

Sermon, August 30, 2026
"Sole Man"
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine

"Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground"
Exodus 3: 5.

Thus begins the dialogue between Moses and God, the longest dialogue in the bible which will span the the length of Moses' adult life. It begs two questions: first - where is holy ground? And second - why should we be taking off our shoes even if it is.

So if a young child asked you, "Where is holy ground?", how would you answer? Is it only in houses of worship? This house of worship? The whole space? or just in the sanctuary where when we walk into it, some feel compelled to do one of those mini-bows? Or is it only special houses of worship? St. Peter's in the Vatican, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Great Mosque of Mecca? Or maybe you find holiness in nature? Top of Mt. Blue? Mt. Katahdin? Hey go all the way to the top - Mt. Everest? Or is it a quiet, serene place by a lake, a bench by your garden in your backyard? Or is it your home, the place where your children may have been born, those you have loved have lived and died?

So after you ponder that for a while what is all this with the shoes?

So I will submit to you that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who perhaps went barefoot much of the time as children and still do so at every opportunity as adults and those who, being pre-occupied with corns, bunions, callouses, fallen arches, a strong sense of modesty and propriety, would rather walk through a pit of snakes than take off your shoes. What does this act of being barefoot do for us?

So let me tell you about "Sole Man". No not the s-o-u-l man version popularized by Sam and Dave in 1967 (a great year for those of us who graduated in it) but s-o-l-e man. In 2010 Arthur Jones, a filmmaker from England, embarked on a year-long mission to live his life barefoot. Known as "Sole Man," Jones spent the year traveling the world, walking through freezing snow in Norway and standing on hot pavement in Shanghai. He embodied these words from Exodus 3 in a way that most of us would not imagine possible.

When you take off your shoes you become more aware of the world around you, you feel it in a different way. You become aware of what you're standing on, you can feel every rock, every surface. "It opens your eyes," he said. "You're suddenly in touch with everything around. And it feels like you're a little child discovering the world for the first time."

Taking off one's shoes does seem to be a fairly ancient custom in some cultures. Karla Soumala reports on a trip to Japan: *Every time we entered our room, we took off our shoes. Every time we visited a museum, we took off our shoes. Every time we entered a shrine or temple, we took our shoes off.*

This ancient and very prevalent custom in Japan seems to be done for two reasons: to keep the house clean and to be able to relax and be themselves.

So why did God tell Moses to take his shoes off? There has to be more to this story than attitude and etiquette. Certainly cleanliness can't be very important in the desert.

But let's imagine the second possibility for a moment... Is it possible that God tells Moses to take his shoes off because he wants Moses to be himself? To remove all pretense? To be vulnerable and open to what God has to say? Back to the story.

So who is this Moses fella anyway? Yes he seems to have been miraculously saved at birth as we heard last week but as an adult things weren't going so well. In a chapter that's often kept out of Sunday School stories, he murdered an Egyptian for beating a fellow Hebrew, after which Pharaoh tried to apprehend him. (I mean can you imagine Charlton Heston as a murderer?) So, he fled to the "far side of the desert" where we find him in today's lesson an unrepentant murderer.

After he takes off his shoes, God lays out the plan for him, "So here's the deal, I'm going to send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Instead of bowing in awe and humility, as a shoeless man before the deity ought to do, and saying, "Yes, with your help, I will," Moses says, "Hey, wait a minute. I'm not ready to sign on." He then goes on to provide a list of reasons why he is not the right man for the job. Does this sound like a man who knows how to behave properly in God's presence? Moses sounds more like a regular guy, a real person.

There must have been something about Moses, with all of his flaws, gifts, and unique qualities, that God was interested in using. Is it possible that in calling out to Moses, God wanted Moses to be Moses, to be himself, rather than pretending to be someone else?

We often read this text and hear God's command to Moses to take his shoes off as one about submission or respect. But maybe we can also hear God's voice, to Moses and to each of us, more like this: "Moses, take your shoes off! I need you, not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, not someone with an MBA or medal of honor. Let's talk, you and me, honestly, about this plan."

And so Moses, being truly himself, said, "But God...are you sure this is a good idea?"

The Book of Leviticus has been called the most boring book in the Bible with its list of 631 commandments. Here's how Rob Bell summarizes it, "Your life matters: how you prepare your food, how you deal with your neighbor, how you handle conflict. You are on holy ground. This is not a random, accidental phenomenon we know to be you, but your entire life takes place under a wide horizon of holiness and sanctity. Respect the mundane and the everyday because it is there that the divine is found."

As Arthur "Sole Man" Jones traveled the world barefoot he learned to open his eyes and experience the world around him in new and unexpected ways.

As Moses took off his shoes he discovered that the ground did not suddenly become holy. Moses took off his shoes and discovered that the ground had been holy the entire time. Or perhaps more accurately, Moses took off his shoes so he could feel and experience the holiness that is always present, just beneath the sole of his foot.

Wherever we find ourselves, may we do the same: Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.