

That first reading said: “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.” That’s kind of an odd thing to do; lead your flock out beyond the wilderness and lead them not towards greener pastures or a desert oasis but to the place called the mountain of God. What was Moses looking for? Was it simply fresh grass for his flocks, or was Moses out front of his flock looking for something far more mysterious, far more transcendent? One of the oldest names used by the Hebrews for god was “el shadi” – the god on the mountain. I think he went looking for answers.

Early in the twentieth century, the German theologian Rudolph Otto coined a phrase in Latin in an attempt to define the word “God”. Wrote Otto: God is the mystery who is both terrifying and fascinating. A mystery – something we see but never fully grasp, a terrifying mystery so different, so other, so beyond us; yet a fascinating mystery that holds our attention and can seem so close, so energizing. This is the One for whom Moses longs and seeks; the One whom all of us yearn to know.

Look at Moses. He has done quite well for himself. Having fled Egypt as a fugitive, Moses marries into the family of a wealthy sheik. Jethro has made his son-in-law a partner in the lucrative family business of herding sheep and dabbling in religion. Jethro, the priest of Midian, has both Wall Street and worship in his corner. No longer fearful for his safety, Moses spends his days taking care of the family business, tending sheep, enjoying life with his beloved Zipporah and their son. Life could not be any better for Moses; or could it?

One day, Moses leads his flock to the far side of the desert, to the sacred mountain known as Horeb. Why lead the flocks to this holy mountain? Could this be more than a search for grass and water? Could this be a search something missing in his life, for connection with the One who is both terrifying and fascinating?

There, at the base of the mountain, he looks up and sees a bush that appears to be burning but not burning up.

I spent a lot of time in the Middle East – there is a plant there that sometimes acts like a wick for the oil that is near the surface. If they catch fire they can burn for a long time. Moses is from Egypt; this is new to him. He sees this fire without destruction; burning apparently without consequence. Moses leaves the flock and climbs the mountain. As he gets closer to this phenomenon, a voice speaks from the bush. “Moses! Come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is Holy Ground.” Moses hesitates, not sure exactly what to do. Though the text does not tell us, I want to believe he took off his shoes . . . perhaps reluctantly.

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” says the voice. And, we are told, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” Think about it: God addresses this very mortal man and summons him to do what will forever mark him as the great deliverer. With God’s help, he will stand before Pharaoh and demand that his people be set free from their bondage and migrate to the land of their ancestors. The last thing Moses wanted was to give up his comfy life and head back to Egypt. He had come a long way searching for something; there was no way he could have been prepared for what he found.

We do this all the time. Call it the search for God, the quest for otherness, the longing to connect with mystery. This is one of the reasons from time to time we feel the need “to get away from it all”, to take a vacation, or just to “veg” in a comfortable chair listening to music. Something in us longs to connect with the One who is both terrifying and fascinating.

Like Moses, we lead our life to places where we can “dial in” to the Holy. We leave our flock – our job, our responsibilities, friends, perhaps even family – to find that connection. This is why churches build retreat centers in the mountains or other secluded places. The quiet, the beauty, “the change of scenery,” nourishes our souls and helps us re-connect with what matters most.

But then it happens. The voice from the burning bush instructs us to “take off the sandals from our feet, for the place on which you stand is Holy Ground.” And so often, that’s where the journey stops. What in the world do I mean by that? What if sandals in the story are shorthand for security, pride, strength, self-confidence? When God asks Moses to take off his sandals, God is asking Moses to be vulnerable before God. Taking off one’s sandals is code language for standing helpless before God, willing to hear what he asks of us.

But what do we do? When God asks us to take off our sandals, we run. We make excuses about the ground being too rocky or the temperature being too cold, I have others things I have to do in life right now. We can draw ever so close to God only to walk away with our sandals secure and our souls untouched. Moses has his issues with God, but he was not going to leave that mountain without meeting to the One who moved him to lead his flock to that place beyond the wilderness.

What does this mean for us? This “bare feet on holy ground” phenomenon comes to all of us in those rare moments when we are most needy and most vulnerable. It may be in a difficult moment when we lose our job or our marriage falls on tough times. It may come when faith itself seems to fly out the window and we no longer feel like we can pray. This “bare feet on holy ground” place could well be the place where you are seated right now. Know for certain that wherever you find that place, it will be holy ground for you if there you meet God and experience the wonder of his loving presence.

So it is for us who now, at Lent’s mid-point, we have the opportunity to lead our lives to holy ground if we so choose. And when we do, God will address us in ways that may not make sense, that might not be what we were prepared to hear. And when that happens, the first thing he asks of us is take off your sandals, submit your life before the eternal mystery Who is both terrifying and fascinating.

We all search for meaning and direction, we want to know the purpose of things, we want to come close to that mystery. We all have to start where Moses did. We have to take off our shoes; to give up the thought of running away and humbly wait for him to come near, wait not knowing what we will hear but wait confident that we will get a glimpse of the mystery.