

Freedom Means... Taking Off Your Shoes
Exodus 3:1-14 (AFBC 7/8/18)

We're spending the five Sundays of July in the book of Exodus as we focus on the importance of freedom. Although we're in an Old Testament book, we're also trying to hear clearly the words of Jesus found in the Gospel of John: "...the truth will set you free."

Last Sunday, we talked about how painfully honest God is as He tells us in Exodus about the early history of His people. He gives us "the whole truth." There are no "cover-ups" with God!

We tend to modify history, telling it in ways that are more to our liking. But God is in the truth business. He tells us the whole sordid mess!

This morning, we go to Exodus 3. Chapter one concludes with the children of Israel calling out to God for help. Then chapter two tells us of the birth of Moses. At the end of this chapter, we hear again about the terrible burden of slavery and how the people cried out to God to help them.

This then sets up Exodus chapter three where God calls to Moses from the burning bush. He tells Moses to go and confront the Pharaoh with God's demand that His people be set free!

Exodus 3:1-14 Moses and the Burning Bush

3 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."

⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of

Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. ⁷ The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." ¹³ Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Wow! Has anything like this ever happened to you? A bush burning before your eyes, yet not consumed. Then... God speaking from the bush, telling you to take your shoes off because you're standing on holy ground. How do you think you would react if something like this actually did happen to you?

Well... I'm not sure most of us would even notice. I mean, this happened live!—as in "real" reality, not "virtual" reality—so I'm not sure it would even get our attention. Know what I mean???

Sometimes we see stuff on the "big screen," and they keep getting bigger! Other times we see stuff on the small screen, and they're getting more compact. But whatever size screen we're watching, we stay over-stimulated most of the time by all this "virtuality." It gets to the point that we don't even notice "reality"—the beauty and wonder, even the people right before our eyes!

Friends, we're losing something important. Think about it: when did you last stand in awe of anything—anything real, I mean—not the fabricated stuff!?!?? So why should it come as any surprise to us, then, that life in general...and maybe worship in particular... has become rather routine, even boring for many.

Are we in danger of gathering with the company of the redeemed to sing our hymns and choruses of praise, to petition God in prayer, to have an encounter with His Holy Word, only to find that we just can't stay connected for long? (Poor signal; too few bars?)

Is there something wrong with the hymns and anthems; is there something wrong with prayer; is there something wrong with the reading and proclaiming of God's word? Or could there be something wrong with us?

If nothing ever moves us to wonder—and, no, I didn't say if nothing ever excites us, or entertains us, or gets our adrenalin going--I mean, if we never feel overwhelmed by the presence of God in His world, the extravagance of His love and mercy, and the magnificent glory of His creation...

... then, friends, there's something wrong somewhere. And I doubt that a burning bush could make it right. It probably wouldn't even get our attention!

Have we become so secular, there's no room left in our lives for the sacred? Have we grown so accustomed in this scientific age to having everything explained, that we refuse to consider the inexplicable—the mysterious and the miraculous? Could this be another form of enslavement from which we need to be set free?

Fortunately, Moses hadn't lost the gift of wonder when he happened upon that burning bush. He heard the word of the Lord and he took his shoes off. He knew he was on holy ground.

Maybe we should try taking our shoes off! People used to do that in church. I think that's why they started burning all that incense! But would removing our shoes make us feel any holier? Or that we were somehow in a holier place? Probably not.

Removing our shoes today doesn't carry the same significance it did in Moses' day. Maybe for us, we need to remove all the distractions instead—the cell phones and texting; all our thoughts about the week ahead; the lunch options available after church; the cute girl just down the pew from you; whatever...

It's not about shoes. It's about reverence... and wonder... and worship "in spirit and in... truth." There's that word again!

This is about listening, paying attention to God, so that when He speaks to our hearts, we can hear Him now just as Moses did so long ago. Let's begin by hearing God through these words He spoke to Moses in our text today.

The late Kermit McGregor, in commenting on our text for this morning, used four phrases to express what he believes God is saying to us in Exodus 3. Think of these as four Divine commandments. I'll share these and then discuss them with you for a few moments.

1. First, God says "**Answer Me!**" When Moses paused to ponder this curiously burning bush, the Lord called him by name; and Moses answered. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells us of a God who comes to us and calls us to respond. He wants us to answer Him because He has something to say to us.

God is in the "calling business." God called Abraham to be the father of His people. He called Saul to be their first king, and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others to be His prophets.

He called Mary to give birth to His Son, and Paul to spread the Gospel to the Gentile world. Each of these, by faith, responded to God, answered His call, and counted it as the greatest privilege of their lives to do so.

In their own ways, they all realized they were standing on holy ground; and, with wonder in their hearts, they took off their shoes. They listened... and obeyed.

God still calls people, friends. He issues His call using our names. He knows and loves each one of us. But will we hear His call and answer Him, or have we allowed our fascination with the secular to rob us of all that's sacred? Do we still have the capacity to see the burning bushes that God places along the paths of our lives?"

Don't shut God out. Listen for God be ready to answer His call. Know that any place has the potential of being holy ground, a place of calling—God calling us. Will we answer Him?

2. Now, a second word from the Lord--a word for Moses and for us--and that is "**Respect Me!**" "Answer Me," and then "Respect Me." This is what removing one's shoes is about. It's a sign of reverence--respect. The place has become holy because of the Presence of the Holy One.

"Come here, Moses," the Lord said, "but first... take off your shoes. I'm here, and that makes this place holy."

Now you and I know through the ministry of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit that God is in every place. There is nowhere we can go where God is not, although He's promised to be with us in a special way any time we "gather together" as His people.

Why is it, then, that we so often come here, and others congregate in their special places, to go through the motions of worship... without ever truly worshipping? We sing "I stand amazed in the presence" in the most unamazing ways, and "when we've been there ten thousand years" as if we never expect to get there.

My prayer each Lord's Day is that... this time... we will have a real encounter with God. But as the old country preacher said, "Instead of 'standing on the promises', sometimes we just sit on the premises. Maybe the bush is on fire, but who are we to notice?"

How can we be so detached, so nonchalant about it all, in the very presence of Almighty God? I think we know He deserves better. He deserves our respect. God said to Moses then, as He says to us now, "Respect Me!" I AM the Lord your God—Respect Me!

3. Then, a third word we need to hear from the Lord: "**Know Me!**" The Lord said to Moses "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham... Isaac... and... Jacob." (verse 6)

"I want you to understand who I am," God said to Moses; and then He begins telling Moses the big plans He has for his life. Moses listens in amazement, feeling increasingly inadequate to do what God is asking him to do. So finally he asks "But who am I, Lord?"

Look at verse 11: "...but Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?'"

But God doesn't answer Moses. Did you notice--He simply says "I'll be with you." To which Moses replies, in effect, "Okay; but then... who are You?"

Now to verse 13: **"Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'"**

This is God's reply (verse 14): **"I am who I am."** He said, **"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'"**

Moses asks God to help him know God better. And this is what God does, for He wants His people to know Him.

Now, it needs to be pointed out here that Moses was not asking God for a proper name. God had already revealed His name as "Yahweh"--translated sometimes as "Jehovah." What Moses was really doing here was asking God to explain what His name meant.

God's reply in Hebrew was something like "éhyeh ásher éhyeh." Bible scholars love to debate the best translation of these words: "I am what I am;" "I will be whatever I will be;" or "He causes to be whatever comes into existence." Those are three possible translations of what God says here.

But whatever the best rendering of that phrase may be, God wants to make it known to Moses and to all His people that whatever they need, that's Who He is. Yahweh is the one who is "always present to save, and who's more than adequate for every situation. With such a God as this by his side, Moses would be able to do the impossible."

"Know Me!" God said to Moses. "Know who I am." And God continued to add to Moses' knowledge. He added also to the understanding of those who came after Moses, until finally He sent us His Son as the fullness of His revelation—His final Word!

God still says to us, "Know Me!" But now God points us to Jesus, no longer just a spoken or written word, but now "the Living Word." Jesus Christ is "the Word of God" in the flesh, dwelling

among us, full of grace and truth—come to Earth that we might know God.

4. Now, friends, that should fill us with wonder and praise; and it should also help us to hear and respond to the fourth word that God has for us—again, a word He spoke to Moses, but a word He has spoken even more clearly to us through Christ Jesus; and that is **“Follow Me!”** Answer/Respect/Know/Follow Me!

A true encounter with God always leads to this—“Follow Me—for I have something for you to do.” God said to Moses (Exodus 3:10): **“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”**

What happens next, and anyone who has ever served on a church nominating committee already knows—excuses happen. We didn’t read all these in our text for this morning, but let me refresh your memory. Moses said he felt weak, he was unequipped, he lacked credentials. The Lord listened to all the excuses, and each time He found a way to reassure Moses.

The thing that really made the Lord angry, though, was when Moses said, “I’m not available. You’ll just have to send someone else.” Nothing ties God’s hands more than that—because God won’t force us. He says, “Follow Me!” He extends the invitation, but He leaves the decision with us. We are free to choose—we have “Soul Freedom.”

Friend, you may think that you’ve answered God, that you respect Him, and know Him; but until you have responded to His call to “Follow Me,” until you’ve allowed God to use your life, your time, talent, and resources in some ministry, you’ve never taken off your shoes in wonder before God. You’ve never stood on holy ground.

Instead, you’ve kept God at a safe distance--so you can’t really know Him, or respect Him. And you certainly haven’t answered His call to follow.

There’s a better way. Know God’s truth. Hear it and respond to it--and let His truth set you free—free... to live, and love, to serve, and give—to experience the abundant life that He so wants to give you. This day, answer the Lord’s call in your life: “Follow Me.”