

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 31, 2008, dedicated to the memory of W. Wallace Cannon and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Where Will You Stand?”**

***Exodus 3,1-15;  
Matthew 16, 21-28***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today brings to a close an amazing month: The Russians invading Georgia, the Olympics, then the nomination of this country’s first African-American presidential candidate, the naming of the Republican’s first-ever woman as a vice presidential candidate, the devastation of Tropical Storm Kay in Florida and the approach of Hurricane Gustav to the same Gulf Coast destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Here at First Church, this week has brought the death of one of our dearly beloved members, Wallace Cannon. We will remember him this afternoon at 3 p.m. in a memorial service here in our sanctuary. Also, in a special congregational

meeting, we voted three weeks ago (by 95%) to proceed with the purchase of 414 E. Broad St. A historic decision for us! We are moving forward.

This has been a month to remember for its amazing highs and lows.

Throughout August, I have been preaching in Genesis and Exodus. On August 10 and 17, we looked at the story of Joseph. Beginning last week, the story of infant Moses in the bulrushes was our text. Today, we pick-up Moses' story with Moses in the wilderness of Midian. Having killed an Egyptian soldier and then having fled for his life, Moses is now married and working as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite priest. This passage begins in the wilderness at Horeb, "the mountain of God."

Moses goes to work one day and comes home changed forever. It is not the work that transforms him from shepherd to liberator of slaves. It is the One he encounters on a high and holy mountain that changes him. It is the presence of God. By showing up to do his job, Moses encounters the divine presence.

While tending Jethro's flocks, Moses takes them into the wilderness of Horeb. There, he sees a blazing thornbush – which is all aflame, yet not consumed – and an angel of the Lord appears to Moses. When he turns aside in awe and wonder, the Lord calls to him, "*Moses! Moses!*" "Here I am," the shepherd answers. Yahweh continues, "*Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals because this is holy ground!*" Yahweh makes the case for who God is: the God of Abraham and company; the God who hears the cry of God's people; the

God who will liberate them from the oppression they are facing in Egypt. This God, our God, will send Moses to do this liberating work.

Moses asks, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the people of Israel?” Furthermore, he continues, “What shall I say is the name of the One who sent me?” To the first question God answers, “*I will be with you.*” Essentially, God is saying, “Moses, no matter what you face in the days to come, I will take care of the you and lead you through this!”

Secondly, when people in Egypt ask who sent Moses, God tells Moses to say: “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.*” This phrase defies simple translation. It has been translated - “*I am **that** I am,*” “*I am **who** I am,*” and “*I will be **who** I will be.*” It has been taken to mean “*I am whoever I choose to be,*” “*I am pure being,*” and “*I am more than you can comprehend.*” Herein we have God offering a self-definition – the only one in Holy Scripture! We are on holy ground. We need to take off our shoes and spend a little time here!

Psychologist Erich Fromm takes this to mean, “*I, God, am in the process of becoming; neither I nor human understanding of me is yet complete. And you human beings, fashioned in the image of God, are also in the process of becoming.*” The name God chooses for God’s self is gender free – embracing neither male nor female images. It is also free of all age distinctions, transcendent and near at hand.

Martin Buber understands this phrase to mean, “*I cannot be summoned or manipulated, as the magicians of Egypt invoke and manipulate their gods. In accordance with My character, again and again, I will stand with those whom I*

*befriend*” (quoted from *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, The Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 2001, p. 330).

**It is essential to remember, that by God’s own self-definition, God is not a noun but a verb.** The essence of Jewish theology is not about the nature of God (i.e. “What God is”) but the actions of God (“What God does,” i.e. what difference God makes in our lives). God as a verb challenges many images of God constructed in Christian theology. We seem to always be pressing God into the cookie-cutter of our needs to make God a noun. Let us allow God to be a verb while Jesus is a noun. In other words, the embodiment of God in human form is sufficient as noun for all humanity.

In one Torah commentary, the rabbis ask: *What then does God’s name mean?* It may mean any or all of the following: God exists; God is more than we can comprehend; God, or our understanding of God, is constantly growing; God is present in our lives; God is with us in our efforts to do what is right but difficult. (*Ibid*, p. 330).

God is right beside us. God is present with us and to us. *“Just as the flame does not harm the bush, so God’s nearness is never a threat, but a reassurance”* (Rabbi Chaim Stern in *Day By Day*, p. 85). In the Midrash of Judaism it is written: *“As the atmosphere envelopes the earth, so does God, and there is no place devoid of the Divine Presence . . . We ask, ‘Why did God choose to appear to Moses in a thornbush?’ To teach us that there is no place devoid of the Divine Radiance, not even a thornbush”* (*Ibid*, p. 86).

We need to take off our shoes sometimes. While is a common practice to take off your shoes in an Islamic mosque

or a Hindu temple, we don't take off our shoes in church. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "*Earth's crammed with heave, and every common bush afire with God! But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.*"

Maybe we don't take off our shoes because we do not see! I don't think so! I think we leave our shoes on because we are so busy getting ready to move onto the next thing. We are on the move so much that we can't find a way to be in the presence of the divine. Taking off our shoes slows us down. It's something we save for home, not for rocky mountaintop experiences.

Jesus encountered this running onto the next thing attitude in the Apostle Peter in today's text from Matthew. Peter, recently dubbed "the Rock," proves to a "stumbling block" for Jesus in today's passage. Jesus foretells his crucifying death and his third day rising. Peter blurts out that this will never happen to his Jesus! Jesus blurts back "*Get behind me Satan! You are setting your thoughts on human things, not divine things.*" (Mt. 16:23).

You see, rather than see Jesus as the burning bush, the divine presence of God, Peter gets locked into his role of defending Jesus so that he won't get crucified. Jesus knows (and we know) that Peter can't stop the crucifixion and actually adds insult to death by denying Jesus when he needs Peter's support most of all.

To stand with God and stand with Jesus means we need to take off our shoes and acknowledge we are on holy ground. It's not about saying the right thing or giving the right answer, it is about living and witnessing for God. It is about

trusting and acting on God's behalf.

I have seen too many people talk about Jesus and never stand with him. I have seen a lot of people say they love God and do nothing that God would do in any given situation.

Again, the Midrashic authors of Judaism have written, *"In every place where you find a trace of human footsteps, there is God before you!"* If we are to leave behind a trace of our footsteps, we need to stand with God wherever we go. We need to be open to God's divine presence. And if, for any reason, we question where God is, let us remember God's own words on this: ***"I will be where I will be!"***

Remove your shoes and stand on God's holy ground. Remove the shell of habits that enclose you and of actions that keep you from experiencing the presence of God! There is no place on which you happen to be standing which cannot be claimed as Holy Ground from the God of all being! So then, it comes down to you: stand for God and be open to the Holy One who stands for you! Amen.

