
Every Common Bush Afire

Exodus 3:1-15

This is holy ground and you *still* have your shoes on. Of course, so do I. And I should say — before you do anything to change that — that on a hot Summer's day, at the end of August, it's probably not best social practice to have us all take our shoes off, no matter how holy we feel this place is. After all, we are trying to get *more* visitors and not drive the ones we have out the door!

Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Zen Buddhist monk and activist, says: "Every minute can be a holy, sacred minute." He says, "Seek the spiritual in every ordinary thing you do. Sweeping the floor, watering the vegetables, and washing the dishes become holy and sacred if mindfulness is there."

Mindfulness can transform ordinary spaces and tasks into holy sanctuaries. It is a tool that helps humans to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not live only reactively. How many of us here lately have had a sacred moment in taking on that huge pile of dishes stacked up in your sink? Yet, you could be standing in your kitchen peeling an orange and it could become a moment of deep connection and joy.

I had a mindfulness experience last week. The family and I traveled to south Louisiana to visit with Katie's parents and sister-in-law, and her two kids. We spent most of the week on a beach, a few hours east of New Orleans, where they live. On one particular morning, I got up before everyone else and walked along the gulf shore barefoot just as the sun was coming up, down the shoreline horizon. Those small gulf waves were lapping at my feet as I gently sank, step after step, into those peachy-brown sands. It felt like holy ground. It became a sanctuary. Maybe this is why everyone returns from beach vacations noticeably happier. You smell that salty, sun-warmed air, with the sounds of seagulls and crashing waves, and you walk around most of that time without shoes. The soles

of your feet absorbing what can heal even the soul of your body. It can be grounding.

All last week, I was reminded how little I allow my feet to touch the ground these days. I'm talking barefoot, out in nature — dirt, sand, or grass pressed against skin, getting in between your toes. When you live in Manhattan, this is highly discouraged practiced. But also, I'm one that doesn't even like walking barefoot around my house, if I can help it.

There's been much research done on grounding, or what some call *Earthing*. Studies show, when you walk around barefoot on the beach, or grass, or other natural places, there is a positive physiological change that takes place. What I've learned is that when we do this, our bodies literally absorb millions of free electrons through our feet, which travel throughout the body as negative ions, neutralizing free radicals in our tissues. This becomes like our own little detox system, with benefits of also relaxing our nervous system, improving heart health and blood flow, and even reducing anxiety. Don't miss opportunities to take off your shoes and connect to the holy that is around us and beneath us.

Moses's grounding came by way of a burning bush in the wilderness. The text says that he had taken a flock of sheep (which he was tending for his father-in-law, Jethro) "beyond the wilderness". The King James Version uses the phrase, "the backside of the desert". Which may not only be a geographical comment as commentary on the quality of where he ended up. And in that space beyond, he came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. *Horeb* is literally translated as "a parched mountain" or some translate it simply as, "wasteland". Moses was out there!

He was in need of grounding because life had become very destabilized for him. He had wandered far from the posh accommodations of Pharaoh's court. Remember, he was born to Hebrew slaves, the people who were oppressed in Egypt, and was sent down the Nile in a woven basket by his Mother. The Pharaoh's daughter found him and raised him in the luxury of Egyptian royalty, the oppressors. But Moses observed the hard labor of his people, even seeing one of them beaten severely. And something woke up in him. He knew he was part of a system that was oppressing his people.

Maybe the desert for Moses was a mid-life crisis, certainly an identity crisis, and most definitely a mid-faith crisis. Desert-Moses was not the chiseled-face, let-my-people-go, Charlton Heston Moses. This was a Moses shrinking in hiding. Wandering deep into the wilderness. And he spots a bush on fire.

Now, shepherds out in those parts would have seen plenty of brush fires. In that climate, this would have been very commonplace. In fact, early Jewish midrash, which was ancient commentary on Jewish Scriptures—essentially, stories they would make-up about the biblical narrative to help bring their meanings to life—Well, ancient Rabbis assumed that *many* passed by this same burning bush day after day. Now, that's not necessarily in the Bible, but it was an assumption they were making.

You can imagine, others passing by were too caught up in the busyness of their lives, getting to and fro. They were diligent, maybe even faithful people keeping to their agendas, getting things done, sticking to the task . . . And though it was a common sight, the text says the fire didn't consume the bush. You have to stay around quite some time to notice that that is true.

Was Moses practicing mindfulness here? Was this contemplative Moses, finally stopping long enough to quiet his fears and not live reactively? I think Moses was curious. I think the spiritual life flourishes out of curiosity. So much so, that I'm not sure we can be the spiritual people we need to be if we don't cultivate a curiosity and a curious disposition in our lives.

The holy is made known when we will linger long enough to notice what others merely offer a passing glance at. In other words: What do we miss when we keep our shoes on?

The text says that, "he turns aside and takes notice." And see here that it's only *after* he does, that God speaks. You wonder how long the God of the Burning Bush remained silent until someone stopped long enough to notice.

We affirm in the Reformed tradition — which is the theological position of the Presbyterian Church USA — that God always initiates. This is what is beautifully celebrated in infant baptism: A child is baptized into the loving embrace of a God who offers grace and salvation *before* they even have a chance to live into that gift. God always makes the first move, and we respond.

Maybe, in life, we are often waiting for the booming voice of God to get our attention. "Lord, speak, and I will listen!" "God, tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." "Lay out your plans for me and I will follow." But that's not the sequence of things here. God initiates by breaking into Moses's life not as a coherent thought, not as a plan all drawn up, but as a possibility in its infancy, hardly formed, merely a spark, just an experience, and through something utterly ordinary. And curiosity leads to an encounter with the holy.

The miracle isn't that a bush was on fire but not consumed, the miracle is that Moses was learning to see differently. Perhaps this is why God asked him to remove his sandals. But notice with me a second movement that is just as important as the first. God wanted Moses to understand first where to locate the holy. But he doesn't ask for him to stay. He immediately sends him out.

Contemplation helps sharpen a vision to see God, but the point is never to remain in that mystical experience. The encounter becomes a summons to go into the world, to the hurting. God's movement is always toward liberation.

How remarkable it would have been to sit and stare at the wondrous sight of a bush on fire yet not consumed. Perhaps, you could have made a holy site there for others to make a pilgrimage. Maybe something that could even turn into a profit-making venture for you. God didn't say, "stay" but "Go".

"And who shall I tell them sent me?" "I AM THAT I AM." This Name means abiding presence. God doesn't send us to liberate on God's behalf but invites us into a partnership, to collaborate in the work of justice and liberation. That's the invitation for you and me.

There are so many things to pickup from this story. We've only scratched the surface. But I wonder where you are in this. Perhaps you are feeling like a wildness wanderer, not knowing what your purpose is. Maybe you've been treating life like a drive-through art exhibit, at a pace which hardly leaves you a moment for holy encounters. Maybe today, you are here because you've noticed a burning bush and you are taking off your shoes to hear what comes next. Wherever you are, this is God's promise: "I will be with you".

Let me close with this: I am continuing to learn how to make sanctuaries out of ordinary places. I am learning to take my shoes off and feel the holy ground

beneath my feet. I am learning to not put a limit on the places God can be present. I am learning to “turn aside and take notice.” I pray you are too.

Those that have heard me preach enough times have heard me quote one of my favorite poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I cannot hear this story from the book of Exodus without her poetic interpretation:

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only [the one] who sees takes off their shoes.
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.”

Amen.