

“Take Off Your Shoes”

Exodus 3:1-15
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While tending his father-in-law's sheep, Moses witnessed the burning bush and didn't know what was happening. He turned off the path to check it out because he was curious to understand how the bush was aflame but not consumed. He approached the burning bush without a hint of what he was getting himself into. That's when he hears the command, “Take off your shoes! You're standing on holy ground!”

I picture Moses trembling, then obediently unbuckling the straps and taking off his shoes! God has his undivided attention! Moses life will never be the same again. He will no longer be leading sheep to green pastures; he will be leading God's people to freedom. The burning bush is his “call” story. It's his day of clarity. He knows now the purpose of his life. He is to be an instrument of God's liberating work.

This text causes me to reflect on ground that is holy for me and holy for South Church. The text is an invitation for all of us to call to mind where we were standing when the sacred broke into our consciousness, got our undivided attention, and perhaps even called us to participate in God's liberating work.

I remember the chair I sat in when I read Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and knew I could never again tolerate racism within myself or anywhere else.

I remember where I was sitting in the Bushnell Auditorium when I heard Albert Kim play Liebestraum on the piano and I knew I could no longer ignore the tugging on my heart to play this instrument.

I remember exactly where I was walking when I heard that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas, and how I wept harder than I had ever wept in my life.

I can't say that I took off my shoes there on the campus of Williston Academy or there in my dorm room at Trinity or there in the Bushnell Auditorium. But on reflection, I wish I had...I wish I had bent over and unbuckled my shoes, for those were three occasions when God got my attention in powerful, life-changing ways.

As we contemplate tearing down and rebuilding our educational wings and our social hall and kitchen, and our office complex, many of us are in touch with times when we encountered the burning bush and turned aside and knew we were in the presence of God, right here in our building! So, this morning, I want to begin to honor the sacred memories we cling to, the divine encounters that keep bringing us back to this church. As we do this work of honoring our sacred memories, we discover that though the building is the specific address, 16 High Street, where a revelation took place; it is the invisible, eternal God, unfettered by bricks and mortar, who does the inspiring and the healing and the reconciling and the uplifting.

I share the following stories with you with some trembling and much trepidation, for these are sacred stories; these are stories that have given life and hope and faith to the South Church family

The first story took place in the church kitchen. It was a Sunday evening following a church potluck supper. Somehow, Emily Hollister and I ended up doing the dishes. She washed, I dried. I knew she had been raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, had married a guy named Sherm, and lived on Hopewell Heights. You can imagine the sound of our chit chat. What you could never have imagined is when she turned to me and asked: ‘when I die, would you say the rosary?’ I gulped a big gulp. And I knew Emily was telling me something from her soul, something I had better hear and honor. I don’t know why she chose that moment, with her forearms in soapy water, but she definitely got my attention. She was letting me know that her soul had been shaped by an ancient prayer ritual. It must have been a risk for her to bring this up. And it gave me a chance to affirm a part of her spiritual journey that clearly mattered to her. When it comes to tearing off the kitchen, the sink and the view out the window will be gone, but Emily’s faith statement will live forever. She died a few years after that. Father Quinn at St. Paul’s Church taught me the rosary. And we honored her wishes.

The second story happened in the social hall. The invitations had gone out from the church visitation ministry team to all the people who are challenged, physically, to get to church regularly, and to others we just thought would like to be included. When it seemed that everyone had arrived, we started eating the chicken salad lunch. What none of us can ever forget is hearing the sound of the west doors opening, the sound of heavy footsteps, and then the appearance in the doorway, walking upright on two legs, smiling from ear to ear, the appearance of Jim O’Leary, Cindy’s husband!

This dear man had been in a coma for six months, had been in four different hospitals, had endured more surgeries and tests and therapies than any one person can enumerate. The church had prayed for his full recovery. We had prayed on Sundays and Saturdays and in-between days.

When Jim walked through those doors, it was like God had gotten our attention! The spontaneous applause was really an acknowledgement that we were in the presence of the holy. In October, Jim will be walking his daughter down the south aisle of the church so she can marry Nathan Shuler. It will be impossible to conceal the joy. When the social hall comes down in a heap of plaster, the memory of Jim O'Leary walking into the visitation lunch will remain undisturbed. It was a sacred moment, and the sacred lives on!

The next story comes from the stage area in the social hall. A casual visitor would have seen an auction going on, auctioneers with red bow ties and straw hats. The casual visitor would have been awed when the bidding on a basketball signed by all the women on the UConn championship team, including Rebecca Lobo, climbed to \$850. The casual visitor would have had no idea that behind all of that carried-away bidding were fifty high school students and ten adult advisors already excited and imaging a mission trip with Habitat for Humanity, a trip that would change lives forever.

The stories of those changed lives appeared on college application essays and on Confirmation faith statements, and in other ways we'll never know. For the casual visitor, that evening's auction must have been like seeing a burning bush, seeing something awesome, seeing something holy. Because holy it was. It was a holy people throwing in together on a holy mission. Some of the hardwood boards from the stage area will be salvaged.

But what will certainly be salvaged is the sacred memory of a church that loses its senses when it comes to supporting its youth in their Christian mission endeavors.

One upon a time, in the 1950's, Bard McNulty gathered couples in the social hall to teach them the finer points of square-dancing. He would call out, "Now bow to your partner," and everyone would offer a respectful bow. Square dancing is a way of building community. If you have four couples, you have a small group! Team work matters! When Bard called out, "Now allemande left," everyone needed to be on the same page! And when he said, "Now swing your partner," it gave you a chance to show how trustworthy you could be with another human being. Some of our older members remember those square dance days and they remember the friendships that were formed on the dance floor. Regardless of what happens to the social hall in the renovation project, if you listen hard enough, you'll be able to hear Bard calling out, "Now do-si-do and bow to your corner." It's a sacred memory, a reason to take off your shoes.

Finally, I wanted to share one quick moment that happened in the Connector area. It was a Sunday morning and I happened upon two children decked out in their finest church dresses. They were maybe five years old. I wasn't sure of their names, so I greeted them saying, "Good morning ladies." They looked at me with a look that halted me in my tracks. One of them said with grave seriousness, 'we're not ladies; we're girls.' They took my breath away. I was astounded, and so pleased, that the church was the place where they could claim their identity. They knew who they were and no reverend was going to alter that! What we have witnessed at our church is how children feel safe to explore their own identity, to claim that identity, and to be that person God has made them to be.

There are hundreds of other stories of men and women and youth and children encountering the sacred here, in this building. There are hundreds of other stories where it became clear that God had gotten our full attention, where we might well have slipped off our shoes, for we were standing on holy ground.

I share these few stories with you this morning as a way of priming your pump, as a way of encouraging you to tell your own stories of seeing the burning bush and stepping off the beaten path in order to discern what God had in mind for you. This I do in the greatest of hope. Amen.