

## Called to Holy Ground

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life!" I remember those words well from my youth. My older sister and I shared a room, and when we were teenagers she had a large poster over her bed with those words in bold print – Today is the first day of the rest of your life! Those words have stuck with me, and the words, just as they were on the poster above my sister's bed, came to mind this week as I read the story of Moses at the burning bush. It seems to me this story could be titled, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." For Moses, it was. I don't imagine he had any idea what was in store for him that day when he set off with the flock of Jethro's sheep. How could Moses have known that something special would happen to him? How could he have known that God would call him from the midst of a burning bush? But certainly, for Moses, that day at Mount Horeb was to be the first day of the rest of his life. Everything changed for him that day.

In the story from Exodus, scripture tells us that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law's sheep, and eventually ends up at Horeb, the mountain of God. Then in one simple verse, the author of Exodus describes a miracle, the likes of which we can scarcely picture in our minds. "There the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." Incredible. Amazing. This was certainly one way to get Moses' attention! It would surely make him stop in his tracks. And for us today, here at Abington, the question is the same. What is it that causes us to stop in our tracks? What amazes us? These are questions I pose to you and look forward to - together - discovering what the answers are for each one of you in your lives this year, and as a community of God's people at APC.

God's call to Moses occurs in the next two verses of our text: "Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush has not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called out to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Here we see Moses as an example to be followed. He could have run away in fear. He could have tried to hide from what he had seen. He could have closed his eyes or looked the other way. But Moses didn't choose any of these options. He knew he had to look, to see for himself just what this

was. And when he did look, God responded. God waited for Moses to make the first move before calling to him. And when God called out to him, Moses answered God's call.

And the story continues, "Then God said, 'Come no closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'" Have you ever been on holy ground? It may be that we're not familiar or comfortable with claiming that we're on holy ground, but I believe it happens more often than most of us realize. For Moses, the ground was holy because of the presence of God, and he was asked to show his reverence by removing his sandals. But for us today, it's a little bit different. When we come into God's presence – in prayer, in worship, in bible study, in fellowship, in mission, or in visitation – we are not asked to remove our shoes. But we are asked to be reverent to the presence of God, and we are called to be open and even vulnerable toward God and one another. Just think about what it's like being without shoes. (If you are able and willing, I would ask you to take off your shoes!) Without shoes, we are much more aware of the heat and cold. We are open to the hazards of rocks and glass, or stubbing a toe. Indeed, being without shoes is a very vulnerable way to be, and that is what God is asking of us today – vulnerability – with God and one another. It's when we are willing to be vulnerable with those around us – our families, our friends, and our faith community – that's when we find ourselves on holy ground.

There are two significant times in working with our youth at APC that we were asked to remove our shoes as part of worship. One was on our trip to Montana for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary, as we helped each other make painted footprints – a sign of our community working together and a sign of our vulnerability and reliance on God. The other time we removed our shoes for worship was on the Philadelphia Project mission weekend. One at a time, the youth were invited forward, and sat in a chair as I put paint on one of their feet, they added their footprint to a banner, then returned to have me rinse off the paint. Vulnerability for all of us. Serving and being served. Holy Ground moments. (Shoes back on!)

So, what happened when Moses discovered he was on holy ground? He hid his face, for it was believed in those days that to look upon the face of God would mean one's death. But while Moses has his face hidden, God reveals "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry ... I know their sufferings." It is here that we see the God of compassion – our God, who we can cry out to in our darkest times, and who always hears. But we also see the God of action. God calls upon Moses to

carry our God's plan for deliverance. God says to Moses, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

I wonder what Moses was thinking right about then. Probably something along the lines of "you've got to be kidding!" Most likely Moses was feeling very much like an ordinary person being asked to do something extraordinary. And so, Moses resists God's call. "Who am I that should go to Pharaoh?", he asks. Maybe he doesn't think he could face going back to Egypt. Maybe he would be too afraid to go before the powerful Pharaoh. We don't really know for sure, but I certainly understand Moses's reluctance, his wondering "why me?" And God also understands and assures Moses that he will not be going alone. "I will be with you," says God, as a pledge of presence and reassurance. What wonderful words. They may not have taken the fear completely away from Moses, but my guess is they sure helped as he struggled to believe an ordinary person like himself would be able to do the work of God.

I want to share a powerful story about feet, from the book Tattoos on the Heart, by Gregory Boyle. Gregory is a Jesuit priest whose church, Dolores Mission, had a ministry to the homeless in Los Angeles. He writes:

"The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.

Once the homeless began to sleep in the church at night, there was always the faintest evidence that they had. Come Sunday morning, we'd foo foo the place as best we could. We would sprinkle I Love My Carpet on the rugs and vacuum like crazy. We'd strategically place potpourri and Air Wick around the church to combat this lingering, pervasive reminder that nearly fifty (and later up to 100) men had spent the night there. About the only time we used incense at Dolores Mission was on Sunday morning, before the 7:30 a.m. Mass crowd would arrive. Still, try as we might, the smell remained. The grumbling set in, and people spoke of "churching" elsewhere...

The smell was never overwhelming, just undeniably there. The Jesuits figured that if "we can't fix it, we'll feature it." So, we determined to address the discontent in our homilies one Sunday. Homilies were often dialogic in those days, so one day I began with, 'What does the church smell like?'

People were mortified, eye contact ceases, women are searching inside their purses for they know not what.

'Come on now,' I throw back at them, 'what's the church smell like?'

'Smells like feet,' Don Rafael booms out. He was old and never cared what people thought.

'Excellent. But why does it smell like feet?'

'Cuz many homeless men slept here last night?' says a woman.

'Well, why do we let that happen here?'

'It's what we've committed to do' says another.

'Well, why would anyone commit to do that?'

'It's what Jesus would do.'

'Well, then ... what's the church smell like now?'

A man stands and bellows, 'It smells like commitment.'

The place cheers.

Guadalupe waves her arms wildly, 'Smells like roses.'

The packed church roars with laughter and newfound kinship that embraced someone else's odor as their own. The stink in the church hasn't changed, only how the folks saw it. The people at Dolores Mission had come to embody Wendell Berry's injunction: 'You have to be able to imagine lives that are not yours.'" (p 72-74)

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. For me, for you, and for us, the story is still unfolding. We know the end of the story in the case of Moses. Even in the midst of his hesitation and resistance, he is able and willing to lead the people of God out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and within sight of the Promised Land, knowing that God was with him. This morning, I offer you encouragement to open your eyes to the amazing opportunities of grace around you, to act and respond when called upon, and to remember that we are on holy ground more often than we realize. For God is in our midst and today is the first day of the rest of our lives!