

If you listen closely, the reading from Exodus sounds a little like the Christmas account from Luke 2. There was in the same country as Horeb a shepherd abiding in the field, keeping watch over the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, by night. The name of this shepherd was Moses. And behold, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. When the shepherd Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight, and as he drew near to look, the voice of the Lord came, saying, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.” And the shepherd Moses trembled and hid his face, for the glory of the Lord made him greatly afraid. And the Angel of the Lord said to him, “Fear not, for I have surely seen the ill-treatment of My people that are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt, and this will be a sign unto you: this bush that burns with fire and yet is not consumed.”

If you know your Bible history, you know this is the start of something huge. But in the moment, all Moses knows is that he sees a burning bush that is not burning up and he goes over to investigate. Then he hears his name being spoken, and then this request: “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” On this holy ground, the Almighty God identifies himself, promises to rescue his suffering people, tells Moses, “I’ve got a job for you,” and promises to be with Moses as he does it. Moses’ life has been changed on this holy ground.

When you came to worship today, what were your expectations? Did you come not really expecting anything to happen? Did you come because somebody else expects you to? Did you prepare for this experience? Did you come here today sensing that you were approaching holy ground? Did you come hungry for the presence of God? Did you come thirsting for living water and the fiery power of the Holy Spirit? Do you believe that this is a sacred, holy time, during which Jesus speaks to you through the words of the Bible? Is the experience of worship special, holy ground for you?

We fight an uphill battle for time spent on holy ground. So-called conventional wisdom says, “Nothing is sacred.” Entertainers and authors gain notoriety by attacking the holy things of the Christian faith. Closer to home, time spent on holy ground sometimes takes a back seat to other concerns—and, when we do make it onto holy ground we fight a mental and spiritual battle to stay

plugged in and concentrate! However, none of that changes the fact that God Himself is present when His people gather to listen to His Word. It's holy ground because the Lord is here. That's what Moses learned, and we need to re-learn it, if our time spent on holy ground is going to benefit us. And it all starts by taking off your sandals.

When you're barefoot, you're vulnerable. You're exposed. When we approach God's holy ground, we take off our sandals--we become vulnerable as we expose our sin and confess it before the Lord. You push back at your human nature that places the blame on everyone and everything else and you say, in the presence of God, the blame is mine. I can't think of another place, group, or organization that asks its members to be as nakedly honest as we are when we "take off our sandals" in open confession together.

But rather than burn us up in his righteous fire, God tells us who He is on his holy ground. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He calls himself, "I AM WHO I AM". He further tells us He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And He is not here to kill, but to give life. He is here to rescue us and take us to a better place. That rescue comes through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. It was transmitted to you when you were baptized in His very name; it continues to be sent to you every time you eat and drink at the Lord's Table. That happens again when a called and ordained servant of the Word says: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It comes yet again when one believer says to another, "I forgive you." God knows our private miseries and our suffering, and here on holy ground he promises you rescue from sin's slavery. He promises deliverance to a land flowing with milk and honey—not just the paradise of a future in heaven—but the joy of living in his kingdom right now—the freedom of living as a forgiven person—the confidence of living for a King who has everything under control. Here on holy ground, God not only promises, but delivers. He delivers the goods to you, bought and paid for by Jesus Christ.

Yes, God revealed His name to Moses from the bush. He said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' Now listen. It is no mistake or coincidence that when Jesus grew and started teaching, He claimed, "I AM the Good Shepherd." "I AM the light of the world." "I AM the vine; you are the

branches.” Jesus Christ is indeed the Vine that took root in Bethlehem and that has now spread throughout the earth.

There is one more way in which we stand next to Moses today. After the sandals are removed, and God identifies himself, and tells of the rescue he will perform, he says, “So now, go, I am sending you...” For Moses that meant being sent back to Egypt, to stand before Pharaoh and to speak for God. For you, that means being sent to your home; your place of business; your circle of friends; if you are a student or teacher, that means being sent to your school; you are being sent to each and every place where you live your life to speak for God and live out his message of rescue and deliverance.

Standing next to Moses you may wonder, as he did, “Who am I, that I should go?” “Who am I, that I should represent Christ to my family and friends? Who am I that I should show Jesus to the people I work with?”

God’s response to Moses applies to you as well. “I will be with you.” It’s almost as if God is saying, “Look, it is my desire to use you. I want to send you. I will be with you. So don’t focus on you, focus on me, and let’s go.”

And Jesus will be with you, and not just in some vaguely spiritual way, but he will be with you every time you open a Bible and read his Word, or hear it, or study it. He will be with you when you remember your baptismal connection to his death and risen life. He will be with you, always setting a place for you at his table. He will be with you in the compassion and concern of a fellow believer. He will be with you in tangible ways every time you set foot on holy ground, and will stay with you as you return to living room and classroom, board room and garage, office, hospital and care facility. Soon we’ll step back into those places with feet that have stepped on holy ground, and hearts that have been changed by a gracious God. But for the few minutes that we have left, let’s leave our sandals off, just a little longer, in the presence of the great I AM, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.