

August 31, 2008
"Holy Ground"
Exodus 3:1-12

The first time I preached on this text in Exodus about Moses and the burning bush, I started a fire – right in the chancel area of the sanctuary – on purpose! Because I'm a pyromaniac? Hardly. Because I'm into theatrical preaching? Not really. Because I like gimmicks – well, sometimes. Actually, I did it for the same reason I think God did it for Moses. Moses was there in the desert, tending sheep for his father-in-law. And a fire in the desert is going to get a shepherd's attention. God needed to get Moses' attention so he would realize the importance of the task at hand – and it worked! Hear now the story of Moses and the burning bush.

SERMON: There's not a lot of lush green grazing land in an arid desert climate in Palestine. Spontaneous brush fires were common – but they also were deadly for the shepherd. Moses spotted the fire immediately, and went to investigate. It was a bush – burning- but not being consumed! Then the voice – *Take off your shoes, Moses, you're standing on holy ground!*

In the presence of God, we take off our shoes – it's a sign of respect and reverence – and besides, I think it's a lot easier to listen with your shoes off. Go ahead - take your shoes off, like Moses did. Why? Because, this is holy ground here, too.

OK God – I've got my shoes off - I see the bush on fire that's not being burned up, you have my attention, what's up? That's when God told Moses he expected him to go back to Egypt and free the Hebrew people from slavery --- you know how that one goes, as in "Let my people go," the 10 plagues, the Red Sea crossing, the 40 year wandering in the wilderness and finally the arrival at the Promised Land. Just a little job that God had in mind for Moses – no big deal.

Why was God so surprised when Moses responded that he didn't feel he was up to the task? *You've got the wrong guy, God. Get my brother Aaron to do it. He's a better speaker than I am – no one's going to follow me. I'm a wanted man in Egypt, I murdered a guy there. Get someone better. I'm just not the one you want for this job!*

There seems to be nothing natural about accepting a job from God. Everyone in the Bible that God asks to do something says, not me, I'm not qualified – Please God, don't make me do it.

Take your shoes off. You're standing on holy ground.

Is some ground actually more holy than other ground? In ancient religions, holy ground was a place where something spectacular had happened. God spoke, someone had a vision, a miracle occurred – so a Temple or shrine was built to mark the spot. Holy ground – separate ground – other ground – special God ground.

You have such a place in your life, don't you? A piece of holy sacred soil? A place set apart, special, where God seems so very extra close, a place of cherished memories, a place your heart returns to even when you can't get there in person. I have a holy place – on a lake in Michigan (and also on a rock in a state park in central Indiana.) Maybe you have holy ground in a cemetery plot where you like to sit and reflect on the life you shared with the dear one buried there; a small rectangle of holy ground where you listen to God and remember. Maybe a family farm (my grandpa's farm is a place I can picture so vividly. The creek running through it, the rickety bridge over it, the hayloft where we cousins built forts. I see it so clearly). Perhaps a childhood house, a garden where you cultivate and toil in the soil until it produces marvelous flowers and vegetables. Maybe your holy spot is right here, in this building that has stood for 140 years. Maybe the place where you were married is your holy ground.

So, why do people fight over who possesses the ground? Because there is so much emotional investment in the land. Feelings of ownership and possession run deep for that which we have come to believe is our holy spot. Take your shoes off; this is a place of reverence and awe. This is a place we meet God.

Holy Ground. Taking off your shoes is a sign of awe and reverence before God. Now that you're comfortable listen, and be filled with gratitude that God offers us these special places. Take off your shoes – dare to approach a burning bush - this is important. I have seen my people suffering at the hands of Pharaoh. They have been slaves long enough, it is time to set them free, Moses. I have heard their cries, I have come to deliver them, and I need you to help me do it. For I am a God of action, and I am a God who gets involved. I will lead them to a new land – show them a new place for a fresh start – and they will be free to follow. But I need your help.

Moses continues his objections: *by what authority do I do this?* God says, Tell them "I AM" has sent you. *What kind of a name is that?* It means, I am who I am, I'm Yahweh, I cause to be what I cause to be. It's the verb 'to be'; I am the action verb, the God of being. *They won't believe me.* I'll equip you. *But I stutter.* I'll teach you what to say. Moses is running out of excuses. *Please God, get someone else. My brother! Aaron can help – but I want you to take the lead.*

We get it – boy, do we get it. It's just so scary to say yes to God – we stutter and claim we're not the right one. Don't make me, God – people will laugh at me. Indeed people may laugh. But God won't.

When we send our prayers to God, we know they are heard. Imagine a torrent of prayers flooding heaven, chanting, reading, speaking, babbling in all languages about all sorts of issues and questions and requests. Passionate pleas for help, whining, bargaining, agonizing requests. How can God sort it all out? Perhaps God is more interested in how we live than in how eloquently we pray....perhaps our prayers are our day to day living out our life with God.

What does God hear in the way we live our lives? What are we actually saying to God by the way we live day by day? What prayer is heard in our living? Please note that the primary way God gets God's business done is through people! Not that God doesn't have other options - thunder, fire, miracle - but mostly it's people, just people, who get the God jobs done. They see a burning bush – and God asks, we balk, God says you can do it – I need you.

I think the reason so many people in the Bible said no, I couldn't do that God, was so that we'd have lots of examples to look at. They initially said no to God. But then after much coaxing they were able to do it with God's help. What is God asking us to do? Well, those answers are varied and many. But, one thing very clear and close to home is one our church is doing starting next week for a month – that is to bring a friend to church with you. Sharing our faith with someone is so basic to scripture that it seems unnecessary to have a special emphasis for it. Yet, we get so squeamish about it, it's good to remember – God wants us to share the blessing of this holy ground with others.

I think I know why it's hard to invite someone to church, at least I know why it's hard for me to do it – it makes me feel vulnerable. Like being at a Jr Hi dance – vulnerable to rejection. What if they say no, what if I can't answer a question, what if they come and don't like it, what if they think I'm a dweeb, it's just not in my character. To talk about faith or church to someone is invasive of his or her privacy. The thing about vulnerability is – it opens up possibilities. Trying something new makes us take an honest look at who we are and what we do with our life – not just what we say, but how we live. As we step into that fear – or as they say, out of our comfort zone, like Moses did, we doubt ourselves, and then we get the same answer Moses got in verse 12, "I'll be with you, you can do it." God doesn't ask us to crash and burn – he promises to be with us.

But there's no point to it, we protest. Too risky, too unlike me, too pushy. Here's the deal. You have a friend who needs to know God, or feels alone, or is struggling, or has past negative feelings about church, or just needs a place to share faith, or worship, or find peace, or be challenged, or God only knows what! There is a friend who needs to be asked – is waiting to hear God – and you are going to be – well, the door opener for God. It's frightening to enter a church alone. God- places can be scary if you don't know what to do. Burning bushes are scary. God's fire in us won't consume us, though. It's a fire of blessing, a fire of love, a fire of the Spirit descending on us, a fire of compassion, a fire that burns to get shared. It gets our attention and won't let go.

Fortunately, we don't have to face Pharaoh, we don't have to bring on the 10 plagues, we don't have to part the Red Sea, or lead masses of people through the wilderness. We just have to open a door for God – and let him do the rest.

Lives can be changed by inviting in.

Yes, there's a fine line between faith sharing and faith pushing. Listen – it's God asking us to open a door for him and let the Spirit blow through a friend's life. You have a

friend looking for holy ground. A friend who may not even be looking for God, but God is looking for him.

So put your shoes back on – you've got places to go, people to see, things to do, invitations to issue, burning bushes to listen to.

And remember v. 12 *I'll be with you.* Amen