

Take Off Your Shoes

William Stell
September 3, 2017

Exodus 3:1-10 — 3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led Jethro's flock through the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 3:2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3:3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 3:4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 3:5 Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. 3:6 I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 3:7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their slave-masters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 3:8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 3:9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

This is probably one of the most well-known stories in the Bible: it's the story of how Moses met God. Before this, there has been no contact between these two. And really, in the book of Exodus, before this third chapter, God hasn't shown up—at least, not out in the open. The Israelites are suffering under Pharaoh's tyranny, enslaved by his empire, targets of genocide, and God may be working behind the scenes during this time, but there's no clear sign that God has really entered into the Hebrews' plight, no clear sign that God has really committed to helping them, until now. In this famous story, God appears to Moses (in a rather curious way); tells him that God has witnessed the misery of the Israelites and the injustice of the Egyptians; and then, God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land. This morning, I want us to look more closely at how God meets Moses, and I want us to ask how, in light of this, God might meet us.

The story begins in the desert. Moses is working as a shepherd for his father-in-law, roaming through the wilderness, watching the days roll along. It's important to know that Moses isn't here, with his father-in-law's family in the desert, because he *wants* to be here; no, he's here because he is on the run. Not too long ago, he was living in Pharaoh's palace. He had been living there ever since he was a little boy. You probably know the story: Moses's mother put her infant son into a basket, covered it with tar, and set it loose on the Nile—the alternative being Pharaoh's army comes and murders her son. It's a tragic and bleak scene, but as it turns out, God *is* working behind that scene. God's hand guides this little basket through that turbulent river and takes it

right up to the banks of the imperial palace, where none other than Pharaoh's daughter discovers it. She raises Moses as her own son, and all of a sudden this Hebrew baby, who was close to being killed, is now an Egyptian prince.

... Well, almost. See, as this boy is growing up in Pharaoh's palace, people know that he is not the child of Pharaoh's daughter by birth. People know that he doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the Egyptians. Moses knows it, too. One day, as a young man, he leaves the palace and goes for a walk in a Hebrew neighborhood. He just so happens to walk past an Egyptian slave-master who is beating one of his kinfolk. Moses feels something surge up inside of him, a sense of allegiance to his tribe, and he murders the Egyptian. But someone sees it and tells Pharaoh, "That Hebrew boy you let your daughter raise and coddle just killed one of your own people." If you think Pharaoh wanted to kill Moses when he was a baby, imagine how Pharaoh felt about Moses after that.

So, Moses flees for his life. Away from the palace, and away from his kinfolk (who have no sympathy for a prince pampered by their oppressor). He travels through the desert until he reaches a backwater village, finds a wife, and starts working as a shepherd for his new father-in-law. Now, shepherding is a menial job. It's mundane, isolated—it's as unglamorous as you can get. The prince has fallen far, fallen hard. But *this*, friends, is where God first meets him. So long as Moses was enjoying imperial luxuries, he did not know God. Only once he was in the wilderness, once he had learned what life in the wilderness is like, only then did God come to Moses and call him into relationship.

It can be hard to meet God when you're living in the palace. It can be hard to meet God when you think you've got more or less everything you want and need. But when you're desperate, when you're in distress, when you're mindful of your vulnerability and of the fact that you can't get through this on your own, *that's* when you're ready to meet God. So, friends, when you're at those low points, when you're down and out, when you're really not sure how many more steps you can take, be on the look-out, because God is close.

Back to our story: Moses is watching his father-in-law's flock, wandering mindlessly around this mountain called Horeb. He looks to his side, and he notices a bush that's on fire. He stops. Watches it. Who knows what he's thinking. Eventually, he notices that the bush isn't shriveling up in the flames. There aren't any hot coals or ashes forming at the base. It's a fire, it's clearly burning, but it's not burning *up*, it's not destroying the bush. So, Moses says to himself (because, why not talk to yourself when you're alone in the desert with a bunch of sheep), "I must turn aside and get a closer look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." And here's the most remarkable part of our story, at least to me: according to the text, "When the LORD saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'" So, God didn't call out to Moses when Moses was walking *past* the bush; God called out to Moses only after Moses stopped, watched, wondered, and then drew near. God didn't come to Moses when he was wandering about mindlessly; God came to him when he paused and when he let himself be curious.

I have a hunch, friends, that some of us have trouble meeting God because we're moving too quickly. When our pace is so fast, our minds so focused, and our days so occupied, it can be hard for God to squeeze into our jam-packed lives. And perhaps some of us have trouble meeting God because we aren't particularly mindful as we wander. When we're just going through the motions, perfectly content with the familiar, the mundane, it can be hard for God to break through and breathe something new. Our story this morning invites us to think of curiosity as a spiritual discipline, as a posture that helps us meet God. Our story invites us to move through our day slowly enough that we can notice the burning bushes around us—and when we notice them, turn aside and get a closer look. And when we do, we just might hear God calling our name.

“Moses, Moses!” God calls out. And Moses, who is by himself, in the desert, says, “Um, yeah, that’s me. Whoever you are, I’m here.” And the very next thing God says to him is “Stop right there. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” What’s that all about? Well, in many religious traditions, both ancient and modern, you are expected to take off your shoes whenever you enter a place of worship. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps the main reason is that shoes tend to get dirty, and you don’t want to bring dirt into a sacred space, a space where the divine is believed to dwell. But what’s odd about this part of our story is that Moses isn’t in a normal place of worship—in fact, he’s standing in the dirt of the desert already! So, why does God tell him to take off his shoes, to get his feet even dirtier? I think that our story is telling us that our God can show up in any old bush, and because of that, any old plot of ground can be holy. What makes a space sacred isn’t a steeple or a worship service or even a community of faith; what makes a space sacred is God’s presence, and if there’s one thing we know about that presence, it’s that it doesn’t stay put. The Spirit of God is always on the move, always popping up all over the place. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote that “Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God, but only those who see take off their shoes.”

When I was in college, I went through this phase of not wearing shoes whenever I walked outside. If I was going to class, I’d carry my shoes in one hand and then put them on just before I walked into the classroom. I started doing this because I saw my friend Natalie do it, and she was super cool, so I followed suit. Over time, though, this became a spiritual practice for me, a reminder that God could show up anytime, anywhere—and because of that, I might as well treat everywhere I step, every speck of Earth, as holy. Whether or not you physically take off the shoes on your feet, friends, let’s think about how we might take off the shoes inside of us, how we might make ourselves ready to notice God’s presence and to step towards it. Let’s start by reminding ourselves throughout this week to slow down, be mindful, and be curious. Amen.