

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
From No-Place to Holy Ground
Exodus 3
September 3, 2023

This morning, we read the story of Moses at the burning bush, which is one of my favorites in all of scripture. This is a story of reconnecting with the ground, with ourselves, our relationship with others, and with God. In other words, it's a story about taking off your sandals, you're on holy ground.

Reconnecting with the ground and God and all else is not exactly where modern life points us. In a scene in the sitcom 30-Rock, Liz asks Jack, "Why are you wearing a tuxedo?" Jack incredulously replies, "It's after 6. What am I, a farmer?" On the other end of life's spectrum and in real life, a boy named Dijour Carter refused to get out of the van parked in the gravel driveway of Soulfire farm in upstate, NY. On this field trip from school, he wanted nothing to do with the farm, the soil, or getting his Jordans dirty. He wanted nothing to do with farming.

Dijour shared Jack's aversion to the farm, yet the only thing worse than going on a farm walk with your classmates was being left behind in a van all by yourself. So he took off his clean Jordans to protect them from the damp earth and allowed, at last, the soil to make direct contact with his bare feet. Dijour, typically stoic and reserved, broke into tears during the closing circle at the end of that day. He explained that when he was very young, his grandmother had shown him how to garden and how gently to hold a handful of soil teeming with insects. She died years ago, and he had forgotten these lessons. When he removed his shoes on the tour and let the mud reach his feet, the memory of her and of the land literally traveled from the earth, through his soles, and to his heart. He said that it felt like he was "finally home."¹ ()

Maybe it's because of experiences like these that the story of Moses at the burning bush is one of my favorites in all of the Bible and is at the heart of what I'll be teaching in formation hour over the next few weeks during our Season of Creation beginning next Sunday morning. In the drama of the story, Moses takes off his shoes, his bare feet touch the ground, and from there, the whole story of Israel in captivity, his own redemption story, and the story of God with the people would be changed. As Leah Penniman, the Black female farmer who tells Dijour's story writes, by reconnecting with the soil, we heal the planet and ourselves.

There are so many layers of Moses' story, and the more time you spend with it the more it reveals of itself. The implications and themes in the story distribute into everything else that follows it. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis says that everything in the Bible before Exodus leads to Exodus, and everything after it is a commentary on Exodus. I'll take it a step farther, everything before the burning bush leads to it, and everything after the burning bush is

¹ <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/dirt/2019/02/14/by-reconnecting-with-soil-we-heal-the-planet-and-ourselves>

commentary on it. So let us, with Moses, turn aside to see this great sight. And remove our shoes as we do.

As Exodus 3 opens on Moses far from home, the sparse details amplify the intensity of the story. In the wake of the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt in Chapters 1-2, the dimensions of this scene are meager. It's a story that could be produced on a middle school stage by a theater department with nothing more than a public school fine arts budget. At the heart of the scene, there is merely one person and a shrub.

Far from the perch of privilege as an adopted member of Pharaoh's house, Moses has become an ordinary person doing ordinary things in an absurdly desolate place. Moses is *shepherding*, a verb form that is ongoing and continuous. He's shepherding, as if that is what he's always doing. His mundane and lonely work would presumably continue on and on, day after day after day. This is a person who is experiencing the distance between the man he was and the man he has become. He has come down from the heights and is now at the depths. He was in the very center of life's activity; now he is beyond the wilderness.

The wilderness plays a big role in scripture, but I don't know of another time when someone is described as being "beyond the wilderness." Is that even possible? In the ancient world, there were three kinds of places, as far as I understand it. There's my people's land, your people's land, and what's between those two places. Each group of people, each tribe, had their people, the land they lived on together, and the god they served on their land with their people. In Israel's sad case, they had gone from their land to Egypt's land and there, they became slaves of Egypt's people, on Egypt's land, under Egypt's gods. In that place, for way too long, it seemed their own God, the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was somewhere else, back on the land they left behind, certainly not here.

So, remember, place is a tightly bound relationship of god, land, and people. The space on the map between my place and your place is wilderness, the no-man's land, the no-god's land, the no-place place. The wilderness is the geographic and existential description of a no-place that's not even contested between my people and your people because nobody wants it. It's a loneliness between community, a place between places, a meaninglessness beyond purpose. Wilderness is where you go only when you have nowhere else to go, and you don't stay long if you can help it. Moses is not just in wilderness; he's beyond wilderness. Is that even possible?

You know it is. You know there's a place beyond place and a season of life that seems endless, as if it has no purpose that can be redeemed. You know there's an experience of life where yesterday is so far gone, and tomorrow seems utterly unreachable. Where you might as well be floating in space, untethered even to yourself, and certainly to your place and to God. When we're told Moses is beyond wilderness, it's as if the narrator says, "Let the reader understand: This is a man without hope and virtually without identity."

Yet, it's right there where God shows up, literally out of nowhere. In the most unlikely place at the most unlikely time to the most unlikely person, when you're caught in the drudgery of the

most endless mundane, God is there, too. The God who you thought had forgotten you, the God who you thought was dead and buried and gone. The God who you thought was a distant memory of your childhood, who you once knew and who once knew you in another life before life happened and the decisions you made and the price you paid and the places and people you left behind. The god who had forsaken you or you had forsaken. Right there, God is there, too.

“Moses, remove the sandals from your feet. The place you are standing is holy ground.” God’s word makes place out of no-place. Even the no-place is a place for God. The place you are standing, beyond wilderness, all alone, here as a driven leaf, the place you are standing is holy.” Take off your sandals.

These are the first words of God in Exodus, and this is the first thing God asks of Moses. Take off your sandals. There’s no antecedent for this in the scripture. Taking off shoes in some cultures is a sign of respect or cleanliness, but it’s not explained here how taking off shoes is a sign of respect for being in God’s presence. In fact, in my experience, going to a so-called holy place has meant putting more stuff on, not taking more stuff off.

It would’ve never crossed my mind growing up to go to church barefoot. Put on your church shoes is what I heard. Those size-too-small, never-broken-in, never-worn-another-time-during-the-week church shoes. And put on your shirt that’s too stiff, and pants that are too hot in the summer. Put on things to go to worship, not take them off. Later in life, we got the same message. Didn’t we? Put on your church shoes, and don’t forget to put on your church face. Christians are good at this.

In many traditions, pastors and priests put on layer upon layer of vestments from head to stoll, to shoes, to come before God’s presence. But it’s not just clothes that Christians put on to come to worship with one another—we have a whole outfit. We put on the belt of pretense, the breastplate of self-righteousness, the shoes of showiness. We put on a helmet of self-preservation and carry a sword of criticism. We put on happy, shiny faces where everything is fine, yes it’s all fine—my marriage is fine. My bank account is fine—don’t ask. My prayer life is fine—don’t ask, and the thoughts I had when I was alone with myself and my hours. It’s all fine, right? We’re good at plastering ourselves with the vestments of public piety, but we know that underneath those nice layers of protection and projection, the millstone of guilt is pressing on your shoulders, the hairshirt of shame reminding you: if they only really knew you, they would never accept you.

Maybe that’s not you at all. Maybe. But it describes a lot of us who in one way or another have been taught that to come to God or to be accepted by others in a community requires us to carefully curate what others see when they look at us. Covering up, and at the very last possible thing to be vulnerable. Sandals, from our story today, let us see, are a picture of all the buffers between us and the ground of our being, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with God.

God who speaks the liberating word in Exodus, the God made known to us in the incarnation of the Gospels is a god who it seems will have none of it. God is not a god of pretense but of purpose and seems to be satisfied with nothing less than taking lost places beyond the wilderness and turning them into holy ground, and finding people lost in the wilderness and lost even to themselves and transforming them into saints.

And if you ask immediately like Moses, “Who am I that you would do this for me?” Remember, it is also to Moses that God says, “Come on, now, take off your shoes, Moses. Take your first step home.”

God’s after more than shoes that protect us. God’s after all that insulates us from holy, divine, redeeming presence and refining power, from the truth of ourselves, and from the courage to live the radical life we are going to be called to live in following this God in service to all who are suffering. Because once you’ve taken off your shoes in God’s presence, you’re going to be sent back to Egypt. But first, take off your sandals, take off the self-imposed guilt; take off your shell and pretense and fear. Take it off and toss it into the refining fire from which the Word of God calls to you. And stand there for a while before the fire of God’s presence, barefoot, toes in the mud.

Your feet now touch the ground and in the grace that comes when we are honest with ourselves about who we are, and set ourselves before God for who we will be, we remember this is the ground of our being, this beyond-wilderness is not beyond the grace of God. Barefoot, bewildered, beyond wilderness, you are already home. Who is this God, made known in fire and mud between our toes, who is this God, made known to wanderers once lost but now found, lost sheep, now found, those once blind but who now see?

The God of your fathers and mothers speaking to you. The Lord, who sends you to take part in God’s salvation of the world. The God who is with you and will not abandon you. *I Am who I Am* The one incarnate in Jesus Christ, the one born to Mary, herself the unburnt bush, he who was crucified, died and was buried. He who descended to the uttermost place beyond wilderness, and then on the third day, rose again. He who is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He who will come again to judge the living and the dead. He who reigns with the Father in the unity of the Spirit, one God forever and ever.

With us here, even now, on this holy ground, in this place of grace and truth, and in you, you wonderful, beloved, called, redeemed, and sent child of God. Barefoot in the mud in which you find your life again. Thanks be to God here with us, even now.

Amen.

