

Standing on Holy Ground  
Exodus 3:1-15

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Moses is standing on holy ground. He hadn't realized it immediately, hadn't been particularly looking for it. Except for this burning bush thing, the ground looks fairly ordinary. He isn't seeking an encounter with any god. He's just minding his own business—or rather, minding his father-in-law Jethro's sheep.

Moses doesn't want any trouble. He was raised by Pharaoh's daughter and once had a certain amount of power and authority in Egypt. But he'd blown it when he killed a man. People were looking to punish him, maybe kill him, so he fled, left that life as far behind as possible.

He has built himself a quiet little life far from Egypt and Pharaoh. Married, settled down, had a few kids. A simple, humble life. He doesn't want a lot of responsibility. Tending sheep by himself way out beyond the wilderness is just his speed. He has run away from his old life.

But now here is this burning bush, calling to him. “Moses....”  
“Mooseees...” “Hey, psst! Moses! Over here!” And it isn't just bad mushrooms from breakfast causing some hallucination—it turns out that there is a god in the bush, and the god wants him to do something. He asks the god's name, thinking he might hear Ba'al or Astarte or Asherah or maybe Isis or Osiris. There are so many gods. And this god replies enigmatically, “I AM WHO I AM.” Or, because Hebrew is fluid when it comes to tenses, “I will be who I will be.” Yahweh. Is that a name? Or a refusal to reply? Or a description? A god who seems to inhabit the verb “to be”: I AM WHO I AM. A god who is the ground of all being, who made this holy ground on which Moses stands barefoot.

What is God, Yahweh, the great I AM, asking of him?

It turns out that Yahweh wants Moses to go back to the very life he fled in shame and terror. Go back to Pharaoh, to the Israelites who are sorely abused and oppressed, and lead them out of slavery.

Right.

No, really, God says. “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

How does Moses respond? Does he say, “Yes, okay then, absolutely—I’m on it! You can count on me.”

No. He throws up every excuse he can think of to say, “Sorry you’ve got the wrong guy.”

I don’t have enough authority or importance to do this job.

I don’t even know you or know your name.

The Israelites won’t believe me.

I’m not eloquent; in fact, I stutter.

I killed somebody there—they want me dead.

To each of these, God says, “I will be with you. Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered.”

Out of excuses, Moses finally just comes out and says, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” To which God, who is getting a little peeved, says, “Enough! You are the one. Get going already!”

And Moses, the reluctant leader, takes on Pharaoh, reconnects with his people the Israelites, helps them endure a series of plagues, and

ultimately leads them out of slavery. He becomes one of their greatest leaders ever. Because eventually he said yes.

We are standing on holy ground today. When we talk about the Holy Land we mean places in the Middle East where the events happened that are in our holy texts. But in fact, all land is holy. All of it is a gift from God, the ground of our being.

God invites us to take off our shoes and connect with this holy ground, to practice awe and humility and wonder at creation. A clergy friend of mine went to Oregon for the eclipse. At that moment when the last sliver of sun disappeared behind the moon, when there was this black hole in the sky where the sun was supposed to be, when she could suddenly see the stars that are there all the time but never visible during the day—she felt an immense sense of awe. This is not a burning bush or a magic trick but simple geometry about the alignment of three objects. And yet the eclipse reminded her that we are part of this vast, wondrous, holy creation, full of surprises.

We are standing on holy ground here. This particular piece of real estate at the corner of 20<sup>th</sup> and Prospect was once part of land used by the Duwamish Tribe. Before that, it was land of deer, cougars, bears, ferns, Douglas firs, eagles. For over a century now this land has been sacred to the people of Prospect Congregational United Church of Christ. Most of this parcel is covered by building or pavement, but there are still a few places where we could go outside, take off our shoes, and feel God's holy land between our toes.

What is God asking of us? If God appeared to us today in a burning bush or an eclipse or in the voice that speaks inside our hearts, perhaps God would say, "I have observed the misery of my creation all over this planet. I have heard the cry of species about to go extinct, of salmon picking up industrial toxins in the Duwamish River, of soils poisoned by too many synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. I hear the wails of survivors of this season's terrible monsoons in India, Nepal, and

Bangladesh as they grieve the 1,200 people who have died. Likewise I hear the sorrow of those in east Texas who have lost everything to the wind and waters of Hurricane Harvey. I see the destruction of the 70 wildfires in the western states. I know the sufferings of creation, and I want you to lead the way to healing this hurting planet.”

How do we respond? Perhaps, like Moses, we say, “Who am I to do this thing? Who would listen to little me? I’m not an eloquent speaker or a born leader. I’m afraid. I am too flawed. I like my quiet little life. Please find someone else.”

I confess I have said all of these things. Perhaps you have, too, either about our environmental challenges or about other things to which you have felt God calling you. Maybe at the birth of a child: “Who am I to take on responsibility for this life?” But the problems don’t go away. And if we’re waiting for our leaders to fix things, we might as well be waiting for Pharaoh to have a change of heart and just decide to free the Israelite slaves on his own. No, I take that back: some of our leaders are working very hard to heal this planet. They are doing admirable work. But they can’t do it alone. And others are working against them.

No, if we want to avoid the plagues that Pharaoh had to endure, we need to be leading the way.

How do we do it? We show up. We pray. We take off our shoes and feel I AM WHO I AM between our toes. And we see where that leads us.

This last Friday, September 1, was the World Day of Prayer for Creation. Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Orthodox Church put out a joint statement. Here is some of what they said. After laying out their concerns about how humans are treating the planet and reminding us that God has called us to be co-operators of creation with God, they write,

Therefore, united by the same concern for God’s creation and

acknowledging the earth as a shared good, we fervently invite all people of goodwill to dedicate a time of prayer for the environment on September 1<sup>st</sup>. On this occasion, we wish to offer thanks to the loving Creator for the noble gift of creation and to pledge commitment to its care and preservation for the sake of future generations.... Indeed, an objective of our prayer is to change the way we perceive the world in order to change the way we relate to the world. The goal of our promise is to be courageous in embracing greater simplicity and solidarity in our lives.

We urgently appeal to those in positions of social and economic, as well as political and cultural, responsibility to hear the cry of the earth and to attend to the needs of the marginalized, but above all to respond to the plea of millions and support the consensus of the world for the healing of our wounded creation. We are convinced that there can be no sincere and enduring resolution to the challenge of the ecological crisis and climate change unless the response is concerted and collective, unless the responsibility is shared and accountable, unless we give priority to solidarity and service.

In these days when more and more people are losing everything, living a quiet little life becomes a privilege and a luxury. So what do we do? We show up. We take off our shoes and feel the holy ground beneath us. We connect with the great I AM. We hear the call. We wrestle with it, perhaps throwing out all the excuses we can think of to say No. And then we say Yes. Amen.