

13th Sunday after Pentecost

“When You Take Your Shoes off--Beware”

3 September 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 3:1-15

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself (John F. Kennedy).

Today’s reading from the Hebrew scripture is the story of Moses’ call to ministry, leadership, mission . . . or call to something. It is a fitting reading with this weekend’s national holiday in mind: Labor Day. Why? Because, for one thing, we find Moses out **working** peacefully by himself—not particularly troubled or bothered by other people. Moses is simply alone with the flock of his father-in-law. All he must do is keep the wolves away, and hope he isn’t bored to death. After all, he has been living in a sprawling urban area and is himself an urbanite through and through.

A lot has taken place in Moses’ life since he was rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. He first assumed a princely countenance, and then lost it when he murdered a cruel Egyptian abusing a fellow Hebrew. Because he feared for his life, he took flight, and ended up way out west—in Midian. This is where our text today picks up the story of Moses.

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 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." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "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 (Exodus 3:1-6).

Out of these six marvelous and pivotal verses of Exodus I would like to deal with three aspects concerning today’s lesson.

1) We have an odd setting in which to hear the voice of God. The voice and presence of God can strike at any time and at any place. People often, and erroneously, think that coming or going to church is something that must be done to hear the Word of God. And while it is true that many people hear the Word of God through the music, prayers, and occasionally the preaching of the church it is not always true. For example, John/Charles Wesley heard the Word from their mother in the Epworth rectory. Matthew, the tax collector, first heard the Word at his tax table when Jesus passed by and said, “Follow me.” Recently, a young woman told me she had gotten her call to the ministry at a UMC camp three summers ago—near Lake Texoma. Yet for many people, the God’s call seems best rendered in a place of holiness, often in a house of worship.

Notice, however, that God chooses the wilderness, on mount Horeb (“wasteland”) to reveal God’s divinity to Moses. It is far removed from the sights and sounds of the religious community—no music, no prayers, no offering—no religious trappings at all. There is no temple in this wilderness area. In fact, there is no sign to Moses that this is a holy place at all. It is just Moses, the sheep, and the Midian desert.

Remember too that this will not be the last time God chooses to reveal divinity in an unlikely place. Jesus’ gospel story is often in decidedly nonreligious, nontraditional settings. I suppose this fact says if one is trying to protect oneself from a divine Word, beware—there is no safe place to avoid hearing God’s Word. One can even hear God’s Word way out there in Midian.

2) We recognize that hearing and sight are closely connected in this experience of God. Now obviously, the most remarkable and memorable aspect of this story is the burning bush which was “blazing, yet it was not consumed.” We should not forget, however that if the Word Moses hears is important, then it is because of Moses’ innate curiosity as he pauses to hear. In fact, seeing is so important that the writer uses words for seeing ten times in the first 9 verses of chapter 3. In one way, we could say that the burning bush is a “visible word” which adds depth and reality to Moses’ experience. Just as the image of Jesus on the cross gives greater weight to the gospel words of interpretation, here the same kind of thing could be said. The bush and the Word go together and reinforce each other’s meaning.

What does this mean for us? It means that people not only judge what **we say we believe, but they look carefully at our lives to see if we give tangible signs of living as we speak.** Jim Moore tells about a strange sporting event—demolition derby. In this crazy event, automobiles race around a track and intentionally crash into each other. The last car moving is declared the winner! He points out that when you watch a demolition derby, you discover that many parts of an automobile are not necessary for it to run. Doors, hoods, mirrors, hubcaps litter the track as the derby progresses, and the cars still move. But one thing is essential—an engine! A car must have power. No power, no movement! ¹ Perhaps a lot of other things are luxury items for your walk of faith, but one thing is indispensable for the witness to Jesus through Jesus’ people—the power of their lives. Our words and actions are best experienced by others if they are congruent. The greatest evidence for the reality of the Christian faith is the lives that Christian people live with power. It is not only what people hear from us, it is also what they see from us that counts as a witness to the power of the Christian life.

3) What are the implications of standing on Holy Ground? To remove one’s shoes in the presence of God is to acknowledge that one is standing in or on a holy place. Holiness is a word that means “separate from” or “set apart from” something that is temporal, profane, or ordinary. But we notice here, as in many parts of the Bible, the place is sacred because of God’s appearance, not because it was already holy. Like Jacob’s shrine at Bethel or the site of the great wrestling match—Peniel, the turf is sacred only because this is where one has encountered God.

Likewise, when we come to the communion table, this place is not holy, except that it is made holy by the presence of God. God has set this place apart to speak the Word and to enact the holy moment that took place between Jesus and the disciples then and disciples now. I will not ask you to remove your shoes today because the ground you tread in this sanctuary is holy, but I will ask you to walk a little more lightly, because it is here and now that we hear and see God. Amen.

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i. James Moore, *Healing Where it Hurts*, p. 102.