

“Take Off Your Shoes” - Message for Passionate Worship Series, August 8, 2010

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Text: Exodus 3:1-12

Today we are moving to the second practice that Bishop Robert Schnase identifies in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, the practice of Passionate Worship. Just to review for those of you who may be coming into this series midstream, Pastor Michael and I are focusing on these practices in our sermon time over the course of several months because we are in agreement with the bishop's contention that these five practices, which are really just basic to what the church is about, are keys to congregational vitality and a fruitful spiritual life for individuals, as well. We like the simplicity of Bishop Schnase's language and the intensity of the adjectives which makes the concepts provocative and memorable. Our sister congregations in this California-Nevada Annual Conference -- and many across the country -- are embracing these ideas, and we are excited to be a part of a movement that is desperately needed among communities of faith as we strive to reach those looking for a word of hope, a clear path for living purposefully as children of God, and tools for unlocking the gifts that will make a meaningful impact in this changing world.

Those five practices are: Radical Hospitality (which we've been looking at over the past several weeks), Passionate Worship (the focus of the next four weeks), Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity. We'll keep repeating them until they are thoroughly ingrained in your consciousness! And that's okay, because they are practices, not accomplishments! Just like shampoo, the instruction is: "lather, rinse, repeat" -- practice, practice, practice.

So here we are with practice two: Passionate Worship. Michael observed to me that each of these practices is going to take us a little deeper into unknown or risky territory, and I think he's right. I've seen a lot of evidence that Radical Hospitality is taking root around here, that people are excited about it, that new ideas and callings are coming to mind and to heart, and I'm glad. The path is about to get steeper, and you're going to be tempted to hang back. But never fear; we're going to do this together, one step at a time. Just follow my lead, okay? And let's plunge into the scripture.

We're looking here in this ancient story from the life of Moses for a picture of

worship, and we're looking for the elements that make for Passionate Worship. We're going to take it, step by step, verse by verse, and see what we notice.

But let's back up just a tad, and put this in context first. You had a little practice with this last week, so I'm going to invite your responses again. Tell me what you know about the story of Moses up to this point: (invite responses, such as:

- Escaped from murder at childbirth
- Raised by the Pharaoh's daughter
- Killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave
- Ran away into the wilderness
- Met a woman, Zipporah, got married and started working for his father-in-law, a priest of Midian named Jethro)

Okay. Verse one: "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." (Ex 3:1 NRSV)

Worship, step one: In the midst of everyday life, taking time to go to holy places. I think it's not by accident that Moses went to a place that was recognized by the people of the area to be a holy place. Whether he was going there specifically to find God isn't clear from the text, but sheep herding is one of those lonely jobs that can lend itself to solitude and reflection, and whenever we cultivate those, whenever we take the time for deliberate quiet, God can meet us. Worship is making an appointment, setting aside time, to meet God.

Next verse: "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." (Ex 3:2)

It's not enough to just go to the quiet place. If we're totally inward focused, we might miss God. Looking is a key -- even if we don't know what we're looking for.

Moving on: "Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'" (Ex 3:3)

I love this little conversation Moses has with himself! It implies some intention, doesn't it? "Turning aside to see" -- paying attention to the extraordinary, delving into it (asking, "why is it extraordinary?"). This is an important step. Without it, an opportunity to experience the the mystery of the fullness of God would be

missed.

Verse four: “When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’” (Ex 3:4)

This is fascinating: “When the Lord saw that he had turned aside...” Moses needed to take that step before God revealed anything further. Then God called out, and called him by name. God knows our name. We are recognized, acknowledged. And again, there’s the invitation to go a step further, to say to God, “Here I am,” to respond to the voice.

Verse five: “Then [God] said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’”

“Take off your shoes.” This is the most interesting thing yet. What does it imply? We’ve a number of friends who remove their shoes when they come into the house. Now, some of them do it because they’ve got white carpets. For others, it is a sign of respect. But in this story, I think it’s about even more than respect. I think it’s about vulnerability. If your shoes are off, you can’t run away! Shoes are protection, especially in the desert. Removing your protection before God is a serious act of trust.

Do you see a progression here yet? One thing follows the other. Next verse: “[God] said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Ex 3:6)

In the encounter with God that is worship, God reveals godself to us. It’s no wonder removing one’s shoes is the step before this one! This is a step of further intimacy, knowing who God is.

Moses responds in fear, hiding his face. And then we get to God revealing God’s will and God’s thoughts.

God’s next speech takes three verses, and you’ve already heard the big words, so let me show it and highlight God’s actions: ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the

Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.” (Ex 3:7-9)

Worship gives us a glimpse of how God sees the world -- “I have seen and I have heard the cry” of the people -- and it gives us a glimpse of God’s intention -- “I have come down to deliver.”

Next, God calls: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Ex 3:10)

Worship involves hearing and responding, not only to one’s name, but to a call to go out and do God’s work.

Do you see how these verses build upon one another? There’s a progression of the human being taking one step forward, and God countering with a vision or a voice or a revelation, and the human being taking another step, or focusing or responding, and God draws the worshipper in further, back and forth as they grow closer and closer to one another, more and more of God revealed, more and more of God’s power shared, more and more trust developed between the two parties in the relationship encounter.

The next verse reveals yet another important element of worship, one that might not immediately come to mind: “But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’” (Ex 3:11)

This is the step of wrestling with that call, in God’s presence -- “Who am I to do this?” Did you ever stop to think that wrestling is a key part of worship? The call isn’t supposed to be easy, and it’s not supposed to be easy to embrace. It’s understandable that one would need to wrestle with it. That’s how we grow. And the actual wrestling, in God’s presence, is part of the worship experience.

And think of who is doing the wrestling here. At this point, Moses doesn’t know that much of who he is. He doesn’t know he was rescued from death at birth for a purpose, or that he was raised among the Egyptian royalty for a purpose. As far as he’s concerned, he’s killed someone and run away and begun a new life. God knowing his name, and calling him to this awesome task, must have carried with it the subtext of forgiveness, grace, and an awareness of God’s great purposes and Moses’ part in it. That’s a lot to wrestle with. Worship provides the space for that. Bishop Schase says “God reshapes the human soul through

worship” (Five Practices of Fruitful Living, p. 46) as we find our alignment with all that God wants for us.

There’s a theological term that fits really well here, which is called justification. Perhaps you know the term from word processing, the choice we have for right alignment, left alignment, centered, or justified -- when the text lines up on both the right and the left and all the words are evenly spaced. That’s what God does to our souls in worship: gets us lined up on all sides, through the power of forgiveness and love, taking a step toward us, and inviting us to take a step toward God.

Back to the text. God responds to Moses: “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’ “ (Ex 3:12)

This is the step of taking in the assurance that we don’t go away from the encounter empty handed. “I will be with you,” God says. And the sign of that promise: worship will happen again.

It blew me away when I realized that, in the story of the Exodus, the reason for freedom is worship. It starts with this verse, but is repeated over and over in the words Moses is instructed to declare to the Pharaoh: “Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (Ex 8:1). The reason for doing God’s work is so that others can come to know God in worship and, in turn, behold the extraordinary, hear their name called, be vulnerable, experience the awe and the see the glimpse of God’s vision and be called to the work, and wrestle, and be assured -- the cycle goes on and on as more and more are drawn, through our response, into the worship experience and are transformed, and the world is transformed this way.

Now, when you hear the phrase “Passionate Worship,” does your experience here at First Church come to mind?

A friend of mine shared a recording with me this week of worship from a church she frequently visits in a town several hours away from here. I could tell from the first snatches of the music that this was a different breed, or brand, of worship from what we experience here on Sunday mornings. It was very emotionally charged, with repetitive music like a chant; one song featured a leader and others joining in, singing:

What does it sound like when you sing heaven's song?
And what does it feel like when heaven comes down?
And what does it look like when God is all around?
Let it come... Yeah

The song was augmented with instruments and drums, flowing on waves of crescendo and decrescendo, until eventually the words changed to

This is what it sounds like when you sing heaven's song
And this is what it feels like when heaven comes down
And this is what it looks like when God is all around

Yeah... ("What Does It Sound Like" by Brian Johnson, CCLI #5149061)

There is something very arresting in this kind of music and worship experience when I let myself be taken in. The music's purpose in worship is to get hearts all turned in the same direction, focused on the same process. Great healings occur at this particular church, I am told. But there is something in many of us that distrusts this predominantly emotive mode, I suspect. There are times when I find myself sort of mentally stepping outside of a worship experience of this style, analyzing with a sort of detached curiosity, paying attention to the teamwork of the musicians, or to the response of the other worshippers, or the images on the walls, or the smells. I can usually go in and out of these types of awareness now without it really breaking the flow -- but I suppose that has taken practice to develop, balancing the halves of my brain.

But I'm not asserting that that form is any more "legitimate" or "worshipful" or "passionate" or "right." I am a student of worship, and I appreciate many different forms. I think God made us all different by design, and I find it fascinating that people can be drawn into God's presence in vastly different ways.

So let me pose this question: what is passionate worship to an intellectual? Is it abandoning the left side of the brain? Can "passionate" and "educated" or "cultivated" go together? I believe that they can. Let's go back to the scripture to review some of the elements:

- Making an appointment, taking time out, giving an hour to go to a special place to encounter God. Don't make it haphazard or infrequent. You can't deepen a relationship with someone only see once in a blue moon, and God desires a relationship with us. Worship regularly.
- Pay attention, listen for God's voice. Be intentional. Don't just go through the motions. Expect God to show up!
- "Take off your shoes." Let your vulnerability show to God. That will look

different for different people: it might look like singing when you're not accustomed to singing, or opening your hands, or crying, or saying "Amen" out loud. Maybe only God will see your open heart. But however you do it, take a risk and show God your trust. For our part, as leaders, we'll do our best to make this a safe place to do that.

- Be in expectation that God will call you by name, that God will give you a glimpse of how God sees the world, and that God will call you to stretch somehow in response. Be ready to wrestle with that call and that vision. And know that God will go with you as you leave this sacred time and place, with a promise to return.

I commend the second chapter of Bishop Schase's book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, to you as we go through this series on *Passionate Worship*. There are copies in the entryway available for you to purchase, and I took the liberty of pulling the ones you can borrow out of the library, if you want to get started today. It's an easy read of just about 20 pages. He ends the chapter with the story of an inspiring woman, an everyday disciple like one of many you'd meet here, speculating what she would be if you could extract from her person all the times of worship she'd experienced in her life. "We would not recognize her," he says. "Worship gave her depth and coherence, a purpose that was irreplaceable.... Through worship she became someone she otherwise never would have become" (pp. 63, 64).

May worship do the same to us. Amen.

"The church is always just one generation away from extinction"