

Today's Exodus story has Moses out doing at daily work – tending sheep. We read that he turns aside, noticing a bush is aflame but not burning. Moses is curious and moves closer until a voice instructs him, “Come no closer. Take off your sandals. You are on holy ground.” God is speaking.

This story's in Bible movies and children's Bibles. Artists have painted, drawn, made mosaics of it. Songs abound about Holy Ground. John Johnson has composed an anthem in 4 parts that'd be great for All Saints' Sunday, Nov. 5. Let John or Ken know if you'll add your voice.

The burning bush story signals God's nearness – aflame in the world all the time if, like Moses, we'll turn aside and notice. God speaks when God notices Moses is curious. This is a teachable moment. Moses is paying attention. God gets excited, “Take off your sandals, Moses. I'm here too. This is holy ground.”

It's been assumed over the years that taking off shoes here is out of respect. Sandals are dusty. But scholars say more.

One says the problem is, sandals were made of leather - animal skin. That made them impure.

Another says being barefoot grounds us where we stand – plants our feet where we are without intermediary stuff between us and the earth.

Another idea says removing sandals symbolizes letting go of possessions – clinging to nothing but the holy ground of God.

Yet another thought is, shoes symbolize superficiality – skimming the surface – while luminal experiences – like experiences of birth, or death, or beauty, or tenderness, or awe open us to deeper awareness. We see what's been there all along – but something awakens us to finally see.

One more idea on taking off the shoe suggests is that this story launches Moses into his life's mission. God is calling Moses to lead people from slavery to freedom. For Moses to do that he needs to be free himself.

Of all the ideas I pondered this week what makes fresh sense to me is a thought from Hebrew studies scholar after her visit to Japan.

Dr. Karla noticed a widespread practice of taking off shoes when entering homes or places of worship. She got into it herself and decided to research their reasons why. Two reasons were prevalent. Cleanliness, of course. Shoes are dusty.

Many in the US now have “shoes off” practices. Some of you may do that in your own homes. I saw a doormat recently that had the Queen of Hearts on it from Alice in Wonderland. The Queen points her finger sternly with the words, *Off with your shoes*.

But besides being dusty, the second reason found in Dr. Karla’s research on Japan identified that taking shoes off is seen as allowing people to be themselves, their real selves, unrestricted. Taking shoes off was a sign of coming home to be their fullest selves.

In her commentary on Exodus 3, Dr. Karla ponders whether there might be something to this in the exchange between God and Moses. God could have snapped a divine finger and freed those enslaved in Egypt. But the Bible repeatedly shows us God choosing not to take things in God’s almighty hands all alone.

If God wanted to work alone, God would be snapping God’s fix-it fingers all the time. But God chooses consistently to not work without us. Martin Luther deals with this in his treatise on the Babylonian Captivity. God chose then and keeps choosing to be looking for partners willing to do God’s work with our hands.

Dr. Karla may be onto something in wondering if the instruction to take off the sandals doesn’t signal God’s hope for Moses to be who Moses really is – not perfect but gifted for partnering with God for the liberation so needed in Moses’ day.

Our Biblical God just isn’t a takeover kind of God – though we might wish God would sometimes. God instead wants partners – and uses all sorts of imperfect people like Moses – who are willing to be persuaded to use their gifts for what God is up to.

Moses doesn’t respond quickly to God’s call. He argues. “I’m no up for that, God. Find someone else. Others will be better at it.” Exodus 3 says Moses goes on about why God should send someone else to Pharaoh.

“Not me,” said Moses. “I don’t speak well. People won’t believe me.” Others, like Jeremiah and Isaiah have said, “I’m too young, or too old, too tired or scared.” But God persists. Mary, Mother of our Lord, is rare in the Bible, quickly saying Yes.

I like the thought of taking shoes off as an image of grounding ourselves. This could become a daily practice. Each time we take off our shoes, what if we take that moment to ask God’s help in waking this day to our truest selves – or how might we help others awaken to their truest selves.

This is the work of spiritual discernment – work we’re never too young or too old for. Awakening to our true selves is a life-long journey.

The divine voice in Exodus 3 calls Moses by name, assuring him he stands on holy ground – right there in the humble reality of his life. He’s a shepherd – skilled at leading vulnerable creatures to safety – why couldn’t God work through Moses to free people from bondage?

God also calls out to the uniqueness of you for the sake of world. You are enough – your true self formed by the gracious love of God. Our excuses, like Moses’, fall silent before God.

Many discover nothing makes them happier than the moment it dawns on them, God indeed longs to use their true self for good in the world.

This is my vision for LCM this Fall. May we be a ‘take off our shoes’ kind of church – helping each other hear and heed God’s partnering call.

*Will you let my life be grown in you, and you in me? ELW798*

Amen