

**Season after Pentecost**  
**Moses and God's Name**  
**Narrative Lectionary Year 2, Week 4**  
October 4, 2015  
Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD  
Readings Mark 12: 26-27a; Exodus 1: 18-2: 15b; 3: 1-15  
"Take off Your Shoes"

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

You never knew what to expect when Pastor Rick Mueller stepped into the pulpit at Atonement Lutheran Church in Florissant, Missouri. It was like a switch was turned on when he stepped into the pulpit. Rick had a laid back, quick-witted persona that didn't prepare you for the strength of his convictions and the power of his preaching. On this particular Sunday he said, "Take off your shoes. This is holy ground. Take off your shoes" He stepped out of the pulpit long enough to let us see he was untying the laces on his shoes and removing them. I was presiding that day, so I, the assisting ministers and acolytes did the same, as did many in the congregation, even the many stoic German and Norwegian Lutherans among us. I would later distribute communion in my stocking feet to many who still were shoeless, as God's words echoed around us, "the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

So what do you say, people of God? This morning I invited you to "Remove the shoes from your feet, for THIS place is holy ground." (*Take off my shoes as I continue:*) Yes, it will feel a bit awkward. None of us planned to expose our feet this morning. It will make most of us feel a bit more vulnerable. Yet for thousands of years, throughout the world, peoples of different traditions and culture have taken off their shoes before entering a place of prayer or worship. So I invite those who are able today, "Remove the shoes from your feet," for THIS place ---- in which we sit, sing, pray, and receive God's Word and Meal — IS holy ground. Here is where God's burning bush of Word, Communion and community call us by name and the Lord waits for us, in our individual and congregational ways, to say, "Here I am" or not.

If you are following the unfolding story of the Bible in this year's Sunday readings, a great deal happened between last Sunday's story of Jacob's wrestling with himself, his past and God and Moses' own encounter with the Lord in the desert of Mt. Horeb. We skipped the truly, epic, family saga that explained how the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob landed in Egypt. We skipped how Jacob's jealous, older sons sold their father's favorite son into slavery and Joseph's unexpected path from slave to prisoner to a powerful position alongside the Pharaoh. We skipped how a drought drove Jacob's family to seek help and because of Joseph, they were accepted as welcomed refugees in Egypt.

Our reading today begins several generations later when the current Pharaoh no longer cared about the story of Joseph. He only saw these Hebrew foreigners as a potential threat whose numbers must be controlled with fear, oppression and violence, the classic strategies of the powerful who want to stay that way at any cost. You might be tempted to wonder why God ever let this happen to the children of God's covenant. You may be tempted to think God took a vacation — until you begin to notice that every plan to kill off the Hebrews fails. Force them into brutal, forced labor — they still multiplied and spread. Kill off the new born baby boys ---- undermined by two midwives, women whom Pharaoh utterly discounted and the Hebrews continue to multiply and become strong. Kill a Hebrew boy who might rise to lead his people out of Egypt — thwarted by still more “incapable” women: a baby boy's mother & sister and Pharaoh's own daughter. It's the unfolding truth throughout the Bible — even when it looks otherwise, God stands on holy ground with those who seem powerless to others and with those who act on behalf of justice and love. Don't be fooled by external circumstances. Whether it be illness, hurricanes, yet another senseless school shooting, shrinking numbers or politicians whose power depends on inciting fear and division — God is not absent, God is at work. It may not seem obvious. It may happen through those who others discount, disregard or write off as too weak or too normal. We may not see the direction or like the timing, but God is Lord. God is persistent. God WILL win.

Enters Moses into the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt. Moses seems such an unlikely man to be chosen for God's showdown with Pharaoh. He was born and nursed in the Hebrew home of his birth and then raised in the shadows of Egyptian power as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. When he witnesses an injustice being done to a Hebrew worker, he measures his chances of being caught and then kills the Egyptian perpetrator, burying his victim in the sand. He soon discovers that both the Hebrews and Pharaoh know about his deed. So Moses flees to Midian where he befriends and marries into a priest's family. One Pharaoh dies but the slave conditions remain intolerable. God decides on a different course of action to help them.

Finally, one day, as Moses is caring for his father-in-law's flock, he goes beyond the wilderness to Mt. Horeb (a.k.a. Mt. Sinai) Where he finds a bush on fire but not consumed. He is drawn toward this curiosity. When he does, God calls him by name. I think at this point we're also meant to pause in our shoeless feet. Wrapped in the ordinary of our days of tending chores, classes, work and service, there are burning bushes waiting to be noticed. Perhaps not every day or as nearly dramatic as a desert bush, but we mustn't fool ourselves into thinking God is not trying to grab our attention. If we only live on the surface

and not in active lives of faith, we lose the eyes that will notice the sparks of the unusual or the unexpected that may be God calling you by name. Sometimes the occasion may be spectacular but mostly these smoldering bushes of God come into our ordinary as unexpected people who cross our path; a story you see on the news that inflames your heart; a missing piece that so obviously has a simple action; an article in the bulletin or newsletter that keeps tugging on your subconscious; the words from a Sunday reading or the taste of communion that seems to linger long afterwards. These are our burning or maybe smoldering bushes. How often might we rush by, paying it no mind, granting it no significance or dismissing it as our imagination? God is not absent. God is at work. We can fail to notice if we are not looking with eyes wide-open or we are blinded by what WE think God should be doing. Trying to notice is holy ground. Drawing near to its meaning is holy ground.

God asks Moses to remove his sandals for he is standing on holy ground. There are traditions upholding such a practice, but might there be more to it here? When you take off your shoes there is nothing between you and the ground. There is nothing to protect you from stubbing your toe but there is also nothing prevent you from knowing God's creation in the softness of grass, the wetness of the ocean, the soothing balm of a good rub. When God asks Moses to remove his shoes, it takes me back to Eden when it says, Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed. In creation as God intended it, there is to be nothing that stands between us our Lord. Remove your shoes before me, God says — take off your fears, your weariness, your regrets, your grief, your feelings of being overwhelmed, unworthy or out of control. Remove whatever you think stands between us and God. Calling us by name, God declares that whenever we walk with our Lord, we are on holy ground. It may look like a desert. It may look like a classroom, office cubicle, your home, the grocery store or restaurant but when we knowingly know God is with us, it becomes holy ground and nothing needs stand between us and God.

Moses hid his face in fear. We can surely understand that reaction. God would have none of that. If Moses thought the *presence* of God was something to fear, he only had to wait a while to find a still more frightening and baffling reality — God had something for him to do! Burning bushes aren't just for watching. They call us into action. God told this man, Moses ----who hadn't been fully accepted as Hebrew or Egyptian, who murdered someone, who was living as an alien in yet another land, humbly tending someone else's sheep — that he could act on God's behalf to bring the Hebrews out of the slavery of Egypt toward the long promised land. Moses reacted the same way we often react when contacted by the pastor or the Sunday School Superintendent or the Council's committee

looking for new members or the property team needing help for clean up days — Who me???? Who am I to teach, organize, be a Council member, chair a team, polish, rake, make attending Sunday School and worship a priority? It echoes those goats in one of Jesus's parables who said, "Who are we to feed and clothe the poor, visit the shut-ins and prisoners, help the sick and befriend the lost?" Yep, if you notice a burning bush, know you are on holy ground **and** it will likely include an invitation to do something for the sake and healing of God's world. An apology long overdue. A simple courtesy or kindness. Letting go of a grudge or hurt. Speaking up for God's sense of truth even though it may earn you eye rolls or hostility. Allowing our rage about injustice, oppression and violence to send us in search of hopeful, active responses. Seriously looking through Jesus' eyes at what fills our calendar and consumes our resources. And such requests from God are another reason why we may develop the habit of walking by burning bushes --- because we are afraid of being called out of our control and our comfort and into becoming more of what God made us to be. Isn't that why Moses questions God choice?

Now, listen my shoeless brothers and sisters of God to how God responds to that fear of Moses: "Who am I to do such a thing? You can't possibly think I can stand up to Pharaoh." God's simply, powerfully answers: "I will be with you" No, you can't accomplish this on your own. "I will be with you." If I ask you, if I send you on my behalf, I go with you, God says. Still not too sure, Moses asks, "Who are you?" God answers, "I am the God who made and keeps promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants and my name is "I AM who I am." I AM a God who comes to you in a burning bush in your ordinary day rather staying remote or demanding you climb up to me. I AM the God who wants you to remove your shoes and be at home with me. I AM the God whose presence can make any place holy even though you may only see it as a church building or a hospital room or the school bus. I AM the God who is and will be, who wants to draw near to you but will not be tamed or manipulated or contained. "I AM who I am" and I go with you wherever you go and especially when you are doing what I've called you to do.

Today's Scripture is a burning bush in itself. If you notice, if you look, if you take your shoes off you will surely find yourself somewhere in today's Scripture today? Wondering where God is in the mess of the world? You're standing in God's presence on holy ground. Afraid or eager to take off the shoes that keep you from experiencing the fullness of God's presence? You're standing in God's presence on holy ground. Ready or unwilling to look for smoldering bushes and draw near to them? You are standing in God's presence on holy ground. Available or too frightened to go with God into kingdom living? You are standing in God's presence on holy ground. Shoes are optional for the rest of

today's worship. I'll leave that to you. But take off those shoes, figuratively or actually, this week as you return to God's Word and Moses' story over and over again. It's holy ground we're meant to walk in with the Lord who walks with us. Such holy ground is a path to a way of life that goes beyond merely existing. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 10/3/15