

## Standing Barefoot on Holy Ground, by Dianne Otwell

In the midst of a “normal, ordinary day,” Moses encounters a rather “normal, ordinary” phenomenon: a bush that, at first glance, is simply on fire. Let us read this familiar passage in Exodus 3:1-12 in the colorful translation I found in *Word Biblical Commentary*:

*1 And Moses was grazing the flock of Jethro, his wife’s father, a priest of Midian, driving the flock well into the wilderness, when he came to the mountain of God, Horeb. 2 Suddenly, there appeared to him the messenger of Yahweh in a blaze of fire from the middle of a thornbush. He looked in amazement: the thornbush, enveloped in the flame, was still the thornbush—none of it was destroyed! 3 So Moses said, “I have got to go over and take a look at this unusual sight! Why is the thornbush not burning up?” 4 Yahweh saw that he had gone over to look, and so God called out to him from the middle of the thornbush, saying, “Moses! Moses!” He replied, “I am here.” 5 Then he said, “Do not approach here! Slip your sandals off your feet, because the place on which you are standing is holy ground!” 6 Next he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Thus Moses covered his face, because he feared to look toward this God. 7 Yahweh then said, “I have seen clearly the humiliation of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry of distress at the pressure of their work-bosses. Indeed I know their pain. 8 Thus I have come down to snatch them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them forth from that land to a good and roomy land, to a land gushing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 Take note now: the distress-cry of the sons of Israel has reached me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are squeezing them. 10 So go now—and I will send you forth to Pharaoh, and you will bring my people, the sons of Israel, out from Egypt.” 11 But Moses answered God, “Who am I, that I am to go along to Pharaoh, that I am to bring the sons of Israel forth out of Egypt?” 12 He immediately replied, “The point is, **I am** with you. The proof of this fact—that I have sent you forth—will be plain in this sign: in your bringing the people forth from Egypt, you all shall become servants of God on this very mountain.”*

Where was Moses on this momentous occasion in his life? At least one translation places him at the “back of the wilderness.” It appears that Moses has been forced to search for grazing “beyond” or “behind” his customary routes and has found himself in a completely new and strange and distant place. It does not seem likely that Moses’s priest father-in-law, Jethro, knew of this “mountain of God,” or indeed that anyone else had ever before experienced it as such. “That the urgent point of this passage is theology and not geography is made clear by the fact that neither here nor anywhere else in the OT is the location of the mountain preserved, or for that matter, even considered important.”<sup>1</sup> Here is Moses, raised as a prince of Egypt, who at age forty had been forced to flee Egypt, because in his zeal for his Hebrew kin, he had killed an Egyptian. Here is Moses, who has spent *another* forty years shepherding his Midianite father-in-law’s sheep. Here is Moses, aged 80 (and even if we interpret “40 years” as a “long time” rather than as literally 40 years, it is safe to say that he is no “spring chicken”) and entrusted

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<sup>1</sup>John I. Durham, *The Call of the Deliverer, His Commission, and His Obedience*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3, ed. David A. Hubbard, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 30.

with his wife's family's source of livelihood. The last thing he is expecting is an "up close and personal" encounter with God.

So Moses sees a thornbush "enveloped in flame," which was probably not an uncommon sight in the wilderness of Midian. What was *exceedingly* uncommon was the fact that the "thornbush was still the thornbush." None of it was being destroyed! So Moses "turned aside" to look—and *found himself on Holy Ground*. God introduces Himself as the God of Moses's own father—as well as the God of *the* spiritual fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, this is the God of Moses's family in Egypt as well as the God of the three great patriarchal fathers of the Hebrews. Moses is suddenly in the Presence of God, and his reaction is to hide his face (and I am sure we can assume that he also took off his shoes). So as Moses stands barefoot, face hidden, before God, he hears words that "normal, everyday" gods (that is, gods with a small "g") do not utter: "***I have seen*** clearly the humiliation of my people in Egypt, and ***I have heard*** their cry of distress at the pressure of their work-bosses. Indeed, ***I know*** their pain." the Lord continues: "Thus I have come down to *snatch* them from the power of the Egyptians." "I have seen, I have heard, I have known," says this God. These are the three actions we see God taking towards Israel, for Israel is the object of God's intense attentiveness. God acknowledges and engages the troubles of Israel: their afflictions, their cries, their sufferings. It is the fourth verb in the sequence, however, which is astounding: "I have come down." This verb articulates decisively what is crucial for Israel's understanding of God and which for Christians, culminates in the incarnation—God has "come down" and actually entered into human history! And if that were not enough, God continues by using two more verbs of enormous power: "deliver" and "bring up." The verb translated "deliver" is the same one used in the previous chapter of Exodus (Ex 2:19) where Moses "snatches" the daughters of Jethro from the destructive power of the shepherds. God is promising to "snatch" Israel from the destructive power of Egypt. The second verb, "bring up," is one regularly used for the exodus.<sup>2</sup>

"Your part in my plan is to go to Pharaoh and lead my people out of Egypt," says the Lord. "Who am ***I*** to lead them out?" Moses asks. "Who *you* are is not the point," says the Lord, but rather who is and will be, with you. ***I*** [will be] with you." And in case Moses should later have reason to doubt that this experience was real, the Lord continued: "I will give you a sign: you will bring the people out of Egypt, and you will become my servants on this very mountain."

"Take off your shoes," God commands Moses. "You are on Holy Ground." Why did God insist that Moses to take off his shoes? We know that it was a common practice in this era and in the area, by which one signified his or her recognition of a sacred spot or a house of worship. Might it also have been because "shoes desensitize, and protect—because they are needed for the practicality of our daily walk? *But we need to take them off on Holy Ground*. Our feet are the site of many nerve endings, and are

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<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. I, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 711-717.

exquisitely susceptible to pain. So, we protect them. But not on Holy Ground. When we find ourselves standing on *Holy Ground*, it is time to lay aside that which desensitizes, and that which protects.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to “take off one’s shoes?” It means to strip away whatever prevents us from experiencing the holy. It has been suggested that God frequently speaks to us from a “burning bush,” i. e., in the fretful whimper of a child, the anxious questions of a sick friend, the frail moans of a fragile elder. If we “take off our shoes,” we will be able to more fully realize that the place where we stand is Holy Ground, and *we will respond to our fellow human beings as we would wish to respond to God’s own self speaking from a burning bush.*<sup>4</sup>

When God speaks to us from the burning bushes of today, His messages are often missed because of unnecessary shoes. Most of us have any number of unnecessary pairs of shoes littering the closets of our professional, social, and even church, lives. First, there are running shoes, which many of us wear as we rush from task to task in an attempt to manage the day. As we fly about, feet barely touching the ground, it is easy to forget, that the ground over which we are running may actually be Holy Ground. Our sturdy walking brogues are an often-relied-upon pair of shoes, which provide protection against unwanted intrusions. Unfortunately, their insulated soles, which keep us safe and secure, may also prevent our feet from feeling the Holy Ground on which we walk. And then there are our favorite, old loafers, well worn and cozy. When we are wearing our loafers, we can so rest in their comfort that we need not be troubled by any disturbing “bumps” on Holy Ground.<sup>5</sup>

When Moses “turned aside” to notice the bush that burned, but was not consumed, he did not recognize the ground upon which he stood as “holy.” After all, for Moses—as for us—“Holy Ground” is indistinguishable from other ground. And there was nothing *inherently* “holy” about the ground upon which Moses stood. What made it “holy” was the Presence of God. *If we are going to have the privilege of standing on Holy Ground, we have to recognize God’s Presence.* And in order to recognize His Presence, we have to “turn aside.” We have to be mindful. We have to pay attention. More often than not, God is Present in a special way at the times and in the midst of the circumstances, when we least expect God. We can “rush by” in our “running shoes” and completely miss being in God’s very Presence. *We can walk around in our heavy brogues and never feel the pain of the thorns that dropped off the bush in which God’s very Presence resided for a time.* And we can get so comfortable in our well worn shoes, that we miss the very great blessing of God’s awesome—and uncomfortable—Presence.

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<sup>3</sup>Penelope Wilcock, *Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1996), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Elizabeth O’Brien, *Spirituality in Nursing: Standing on Holy Ground*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2003), 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

I said earlier that Moses “suddenly” found himself on Holy Ground, and I am sure that to Moses that seemed to be the case. God, however, had been preparing Moses for many years. Moses had had the influence of his Hebrew mother as well as that of his adoptive mother, the Pharaoh’s daughter. Having grown up in Pharaoh’s household, Moses was uniquely prepared to interact with Pharaoh—as a more or less equal and contemporary, while at the same time, he was also a son of Israel.<sup>6</sup> When Moses committed murder, it seemed that his life and usefulness were over, but God took this turn of events and used it to continue Moses’ preparation. Moses spent the second third of his life in the wilderness, married to the daughter of a priest, tending sheep. Not only did he learn how to survive in the wilderness; he also learned how to be a shepherd—there being certain similarities between leading sheep and leading human beings. . . . God’s “sudden” appearance in the bush in the “back of the wilderness” was anything but sudden or random, but it takes “looking back” to realize this. Before we stand before our own burning bushes, no matter how we may feel about our preparation, I believe that God has already seen to it that we are prepared—prepared to be in His Presence, and prepared to do what he asks us to do.

At the insistence of my parents that there was nothing else I could do except to become a pharmacist, I graduated from pharmacy school some 38 years ago. Thirty years after graduating from pharmacy school, I stood before my own burning bush. On an ordinary Saturday morning, I was dealing with that with which I had dealt with many times: how much I did not want to be a pharmacist. Vern and I were about to take a walk. Suddenly, before I even knew what I was going to say, I said “You know what I would like to do? I would like to be a hospital chaplain!” On Tuesday of that same week, I found myself spending the entire day attending classes at McAfee School of Theology and deciding to enroll as a student the following fall. Like Moses, I had no idea what I was getting into. There were certainly times when I cried out to the Lord as did Moses in Exodus 4:13: “Oh my Lord, please send someone else!” My own burning bush encounter seemed to come “out of the blue,” as did that of Moses, but as I worked as a hospital chaplain in training at St. Joseph’s Hospital, I realized that, like Moses, I needed to be *this* age in order to be a chaplain. Being a hospital chaplain might not be for “spring chickens.” I like Moses, probably needed to have gone through some crises in my own life.

It was the first weekend during which I was the chaplain in charge of the whole hospital. I was called to a “code” (which most of you know is an “all out” attempt to save the life of a patient, whose heart and/or breathing has stopped). I stood with the wife of a patient as he coded not once, but four times, and finally died during the fourth code. He had been very ill and had had numerous health problems, but still, his wife had not expected him to die. I stood with her as she spent time with his body, expressing her grief. Finally, I said, “You had a great love story, didn’t you?” She smiled and replied, “Oh yes, I did.” And then we embraced—as we stood together—on Holy Ground.

I was called to the ER to be with the husband of a patient, who, having no prior health problems, had suddenly collapsed. The husband had performed CPR until the paramedics arrived. When the patient got to the hospital, she had to be placed on a respirator and was not “waking up.” I entered the private

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<sup>6</sup>Lee Haines, *Genesis and Exodus*, The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, vol. I (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 178.

family conference room where the husband was waiting. “I am the chaplain,” I said. “But I am Jewish,” he said. “It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We have the same heritage and the same God.” “OK!” he replied. We talked for a few moments. “Would you like to pray?” I asked. “Yes.” he replied. So I prayed aloud with him. I was with him off and on for several hours. Finally, they decided to try “hypothermia” therapy on the patient. This is a dramatic treatment during which the patient’s body temperature is lowered significantly for twenty-four hours, then slowly raised back to normal. The idea is to minimize swelling and consequent damage to brain cells which have been deprived of oxygen when a patient’s heart and/or breathing has stopped and been restarted. The patient’s husband left the hospital, “shell-shocked.” After the 24 hours were up, the patient was slowly “warmed up,” after which she woke up—and was basically fine! I went to see her. She was sitting up in bed, smiling. “You must be the lady my husband said was there the night I came into the hospital,” she said. We laughed and celebrated together. It was an unforgettable moment—on Holy Ground.

I went to visit a patient, whose wife said he was about to undergo a test to determine whether he would lose his leg. Things did not look good. The patient’s brother was also in the room. We chatted for a bit, and then I asked if they would like for me to pray with them. The wife asked the patient and brother, rather half-heartedly, “Do you want to pray?” “It can’t hurt,” the brother replied. So the patient, family members, and I joined hands, and I prayed. I left the room and saw some other patients. Suddenly feeling very tired, I thought to go downstairs for a cup of coffee. As I was “dragging” myself down the hall, I met the wife and brother of the patient, who might lose his leg. The wife rushed up to me saying, “I want you to come and pray with us everyday! We just found out that they are going to be able to save his leg!” Suddenly a hospital corridor was transformed—into Holy Ground. (And I found I did not need the coffee after all).

And one more story. An elderly woman was brought into the ER and put on a respirator. It was determined that she had suffered an extensive area of bleeding in her brain and that there was no way she could live without the respirator. The decision was made to turn off the respirator, but the idea was to wait until there was a quieter, more private place in which to do this—in the ICU. The wait turned out to be a much longer one than expected, and finally, as no bed became available in the ICU, it had to be done in the ER. As I waited with the family, the patient’s husband told me about his life, how he met his wife, and about their life together. He was a holocaust survivor. After awhile, he asked if there might be a Hebrew prayer book in the hospital. There was not, but I did find a Bible in Hebrew with the English translation alongside. The man stood by his wife’s bedside in the ER and read in Hebrew until he was overcome with emotion. Then he handed the Bible to his son, who could not read in Hebrew, so he continued the reading in English. What he began to read was Psalm 23—in English. Finally, that most difficult time came, and the respirator was turned off. I stood with the family as the patient took her last breath. Jewish custom is that the body will not be left alone until it is committed to the ground. So, I waited with the family for the funeral home attendants to arrive. By this time, I had been with them off and on for several hours. I guess the chaplain herself had begun to show signs of the strain. And so the patient’s husband and I switched positions. Observing my face and demeanor, he said, “Honey, it is OK. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.” I will never forget looking deeply into his eyes as he said this. In that moment, he and I stood together on Holy Ground.

Many times, family members of patients (mostly those of patients who had just died) said to me, “You have a hard job.” “It is my privilege to stand here on Holy Ground with you,” I have replied. And it was. It was among the greatest privileges of my life. Was it easy? Of course not. Was it worth it? Absolutely.

So what about you? Will this be the week that God places a burning bush alongside *your* path? Will you turn aside to look? Will you take off your shoes? Will you find yourself standing in His Presence on Holy Ground? **Play chorus of *Holy Ground*.**

### **Benediction**

Go from this place in the anticipation that God is preparing you to stand before Him on Holy Ground. May you be ever alert for the call to turn aside and to take off your shoes. And may you go in the knowledge that when God calls you to do a hard thing, He will be with you and will bring you back to that same Holy Ground, having accomplished what He called you to do.

The very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He, Who calls you, Who also will do it (1 Thess 5:23-24).