

Lent 3, Year C

- Old Testament passage today has one of my all-time favorite lines of Scripture, one that I try to always keep in mind
- It comes as part of the story of Moses being called by God to lead God's people out of Egypt, out of slavery into freedom – comes at the beginning of this journey that is so central to what it means to be God's chosen people that it is still a part of our identity, still a part of our DNA, still one of those stories we tell after lighting the new flame at the Easter Vigil, the central feast of our faith
- So you could say this moment is kind of a big deal
- And it is announced as such – announced with a bush that is engulfed in flame but is not consumed
- And Moses turns to look at this bush, this incredible occurrence that he'd never seen before, this moment of God's glory being revealed, and he hears God call his name
- And he responds exactly the way you're supposed to respond in Scripture when God calls your name: "Here I am!"
- And what God says back to Moses is utterly unique: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."
- "Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground"
- And God goes on to give instructions to Moses, to tell Moses where to go and what to say and who it was that sent him – but for me, when I think of this passage, I always think first and foremost of that one line, that I find utterly incredible: "Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground"
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- Before seminary, I attended one Episcopal Church in Augusta, Georgia, while my wife Loren worked at another
- Both of these churches, while we were respectively a part of them, went through something called the Epiphany process, where the parish was invited to take stock of itself – to see what assets and gifts it had as a result of the members of the community, and how these gifts could be leveraged to make the parishes themselves make the greatest possible difference in their community while also being as clear as possible about who they were and why that was important
- And the way this process played out was largely conversational – in the form of small group or "cottage meetings", or eventually in larger parish meetings to discuss some of the

findings

- And it was fascinating and exciting to go through this process, to see it play out in two very different churches that happened to be just around the corner from each other
- But one of the most thrilling parts of that process was people having the opportunity to talk about their gifts, and the ways in which they were making use of them for the good of the world – sometimes in their day jobs, sometimes through the church, sometimes through volunteer organizations, and sometimes completely on their own
- But there were quite a few moments at which people would have a sort of breakthrough, and realize that some of this work that they did, or that others did, wasn't just an extra detail about them – was part of their ministry, of the way they were living out their faith
- At the outset of that Epiphany process, they had a sort of covenant they laid out with expectations for the process including things like saying it was important to be honest and open to the presence of the Holy Spirit at work
- But what they might've said instead, before each of those meetings, was: "Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground"
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- Before seminary I also worked as a volunteer youth minister, and one of my favorite activities, something I would try to do pretty much every time the youth gathered, was something that I unabashedly stole from my wife, who unabashedly stole it from a Sunday school teacher in her parish
- And it's a little exercise called 'Good, Bad, and Godly' – and it's just what it sounds like – at the beginning of any gathering, we'd just each take a turn saying one good thing, one bad thing, and one godly thing that had happened since last we were together
- It's a really excellent exercise and I commend it to you as a sort of principle, especially that last bit, the 'godly' bit
- You see, forcing yourself or each other to actually name moments when you've seen God at work in your life is genuinely transformative – it conditions you, when God is at work as God so often is in our lives, to take notice, rather than simply taking for granted
- Eventually, you come to realize, that God has done and continues to do more in your life than you'd ever really realized before – you realize that God's holiness permeates pretty much your entire life
- Eventually, perhaps, you might even walk around muttering to yourself, "Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground"

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- Just a couple of nights ago, I ran out to the store with my son Elias in the narrowest and maybe unlikeliest of windows – the time after he’d put on his pajamas and gotten ready for bed, but before he had to actually lay down
- There were a few things we needed at the store, and so I knew I had to go out that evening – but decided it would be more fun to take him on a quick trip rather than wait until the boys were both in bed and then go on my own
- So I loaded the both of us into our van and drove around the corner to the store
- And on the way back I realized how long it’d been since I’d actually been outdoors at my absolute favorite time of day – those evening twilight hours when the fading light makes everything seem almost surreal and supernaturally beautiful
- And as I sat there talking to my son who was in the backseat, I realized that I was hardly ever out at that time of day anymore because it tends to be right around the same time as the bedtime routine – so if not for the chance need for some last-minute shopping, I wouldn’t have seen it that night, either
- And so I asked my son if he noticed how beautiful the sky and the world were just then, with everything just a bit paler and bluer than usual – and I told him how much I loved that time of day
- But what I might have said to him instead was, “Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground”
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- I know plenty of people who read stories like the story of Moses and the burning bush, and wonder why we never get signs quite that clear anymore – I myself have read this story before and wondered why we don’t really see any burning bushes – don’t always have God’s voice booming out our name, and then giving us very specific instructions about where to go and what to do
- But I think we’ve made a mistake if we think that means God is any less present – even any less **conspicuously** present – in our lives
- God shouts to us from the beauty of creation, God calls our name through the people we encounter, and God is at work in our lives, all the time, if we can only remind ourselves, can only remember to look
- So every once in a while, I think we have to say to ourselves and to each other: “Take off your shoes – you are standing on holy ground”