But he doesn't and the scripture says only when God sees that Moses turned aside to take a closer look does God then address him.

Before we get to what God says, it's worth pausing right there and considering this introduction of Moses' encounter with God. Note, the way

it happens was not a bang but more like a whimper! It could have been a volcanic eruption or a bone-rattling earthquake in which God appeared. But instead, it was an oddity, a curious kink in the everyday-ness of the desert that didn't quite fit. A bush was burning but not consumed, Moses noticed... he wasn't terrified by it nor did he enter into some ecstatic trance at the encounter, he just *noticed* it.

This is one of the remarkable things that the Hebrew scriptures teach us about God, this Source of All, that God expresses Himself, Herself, Godself in self-restraint, subtlety and hiddenness, even. In relation to us humans, God lures and woos and at times even begs. God does not dominate, rape and overwhelm, rather calls to us and often subtly enough that if we are not paying attention, we could miss it altogether.

This is not Zeus, this God we Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in. The feminist theologian Maggie Ross says "This is no Zeus-like puppet master god who solves all our problems by intervening but a humble kenotic (self-emptying) God, the One who will not intervene willy nilly in our lives but co-creates with us only as we allow or invite. Such a God infuses, supports and enhances our life without making us object." This is the I-Thou relationship that the famous Jewish theologian Martin Buber refers to. God does not treat us as an It but soul to soul, I to Thou and Thou to I. And expects the same of us. As God does not use us without our consent, we are not to use God for our purposes either, nor are we to use one another but our relationships to God and neighbor and even enemy are to involve the deepest respect for human dignity and the soul.

So God does not demand attention from Moses with all God's divine power but rather whispers to him from a bush. And Moses turns to see this curiosity. Only THEN does God address him.

"Moses, Moses." That's the way God initiates this encounter. He uses his name. It happens throughout scripture. Do you remember one of the first

words we hear Jesus say in the Gospel of John at his resurrection? When Mary sees him near the empty tomb? Jesus says “Mary, Mary.” And the Apostle Paul whose Roman name was Saul. He encounters the risen Christ and the first words that Jesus speaks? “Saul, Saul.” It’s the way an encounter with God occurs – God knows us, God knows our names and calls to us, personally, intimately. Not “hey you! C’mon over here! Whaz your name?” No, God says “Moses, Mary, Saul, Penny, Andy, Christine, David, Will.” God to you. You to God. Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep demonstrates it again, there’s not a single one of us so lost or unknown to God that we are forsaken, we are known by name, the hairs on our head counted.

“Moses, Moses.” And then once addressed, God makes a request of Moses. First a little request – “take off your shoes, Moses, for you are standing on holy ground.” And Moses removes his shoes. When I first watched the video our feet standing on holy ground I have to say I was very moved by it. I asked Sarah, “was that just me or did you feel emotional watching that” and Sarah said “that was just you, Will.” But there was something about it that I found very poignant and moving all these feet in their special places over the summer. I think it had to do with the vulnerability offered, soft bare, sometimes dirty, probably smelly feet standing on holy ground. This is true of an encounter with holiness, it doesn’t require our strength and might and brilliance so much as it requires our humility and vulnerability. “Take off your shoes, Moses, you are standing on holy ground.”

That’s the first request that comes after his name has been uttered and then the game changer. “I have heard the misery of my people enslaved in Egypt and have come to deliver them... actually,” God says, “I am sending YOU to deliver them out of Egypt.” Moses’ response to God, as I see it, forever gives us permission to come up against God and argue with God.

Moses responds with about 5 excuses for why it's a really bad idea for him to go to Egypt –I don't know your name, they won't believe me, I don't want to, I can't do public speaking, and finally please send someone else – but patiently God responds to each of Moses' concerns and convinces him to go. God does not insist or compel or threaten Moses, God patiently works to simply convince him. And Moses goes.

This reveals another central Judeo-Christian understanding of God, that God doesn't meet us so that we can have a really cool spiritual experience, and bliss out on Divine energy, God encounters us in order to send us forth to serve.

“Moses go tell Pharaoh to let my people go.”

“Mary, go to my disciples and tell them I have risen.”

“Saul, go into Damascus and there you will be told what to do.”

“Peter, love my sheep.”

In every encounter with God there comes a mission. That's how we come to know God in going forth to serve in love. This is why as a church we do outreach and mission. Yes we come together to worship and to learn and grow together in our faith and to be nurturing community but if we are to be an authentic Christian community in relationship with God then we must go forth as well.

And where are we called to go? Actually not to some heavenly realm of eternal happiness. Rather an encounter with the invisible God leads us to a deeper and more love-filled encounter with the immediate material world. After the burning bush moment, Moses doesn't build a temple and enter into 24-7 prayer, he beats a path to a super-power Pharaoh to whom everyone was pledging their allegiance and he pledges his allegiance to God and God's realm! Moses calls Pharaoh out for the oppression and injustices of his kingdom and then takes away Pharaoh's slaves. Moses doesn't get lighter and purer through his encounter with God but bloodier and muddier

through it! After an encounter with God, we are called to be more deeply committed and in love with this world to make it on earth as it is in heaven. But first our eyes must be open enough to see, our ears attentive enough to hear and we must be ready and willing to remove our shoes to make ourselves vulnerable to be vessels of Love.

I began by asking you to consider a profound moment of depth or meaning or divine encounter that you had this summer and I'd like to end with a poet's expression of this encounter. It's a poem called "The Opening of Eyes" by David Whyte. He writes:

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

May we fall in love anew with the solid ground of our lives, remove our shoes with humility and go forth to serve the world with gladness and hope. Amen.