

March 13, 2019 – Exodus 3:1-17 (Lenten Midweek)

When you hear the word “holy” what do you think of? What images come into your mind? What people, places, or things represent holiness to you?

Perhaps it's a magnificent church with towering stained-glass windows and a booming organ. Or maybe your tastes bend to the more contemporary, with a powerful worship service of modern music and prayer. Some people see holiness in the purity of nature and a beautiful scenic vista. Or you could be more people oriented and see holiness in the love we have for our neighbor.

Whatever you think of when you consider the idea of holiness, I sincerely doubt that any of you would possibly consider this image: two bare feet. Yes, feet. Dirty, smelly feet. The feet of a shepherd, to be more specific. After walking for hours, possibly days across a barren desert.

And yet, that's exactly what we find in our Old Testament lesson today. *“Take your sandals off your feet, [Moses,] for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”* That is holiness. Moses standing on a mountain with bare feet.

Why? What possible purpose is there in telling Moses to take off his shoes? Why does God want to see him in bare feet? Well, he doesn't. And honestly there isn't any real, practical “purpose” in Moses' shoes coming off. The point is that Moses needs to recognize that he is standing on holy ground.

And taking off his shoes accomplishes that, for two reasons. The first is fairly obvious. However dirty Moses' feet were, his shoes were a hundred times dirtier. Moses is a shepherd, after all. And you can't spend much time as a shepherd before you eventually step in some... sheep. And so this is a matter of cleanliness. Moses is physically setting aside the filth of his daily vocation as a reminder that he needs to approach God with a clean heart and mind as well.

The second may not be so obvious. You see, Moses is approaching something really, really bizarre. A bush that is on fire for no particular reason. A fire that is burning brightly enough that he can see it from a distance. And yet, the fire is not consuming the bush. The fire is there, but the wood isn't actually burning.

And this fire begins to speak to him. And the first thing it says is, “Take off your shoes.” Moses is in the middle of the wilderness, a barren, rocky, sandy wasteland. Miles from any other human being. And if he's going to escape, if it turns out this strange, talking fire is dangerous, he's going to have to run. And if he's going to run, he's going to need his shoes.

So this is an act of vulnerability. This is God asking, “Are you going to have faith that this is actually holy ground and that I am the Lord – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – here to help you? Or are you going to doubt? Are you going to run?” You gotta give Moses credit. This is a really, really weird thing that is happening to him. And he's handling it better than many of us would, I think.

Of course, it makes sense that he would, right? I mean, this is Mount Horeb. The Mountain of God. A deeply sacred site to the Israelites.

Except that... it's not. Not yet. Mount Horeb would become known as all of those things because of what happens to Moses here. And because of all the other events that would transpire at that location. The giving of the Ten Commandments. The building of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Mount Horeb would become a deeply sacred place for the Israelites.

But right here in Exodus chapter 3? It's not even close. Mount Horeb is a rock on the edge of the desert. A lump of granite and sand. At about 7,500 feet tall, it's actually the shortest of several mountains in the region. And, at that time, it had absolutely no religious significance.

Mount Horeb is little more than a minor detour. A hill you have to go around to get from one side of the desert to the other. And yet, God calls it “holy ground.” Moses himself considers it “holy ground”?

Why? Because God is there. God didn't choose Mount Horeb because it was holy. Mount Horeb was holy because God chose it. And it would remain holy. To Moses. To the Israelites. To the Jews of Jesus' day. Why? Because God was there.

There was nothing special about that rock. Just as there was nothing special about Moses' feet. Or the bush that didn't burn. All of it was holy because God was there. Which is important for us to remember.

This is something that I have to remind myself whenever we have communion. Something the elders may have noticed as well. I think we'd all agree that the Lord's Supper is a tremendously holy event. And you want it to be deep and meaningful and sacred...

And over here, a couple is whispering to each other as they wait for their empty cups to be picked up. And over there, there's a toddler squirming against his frustrated mother. And in the congregation, 80 people are struggling to sing a hymn they've sung at least 20 times before, and yet have never been able to learn. And I'm standing here with my face covered in sweat because I'm the sweatiest guy on the planet. And my back is aching from stooping over for the past 15 minutes. And none of this feels in the least bit holy.

And yet, it is. Because God is here. He is here in flesh and blood. And you can see him. And smell him. And feel him. And taste him. As real as the fire that surrounded that bush. Warming Moses' face. Lighting up the sky with its light. As real as the voice that came out of it. Telling us, *"I have seen the affliction of my people... and I have come to deliver them."*

You see, there's holiness and then there's holiness. There's the holiness of ornate churches and skilled praise bands. The holiness of natural beauty and human compassion. The kind of holiness you can see and feel right away because it's completely obvious.

And then there's a different kind of holiness. The holiness of a sinful man on an ordinary mountain. The holiness of a sinful child being sprinkled with ordinary water. The holiness of a sinful congregation eating ordinary bread and wine.

And nothing about it feels holy. There's nothing special about the elements. There's certainly nothing special about the people. We're all just a bunch of ordinary sinners. Easily distracted. With only the vaguest idea about what's really going on here.

And yet, we don't need to understand everything that's going on. And we don't need to pretend like we're anything better than the sinners that we are. All we need to do is the same thing that Moses did.

Accept that somehow, somehow... God is here. God is here because His Word here. Speaking to us like it spoke out of that burning bush. Speaking God's promise of grace and mercy and protection. Promising to be with his people always, as he was always with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Promising to be with his people always, to the very end of the age.

And because God is here, this time, this place, these elements... they're holy. In a way that surpasses any glory this world can give us. And even though we are sinners, God has invited us to take off our shoes and stand in his presence.

To cry out to him in our distress. In our guilt and failures. In our weakness and doubt. In our suffering and our pain. To cry out and know that he hears us. And he has come to deliver us. He has suffered whips and scorn to deliver us. He has died on a cross to deliver us.

God came down in that burning bush not just to make the ground holy, but to make Moses holy. So that he could lead his people out of slavery and bring to them God's Word of promise and hope. God comes to us in Word and sacrament not just to make the elements holy, but to make us holy. To lead us out of slavery to our sin and bring his Word of promise and hope into hearts.

God didn't choose the ground because it was holy. The ground was holy because God chose it. God doesn't choose us because we're holy. We are holy because he has chosen us. Amen.