

# Covenant Word

## **Barefoot Vulnerability**

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

What is it about our feet that makes us feel so exposed, so vulnerable?

Moses had an experience that brings this question of vulnerability to mind.

Born to Jewish slaves working and living under the oppressive Egyptian Pharaoh, Moses enters the world more vulnerable than most. You see, there was a plan in place, at his birth, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys in order to keep the population numbers down among the Hebrews. So his mother placed him in a basket, in the Nile River, in the hopes of keeping her son safe. Moses' vulnerability was quite risky until Pharaoh's daughter finds him floating in the bulrushes. Courageously telling her Pharaoh-father that Moses will be raised as a Prince of Egypt in spite of his heritage, the princess brings Moses into the royal household. As he matures, Moses becomes increasingly aware of the injustices inflicted on his people. So when he observes an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, Moses intercedes. The Egyptian is killed in their altercation and Moses, more vulnerable than ever before, flees. He ends up in Midian. He marries and takes care of his father-in-law's sheep. It is while he is tending the sheep that he encounters the burning bush. While it is a bush consumed by flames, it is also a bush that is not consumed by the fire. As Moses takes a closer look, he hears a voice, "Remove your shoes, because you are standing on holy ground." And Moses hides his face in fear.

## **What is it about our feet that makes us feel so exposed, so vulnerable?**

When have you stood on holy ground? I would love to tell you an "I was standing on holy ground" story that occurred when going into the Dome of the Rock, the mosque that sits on the highest point of Jerusalem. We were told to take off our shoes there, to enter barefoot because we were on holy ground. But nothing stirred in my spirit.

I would love to tell you that the prayer-laden walls of Notre Dame Cathedral or Saint Chappelle's chapel in Paris took me to my knees with the awareness of holy ground, but that would not be honest either.

You see, the most likely place for me to be tempted to slip out of my shoes is when I am sharing a little of myself as another shares of themselves. We often sit knee to knee, or lean over a table. I find these times to be especially profound when the other is actively practicing the imperatives Paul lists in Romans 12.

For instance:

A father sat with me this week. It is probably important for me to tell you that he is not an official member of our church, but he is one of those "at large" members who loves us and shows up from time to time. His son has gotten into a heap of trouble. The matter is so serious that a legal team is involved. A judge has been appointed and as you might well imagine, there are sleepless nights for the

It was just a silly game; one that youth ministers are prone to pull out of their bag of tricks when an after-church-fellowship needs a little structure. I asked several of our teenaged boys to quietly "disappear," so that we could cover a doorway with a sheet. The sheet was placed so that all you could see, should someone step behind the sheet, was that person's feet. So these young men, with socks and shoes removed, took turns stepping into the covered doorway. It was the remaining group's job to guess whose feet belonged to who.

It goes without saying that their hygiene, or lack thereof, was not surprising. What surprised me most was how uncomfortable they were exposing their feet. Of course, their discomfort multiplied exponentially when the girls squealed with the unveiling discovery of each boy.

As the youth minister, I became so accustomed to asking the youth to do uncomfortable things in party games or in order to make the gospel more accessible, that I did not even think twice when I led a Sunday night adult study on the events of Holy Week to include foot washing. We were studying the Maundy Thursday scripture of when the disciples gathered with Jesus for their last meal together and Jesus, towel about his waist, knelt down to wash each of the disciples' feet. In my notes, I had written that the adults would re-enact that humbling activity, i.e., we would remove our socks and shoes, dip a towel in a basin of water and rub the feet of our neighbor one by one around the circle in which we sat. I found, however, that the mere presence of the basin and pouring the water into it from a pitcher, created such anxiety in the room that chairs began to quietly inch out of the circle, arms were firmly crossed against chests, and feet were tucked up tightly under each chair. So instead, I dampened the towel, and I went from person to person merely touching their hands as a reminder of Jesus' care for them. You could feel the whole room relax after I went to the first person and embarrassing threat was removed. Afterwards, one of the participants approached me with his wife. He said, "Oooo for a minute there, I thought you were going to make us take off our shoes!" When I shared with them my original plan, they both said that to expose their feet for washing would have been too much to endure.

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
Jackson Shelton  
Pastor  
Sunday  
September 3, 2017*

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



Baptist Church of the  
**Covenant**  
Where Faith Comes to Life

2117 University Boulevard  
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644  
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday  
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

parents who are wrought with fear.

As a parent of sons, if it had been me, I fear I might have said ruinous things about the character of my child who had made such a poor decision. I think I might rant and rave a little, maybe even be vengeful. But that is not what I experienced in this father who sat in my office. No, instead I found that this father was determined "to live in harmony" with his son. His genuine love was not only going to hate what was evil in this situation but was equally determined to find the good. This father was exuding patience in tribulation as well as pursuing what was noble about his son. I was so grateful to listen, because it was apparent that we were on holy ground.

What sort of holy ground might we bring to the world's burning needs if we were to live by the imperatives that Paul offers in Romans? You see, I believe that holy ground is present when we make ourselves vulnerable enough to honor others rather than ourselves; when we help those who are different from our usual circle of friends. I believe that holy ground is present when we love our enemies, feed the hungry and give the thirsty something to drink. I believe that holy ground is present whenever we clothe the naked and find work for those who hate us. We stand on holy ground when those we are seated next to are forgiven and all the grudges are put away forever. Holy ground is present when we overcome evil with good. These are not naïve suggestions. They are demands put upon us when we walk into God's house and bow our heads in prayer because we profess to believe in Jesus Christ. It is such a powerful passage that it might be prefaced with cautionary words like, "This is a reading from the letter to the Romans in which the Apostle reminds us of the many ways in which we are likely to disappoint one another!" (Adam Fronczek, Fourth Presbyterian Church, "Hold Fast to What is Good," 8-28-11)

But that day on Mount Horeb, neither God nor Moses disappoints. God not only calls Moses by name, God vulnerably identifies God's self as well. The Hebrew can be translated:

I AM WHO I AM or  
I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE or  
I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I WILL CAUSE TO BE or  
I WILL BE WHO I AM or (my favorite)  
I AM THE ONE WHO IS.

Then Moses hears that this is the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel. This is the God of his people. This God not only has a history with past generations, but this is the God who enters into history every day. This is the God who hears the cries of suffering people, who comes down into the world and acts on their behalf. This God cares about the abused and the afflicted. This God cares about those in need. This God cares about those who are oppressed. Most importantly, this God promises to save them. And so this God calls people like Moses and Mary Helen and Don and Joyce and Dennis to join in. The question is, will you make yourself vulnerable by taking off your shoes to stand on holy ground?

Macrina Wiederkehr writes:

*The Moses in my heart trembles      The ground you stand on is*

*holy.  
not quite willing  
to accept the prophet hidden in  
being wondering how much  
it will cost emerge.  
to allow that prophet to emerge.*

*O child of unnecessary shoes  
cast them off  
and stand in readiness  
on this holy ground.  
For the Egypt in people's lives  
demands that you see the  
burning bushes  
all around you  
afame  
burning wildly  
calling you  
away from the comfort  
of well-protected feet.*

*Take off your shoes!  
The ground of your being is my  
holy.  
Take off your shoes!  
Awaken the sleeping prophet  
Believe in your Moses  
and go!*

***This God cares about the abused and  
the afflicted. This God cares about  
those in need. This God cares about  
those who are oppressed.***