

## On Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-9

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By Rev. Ridgley Joyner

The iconic Moses and the Burning Bush. One of the Old Testament's "greatest hits" the story you almost always learn in Sunday School, alongside of Noah's Ark and Adam and Eve. Last week in worship we read of Moses's beginnings in the heart of violence and hate. Moses was destined to be killed, and survived. With an edict out to kill the Hebrew male babies, Moses' mother hides him for 3 months in her home. When she can't hide him anymore, she crafts a basket laid with pitch on the inside and sends him down the river. It truly speaks to how dire this situation was for her, that this was the safest option. He FLOATED DOWN A RIVER IN A BASKET and somehow was taken in by Pharaoh's wife with his sister as a nursemaid.

Today's scripture accounts for but a moment in time of Moses's life, but it was a moment that forever changed him. Moses wasn't young here, he had lived a life—"Raised by Hebrew mother. Adopted by Egyptian princess. Murdered an Egyptian worker. Rejected by fellow Hebrews. Flees his homeland and is identified as an Egyptian by the woman he soon marries.

In the previous chapter, Moses calls himself an "alien" residing in a foreign land. The Hebrews rejected him as their own, Pharaoh sought to kill him. The Midianites consider him an Egyptian. Moses is not fully *home* in any community. Yet this sorted life is just what God needs to fulfill the mighty task of delivering the Israelites from the hands of pharaoh. And it all starts with a shrub ablaze, an attentive Moses and a God who invites him to take his shoes off, for he is *home*.

What once was a life lived in royalty he now finds himself tending his father in law's sheep on Horeb--when he steps aside to check out this baffling scene-a bush on fire but not consumed. The word "Horeb" where this bush is located means "wasteland" and the Hebrew word for the bush is *sneh* which only occurs in the bible when describing this bush. It's essentially a shrub. So here, on a hill that means wasteland, a man that has never felt like he was *home* shuffles aside to see a shrub ablaze and meets God. God invites him to take his shoes off, for he is on holy ground. After this encounter Horeb is known as Mountain of God.

The first words Moses utters to the talking bush are simple yet important. He says “Here I am” just like Abraham, just like Mary. Moses says “here I am” ---here, Moses is curious, attentive and present. The first thing God has him do is take off his sandals, for he is only holy ground and this is a sacred moment. Here on this mountain of God, here at this strange sight and holy encounter, Moses shows up as he is, as God made him to be, and takes off his shoes. He is attentive to God working in this moment.

This ordinary place is made sacred by the sheer presence of God in an unexpected place. Here God tells Moses what is to come, how he will participate in this liberative God’s plan. God has heard the cries, God has seen their plight, God is intervening, and Moses is integral to this liberation.

But immediately we see a relatable Moses. Who, Me? Who am I to do this big thing!? Later in chapters 3 and 4 we see 5 of Moses’s excuses as to why he shouldn’t be called to this after this initial encounter. Moses was *unsure*, God persisted for God had chosen.

- Ex. 3:11 - I’m not good enough
- Ex 3:13 - I don’t have all the answers
- Ex 4:1 - People won’t believe me
- Ex 4:10 - I can’t speak well
- Ex 4:13 - Send someone else

All of Moses’s excuses as to why he can’t serve God *now* are answered by Yahweh with a future promise. I will be with you. Moses wasn’t perfect and Moses hadn’t found himself in just the right season to start serving God. God interrupted his life, reminded him he was on holy ground, and voluntold him. And we know, by reading the rest of Exodus, it was a journey and God was indeed with him every step of the way. It all started with being attentive, taking off his shoes, recognizing God at work and having the courage to trust God every step of the way. He wasn’t sure of his ability to fulfill what seemed like this big call. And yet with a simple “Here I am” a commitment to show up as he is, as God made him to be—found his identity shaped by the courage to take a step trusting God would provide the rest.

The iconic Moses and the burning bush is my *favorite* because stepping aside to be attentive to a small thing led to a big change in his life.

I wonder for us, how often do we not notice what is all around us? That we are only holy ground. How often do we make time for curiosity? OR does making our lives busy allow for us to plan things out, no moments of time that we can get roped into something we maybe don't think is God's plan for us because that would be too much. I know I'm guilty of it—even with our programming at church!

This time last month, I was preparing to drive home after a week with our high school youth at Montreat, only to head back with the women of the church for the Women's Conference. You may have read in the newsletter a couple weeks ago that 10 women from St. John's (and friends of St. John's) gathered with hundreds of other women to worship and experience God anew. Our theme was "Seen" and it really hit home for me. Because while I agree, it was insane that I drove back and forth to Asheville twice in August, I couldn't miss an opportunity to share a place that means so much to me with my church family. Because Montreat was a place where I felt most "seen" as a young person, and it was the mountain of God that shaped my call while my shoes were off in the creek.

Our first morning at Montreat, Carla Cheiffo and I sat on the porch catching up, and we decided to go for a walk. There as the morning fog was burning off the mountain, we strolled through my favorite spots that I've known since I was a child. I shared with Carla my memories of growing in faith at Montreat and how much it meant to me, but also how much the people that brought me to Montreat mean to me. My church was the community of faith and family that raised me, assured that I knew I was loved, and later affirmed my call to ministry. Affirmed is a gentle word. I was voluntold for many years.

I took Carla to my favorite spot at Montreat—the prayer porch. The only other St. John's member I had taken there was Ellen Moeller on her first visit to Montreat. There I shared that in the summer of 2010, I was with a group of my youth from Spartanburg, SC I was also discerning my call to seminary. The prayer porch is this

sacred holy place that is nestled between buildings on the campus tucked in right next to a creek. When you walk in, the place is filled with sounds of nature, the rushing water reminding you of your baptism, the smell of cedar shake walls, the handcrafted cross hanging in front of the trees and blooming wildflowers. In this tiny wooden chapel, is a podium is a Bible with wrinkled pages and black dots of mold from the excessive humidity of WNC summers. What used to be on the shelves of that podium were notebooks FILLED with pages covered in words. Words of young people of years past who were writing prayers to God. Now what is left are papers with written prayers, folded up and tucked in the walls of cedar shake, much like the wailing wall. It's the kind of place where you feel the need to take off your shoes, you're surrounded by the brave prayers of young people.

I tell you this because I was once a young person writing prayers in those old wide ruled notebooks. And I come back year after year to remember that summer I wrote a prayer to God full of doubt, what if's and "make it clear"s. Yet, it wasn't the first time I was discerning what God had long ago initially called me to. Some would say that Moses and I had a lot in common, this negotiating of the call for chapters. Two weeks ago was my 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination in the PCUSA and looking back, it was most certainly shaped by sacred moments in ordinary places where I found myself on holy ground committing to God that I'd be a part of this, even if I doubted my role in it.

My first time to Montreat as a youth conferee was my freshman year. My mom wouldn't let me go because it was too expensive (I was the kid that wanted to go on EVERY youth trip). So, I did what I usually did as a child and found a way to get around the reason my mom told me I couldn't do something. I found a full scholarship. My Director of Christian Education at the time encouraged me to apply for a program called Project Burning Bush—catchy title, eh? PBB as we alum so lovingly call it was a program that Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond started for youth who had leaderships gifts. It was designed to enable us to discern how to use our gifts to glorify God, whether that was through being a teaching elder, or like many of you, a ruling elder or deacon. The first year of the program was a week at the Montreat Youth Conference. I thought I had hacked the system, here I was able to be just like my peers and go to Montreat. What followed however was not what I expected.

My small group was led by a pastor and a seminary student. We were doing spiritual practices and unpacking what vocation looks like, reading scripture passages about call. At lunch, they set me up with a retired pastor to ask any questions I had. Every day that week, we sat on a bench by Lake Susan and my curiosity ran amuck. As you know, it didn't take much for me to befriend this man. He opened my eyes what it actually looked like to be a pastor. While it wasn't what I expected my Montreat Youth Conference experience to be, my curiosity allowed me to see that God was at work, and I was about to be a part of it. I left Montreat that year deciding to do "part two" of the program where we spent 12 days on campus at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond VA when the general assembly of the PCUSA was happening. A sophomore in high school, I had no idea what my small church in SC was a part of something so much bigger, so much more connectional than I ever could imagine. We took seminary classes, planned chapel services, even helped lead worship at the general assembly. I completed all three years of this program in 2004. And even today, about 10 of the 30 participants are good friends of mine. One a pastor down the street at Covenant Presbyterian, one in healthcare reform community organizing, and one a civil rights lawyer in the city. God called each of us to a holy space and our curious minds began to discover just what God was up to, even at a young age.

I can't say that I left this amazing "Burning Bush" program any different than Moses. I sensed God calling me to ministry but I had a million excuses. But I kept moving one step forward trusting that it would be made clear. The prayer I was writing in the prayer porch to God the summer of 2010 was when I got a job offer from the church I had interned at in college. They offered me a one year job as an interim youth minister along with funds to visit seminaries and a scholarship for living expenses once I decided where I wanted to go. "Ridgley you are called to ministry, and we are going to make sure you get there." I wrote in that prayer a "deal" with God. (isn't it funny how we think we can do that with God?) I'll go to seminary if it doesn't cost me any money. A full scholarship later with living expenses paid by the church I was a member of—God made it abundantly clear that I was to keep going, and that indeed I was called to ministry.

But still, I resisted. I would say "I'm called to seminary" "I'm called to discern". I don't know enough about the Bible, I'm so young, I just want to do *youth* ministry. Or even sometimes (God, anyone else but me) Who knows, maybe just a really engaged elder—churches love those! Well, we see how that worked out. There

were a lot of “small steps” I had to take and am still taking to follow what I believe God is calling me to do vocationally and personally.

I tell you all this to share—that even pastors don’t have that mountaintop experience where it is all made clear and with abundant courage throws caution to the wind for a life of devotion to God.

Sometimes a call story looks like everyone else in your life seeing God alive and well. Active. Sometimes a call story looks like a shrub that isn’t consumed by a fire, and you look to see why and suddenly you’re doing big things in the name of God. Sometimes a call story looks like uncertainty and doubt, but still taking the step in courage.

Our church is in a season of discernment right now. In some ways, we always should. My prayer is that in our own personal lives and as a part of this church family, would be that we are attentive and curious to the ways God has been and is alive and active. And May we, like Moses, have the courage to say yes to being a part of it all. May we, like Moses, take our shoes off when the moments arise and show up as our full selves—the very children of God that God made us to be. Taking one small step at a time.