

Take Off Your Shoes

Maple Grove UMC

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Exodus 3: 1-5

³ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵ “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Joshua 5: 13-15

¹³ Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

¹⁴ “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?”

¹⁵ The commander of the LORD’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

Holy Ground

What is holy ground to you? This sanctuary, your home, your parent's home, the ocean, the mountains, the woods, your garden?

Last week, a young man with our lawn service brought a weed-wacker to the parsonage and cut down a patch of ornamental grass that he

presumed were weeds. He didn't know that this was something carefully chosen, tenderly planted, given water and light and fertilizer and room to grow.

He looked on the outward appearance, reckoned it out of place beside the tomato plants and daisies. It looked grassy, but it belonged and was loved. It was a part of the garden. But he didn't know that and cut it down.

I've done this. You've done this. Trampled over things, places and persons.

I've walked into a home and only realized some minutes later that I was the only one with shoes on in that home. And it wasn't so much that my shoes left a mark, it was the respect for the place and its inhabitants that I was missing.

I've walked into churches, I've walked into lives, without knowing the preciousness there.

When God first called Moses, God set a bush to blazing and when Moses approached said: *Take off your shoes. The ground which you stand is holy.*

Moses took off his shoes, and humbly led the people to freedom. When he died on the journey, Joshua took his place and led the people the rest of the way, and just before he entered the new land was stopped by a messenger of God who told him to take off his shoes. For this land was holy ground. God arrived before them.

This is the day that we celebrate our founding as a nation which belongs to the world. The place where everyone can begin again. A promised land.

Those who came to this amazing continent found freedom, opportunity and hope, but they struggled to take off their shoes to realize that God was there before they came, that God's presence filled creation and had revealed itself to these people so different from themselves.

To truly believe that all, all are created equal, endowed by our Creator with the same rights and holy longings has taken time to learn.

Moses had to learn, Joshua had to learn, we have had to learn, too about the holiness that goes before us.

So, I had to learn about taking off my shoes in Southeast Asia.

One day I climbed a mountain to find a wise old tribal leader to tell me his stories of God. But he was too busy with his root crops and not up to emanating the earthy mysticism I wanted. So, I hiked back down the slope. If I hurried, I could get home by nightfall.

It was May, near the end of dry season and along the river, these native, first peoples pushed off their fertile soils, had built their small lean-tos by a dry riverbed.

I was walking quickly, the first storm of the year was threatening, when I faintly heard my name; then clearly, "Anak!, *which means Child*. I turned to see an old woman up on the riverbank waving at me.

"Come here," she said.

"Hello, Inang Filipa, *Grandmother Filipa*, how are you?", I have just come from the mountain, I am on my way home."

"Come here," she said.

"I must get home," I said and kept walking.

But the sky had opened and the rocks were wet. "Come here, child, it is raining!" Resigned, I scurried up the slope.

Bent double from osteoporosis, Inang Filipa shooed me under the roof and her daughter brought me a cup of sweet, hot, coffee made from scorched corn.

The rain picked up and the dogs crowded in with us; no way I'd get home tonight. Inang was talking and laughing about something. I brightened up and switched on my recorder.

"Does the water have a spirit," I asked. "Of course," she said.

Her daughter interrupted. "The militia keep coming by here, did you see them?"

Inang said: "Yes, they are always troubling us."

"No, I didn't see them today" I answered curtly. I had spent years documenting militarization, now I wanted to talk about the environment and spirituality.

I asked Inang, "How about the trees, do they have spirit?"

"Of course," she answered.

The daughter broke in again, "Pat, do you remember when we first met? It was at that rally?"

I nodded and asked Mother Filipa how she felt when the trees were cut but her daughter kept on talking.

"That rally was right after I was arrested. You remember. They kicked me in the stomach!" She shook her head, perplexed "...and me being six months pregnant."

I stopped breathing.

Inang said, "yes, that was an awful thing. And my nephew was just killed yesterday in the other village, poor boy."

Her face turned toward the riverbed, now with water flowing, then to me. "If they can look a person in the eyes and not see the spirit in them, and kill them, how can they see the spirit in a river or a tree?"

“No, the Power, Holiness is all around them, yet is as nothing to them.”

The rain was slowing now, I asked no more questions.

Just let this mother and daughter speak of life: human and bird, river and plain, a child's death and the cutting of trees.

In my blindness I had been treading the same path as the militia. There was no unholy ground. *All things are charged with eternity.*

We are part of the same garden, God's garden, chosen, tenderly planted, given this world in which to live and grow.

Take off your shoes, said the Lord for what you are walking on is holy.

Let's help one another not to forget.