

“Lent In Plain Sight: Shoes”
Exodus 3:1-12; Mark 6:6-13
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For the past several weeks we have been following Jill Duffield’s little book [Lent In Plain Sight: A Devotion Through Ten Objects](#). In her introduction Jill, who is a gifted writer and Presbyterian pastor in Greensboro, NC, says this:

“God works through the ordinary. Ordinary people, everyday objects, things we bump up against moment by moment.... People of faith report epiphanies, revelations of God's word to them, sometimes by way of miraculous interventions or otherwise inexplicable happenings, but often and also through the mundane made holy due to timing and perception. The note from a friend arrived with the right words, just when encouragement seemed utterly absent. A deer appeared as if out of nowhere, after a voiced prayer for a sign....[so] The question for us becomes: do we have the eyes to see God's near presence? Do we have ears to hear the word of the Lord, spoken in a multitude of ways and languages? Will we open ourselves to the Holy not only in heaven but also on earth and right in front of us? Can everyday objects remind us to stay awake and pay attention?” (pp. 1-2)

This past week the object we have been invited to consider has been Shoes. Next week will be Oil. Let us turn now to one of the most important stories in all of scripture, the story of Moses and the burning bush, a story which indeed features the ordinary object of shoes. Let us listen now for God’s Word from [Exodus, chapter 3, verses 1-12](#) [read passage]

This story of Moses and the burning bush is important for many reasons. First of all, it serves as the call story of Moses - God calls Moses to be a leader, a very unlikely choice for the one who will lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness as they head to the promised land. In this passage we also see that God is the one who takes the initiative - God is the one who speaks through the burning bush and communicates to Moses the plan for deliverance. We also can get a picture of God’s own heart, as God is the one who sees the misery of his people who are slaves in Egypt; God hears their cries as they are beaten by the task masters. “Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...” Yes, God is the one who comes down to save and deliver - yes, the same God we have come to know in Jesus - the one who came down as a baby born in Bethlehem, the one who grew and sacrificed his life for us and all in need of salvation. This passage also illustrates the resistance people feel when God places a call on their lives. “Who me? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Moses goes on with more and more excuses in the verses following our reading, offering reasons why he is not qualified to serve. “I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now... but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4.10) Yet God is persistent in the call, and does not let Moses off the hook. He provides Moses with a staff as well as a plan to let his brother Aaron be his spokesperson. Moses has good reasons why he is afraid to return to Egypt - in a fit of anger he murdered an Egyptian who was beating one of his kinsfolk, a Hebrew (2.11-12). As a refugee in Midian, Moses has every reason to want to stay in the security he has found in his new life. But God promises

Moses something remarkable - God's promise to Moses is not super powers or secret service protection - no the promise is simply that of God's presence. "'I will be with you" (3.12) says the Lord to Moses. "In light of all of your fears and insecurities about being a leader, know that I will be with you."

This past Wednesday during my time with our younger youth we watched a clip of this scene from the movie [The Prince of Egypt](#). In this classic Dreamworks production the drama surrounding Moses and the burning bush is heightened as the scene is set in a cave where the bush's flames can be brighter, and Moses actually puts his hands in the fire and it does not burn him. While Hollywood always wants to add such dramatical elements, the movie does a good job capturing the surprise Moses feels as he is out tending his father-in-laws' sheep. And we see what it means to experience the holy, as Moses takes off his shoes as a sign of respect and awe. In the presence of God who is too holy to see, Moses is instructed by the Lord to take off his shoes... "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

I believe there's a temptation on our part to focus on the drama of this scene - to think about the angels and the fire that is burning but is not consuming the bush - and to think of this as an extra-ordinary event, a supernatural occurrence. *But what I want us to lean into this morning is the ordinariness of this story.* You see, Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep, doing his ordinary job in his ordinary life in Midian. And it is from an ordinary shrub that he experiences the Holy - he is not off praying somewhere in a temple or spending hours meditating on God's law. No, he's simply watching the sheep and it is here that he has the surprising experience of God.

In her reflection on this passage, Jill Duffield writes this: "Perhaps, like many of us, Moses relegated the holy to those places designated for worship, set aside for ritual, marked as special and mostly off limits to ordinary people. God, though, refuses to be boxed in by our expectations or designations. God speaks from the clouds and out of the burning bush. God uses everything [to communicate to us] ... Our role is [simply] to respond by taking off our shoes, to recognize the holy when we experience it, to turn aside our gaze in humility, follow instructions and listen." (pp. 91-92)

This morning I'm inviting you to share a time when you experienced God showing up in a surprising way. Where have you seen God in the midst of your ordinary life? This Wednesday during our group studies on Zoom I shared how for me God often shows up when I am out doing some service or mission work - volunteering at the food bank, serving food at a shelter - leading a mission trip somewhere where we are supposed to be the ones bringing the help to those who are in need. I did a lot of that in my previous work with Asheville Youth Mission, similar to the type of work we are going to do this coming Saturday with Neighbors Feeding Neighbors. The way God surprised me time and time again is how I ended up being helped by those I had come to serve. I remember a time when at a lunch table in West Asheville I sat down next to an elderly woman named Queen Mother. When I asked about the origins of her name, she told me how she had learned to think of everyone in her life as being God's children, and how she had come to name herself Queen Mother as a reminder of this truth. I learned a lot from her that day, seeing God in her quiet but strong faith.

When have you experienced God in an unexpected place? When did God show up when you were not expecting it? What ground in your life has unexpectedly become holy? Please feel free to share...

In this week's devotional reading we came across another passage about shoes, this one from Mark's gospel, chapter 6, verses 6-13:

"Then Jesus went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. **He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.** Jesus said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

In the reading from Mark's gospel we see Jesus sending out his disciples on their first experience in mission. I know we have a tradition sending out youth and adults on Big Mission Trips during the summer months, an opportunity to put our faith in action in a concentrated way. This July we are planning to go to New Bern, NC to help with the hurricane relief efforts there. We are partnering with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program again - PDA will be connecting us to Habitat for Humanity who is organizing groups to repair and restore houses damaged by the hurricanes.. As you may remember, in October of 2016 Hurricane Matthew caused catastrophic damage to Haiti and parts of the Southeastern US. When it came on shore to the Carolinas it brought damaging floods. In New Bern the Neuse River flooded, causing damage to thousands and thousands of homes. Then came Hurricane Florence in 2018 and brought even more damage. In talking with the PDA representative in New Bern a couple of weeks ago, he told me that there are still about 650 houses left that need repair. As you may know, Molly Westall is teaching in New Bern and recently shared with me how many of her students are still living in temporary housing.

I totally resonated with Jill Duffield's reflection "Shoes for Mission." As someone who has led many mission immersion experiences, I have spent many hours perfecting packing lists - making sure to include everything we might "need" for a trip - not just the obvious things like towels and pillows, but the rain jackets, the flash lights, the extra change of clothes that might be needed in case of rain. In contrast to Jesus' message to the disciples being sent out - his instructions to "take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money..." but just to wear sandals and not even to take two shirts - we tend to pack extra stuff when we are traveling. When the disciples are being sent out with hardly anything, they are being invited to trust in the hospitality of others - they are being invited to let go of the things that they may cling to for security, and instead trust in the One who is sending them.

Through our [presbytery's partnership in Guatemala](#), I have had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala multiple times, visiting the Ebenezer Presbyterian church there. A beautiful country with many beautiful people, Guatemala ranks only behind Haiti in terms of extreme economic

poverty. Over the years of my travel there I have seen how tempting it is to over pack - to bring much more than is needed - and I have come to understand how such a dependency on “stuff” is actually a form of spiritual poverty. I shared with our Wednesday night study group how I slowly learned to trust in the hospitality of our Guatemalan host church. Instead of worrying about packing all the “right stuff” to lead worship and games and bible school activities, I gradually learned that simply being present with our friends there was enough. One of our most meaningful mission experiences turned out to be the time when the church organized and led a presbytery rally that included youth and adults from other churches - and we were just included as part of the group. We did not need to bring anything except ourselves.

I know some of you in worship today have had powerful experiences on some of our past mission trips. And some of you have done important mission work in other ways. I want to invite anyone who would like to share an experience you have in mission to share now - what did you learn as you sought to serve God in an intentional way?

Over the years I have learned that mission is not so much about us “helping those who are less fortunate” but rather its about experiencing God in the people we meet. Sometimes it helps to get out of our comfort zone, to get away from the comforts and security of home - and it is in these moments when we don’t have extra baggage with us that we can learn to trust more in God. In the history of Christian mission work there was a time when Christians thought it was their job to bring God to others who needed spiritual help. “If we don’t bring God to the heathens then how will they be saved?” Sometime along the way, things began to shift. Instead of thinking it was our job to bring God to others, we began to trust in the reality that God is already there in the world - God’s Spirit is not bound to our buildings or our culture or even our religion - God’s Spirit is set free and loose in the world, and it is our job simply to be open to that Spirit wherever we go. Whether it's in Guatemala or in New Bern or right here in Mitchell County, I believe God calls us to look for the holy in the ordinary, to put our trust not in the stuff we pack but in the One who sends us in love. May we continue during these last weeks of Lent to be open to see God in the ordinary things around us, trusting that even if we don’t see a bush on fire, God is able to speak to us right here, right now. To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.