

Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-15

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Dr. Brent Beasley

I don't know about you, but I've gotten sucked into watching the Olympics on TV. Swimming and gymnastics are two things that I don't really care about, but I've found myself staying up late almost every night this week to watch.

Of course, what Michael Phelps has done, swimming in eight events and winning the gold medal in every one, is amazing.

Michael Phelps seems to have been born to be a swimmer. It's as if God designed his body to be the perfect swimmer. He's 6'4". With extremely long arms—and he needed every inch in his race Friday night. But he has short legs. They say that even though he's 6'4", his legs are the length of someone 6'0". It gives him good power to push off the wall on his turns. And it means his torso is really long, which is great for swimming.

His feet are huge, like flippers, and the same with his hands. And on top of all that, he's double jointed at

his knees and elbows, which makes him able to undulate his body under water in a way that other people can't.

He's been preparing to swim in the Olympics since he was 10 years old. For most of us, what we're going to do with our lives is not so obvious.

One of the books that I have from my childhood is a Dr. Seuss book called *My Book About Me*. Maybe some of you had a book like this or your kids did. It goes through and asks all kinds of questions about you, and you fill in the blanks. I was eight year's old and in the third grade when I filled out this book.

One of the statements in the book with blanks for me to fill in is this: When I grow up, I want to be a football player and a millionaire. Well I didn't quite make it to the NFL, and I'm not a millionaire—yet. I still haven't gotten that TV ministry up an running.

It's always interesting to think back on what you used to think you wanted to be when you grew up. I know for me being a pastor was definitely not on the list.

My nephew Jake got asked this question on his first day of school as a kindergartener.

Jake's teacher sent home a questionnaire for his parents to fill out with him, just for her to get to know him better: his favorite book or story, favorite food. Then they asked him what he wants to be when he grows up and he thought for a while, and said, *I can't know*. So my brother gave some examples like doctor, fireman, teacher, policeman. Finally, Jake said, *Ummm, I think I'll just be myself*.

They kept asking him what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he insisted that he just wanted to be himself. Being himself is good enough for him, and he thinks it ought to be good enough for everybody else.

Most of us always thought we had to be somebody else to succeed. But have you ever thought about the fact that you just may be called by God to be yourself? And that God might actually be calling you, as yourself, to do something great?

Remember Moses. Remember the story of Moses. God called him, as simply himself, to do something great.

When Moses was in Kindergarten in the Pharaoh's court and they asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, I bet he didn't say he wanted to work for his father-in-law out in the wilderness tending his

father-in-law's sheep. But that's what he ended up doing.

One ordinary day out there in the middle of nowhere there was a miracle. A bush aflame—but not being consumed by the fire. Moses moves in for a closer inspection, and God speaks—calls him by name: *Moses, Moses!*

And the voice of the Lord commands Moses to take off his sandals, for he is on holy ground. The real wonder here is not that of a shrub that refuses to be burned up. The real wonder is that of a God unlike any other; this is a holy place because God is here.

And then there is a second statement from this God-of-the-bush. This God-of-the-bush is also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And then a third statement: God says, *I have observed the misery of my people. . . ; I have heard their cry. . . . I have come down to deliver them and bring them into a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey*. This God is a God of compassion who hears the cries of his people and wants to deliver them from their suffering.

And then there comes a terrifying fourth statement. *So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my*

people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. What this miracle-making, compassionate, justice-loving, God-of-the-bush intends to do is to be done by none other than Moses himself.

And this is where this whole thing gets problematic for Moses. In Moses' mind, this plan of action must have presented at least two difficulties.

One, If you are a powerful God who appears as fire in a bush that does not burn up, why not take care of this matter yourself?

And the other, and this one Moses says out loud, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*

In other words, *I can't do that. I'm not qualified to do that.* Here Moses stands trembling with fear before God because God has asked him to do something that he doesn't think he can do. He's no Michael Phelps. It's not so obvious that he was born with the ability to do this.

This is why a lot of us don't do much in service to God, I think. I look back over my life growing up and as a young adult, and I think about the times when I just decided not to try. Because I didn't think I could do it.

I'll admit something that has always been a flaw in my personality. My whole life I've been the kind of person who has to be the best at what I do. And if I didn't think I could be really good at it, then I didn't want to do it. So growing up, there were so many things that I didn't try—because I was afraid I might not be great at it. Unfortunately for me, too many times I would rather not try something than try it and fail.

Moses thought he wouldn't be good enough. He was afraid he would fail. He was afraid he would be rejected by the Pharaoh and his own people. He said, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? That's not what I want to be when I grow up.*

And God said, *I will be with you.*

Notice, God didn't say, *You're so strong and powerful and great, you can do it.* God said, *You can do this, because I will be with you. You don't have to be afraid. You can do this. I will be with you.*

Moses still wasn't convinced, so God gave him something to remember him by. Remember the rod of Moses—his staff.

Moses, the voice said, *throw down your staff.*

Moses, who had walked that mountain for forty years was not comfortable with that command.

God, you may know a lot about a lot of things, but out here in the desert you just don't go around throwing down your staff.

Throw it down, Moses.

Moses threw it down. The rod became a snake, and Moses became Jeremy Wariner. God called out his name, and he stopped running.

Pick up the snake.

Moses looked back over his shoulder at the snake and at the bush and said, *What?*

Pick up the snake. . . by it's tail.

Moses said, *God, you know a lot about a lot of things, but out here in the desert you don't pick up snakes too often, and you never pick up a snake by its tail.*

But he picked it up and as soon as he touched the scales of the snake they hardened. And Moses lifted up the rod.

The same rod he would lift up in Pharaoh's court.

The same rod he would lift up to divide the water and guide a nation through a desert.

The same rod he would strike a rock with and the water would come.

The same rod that would remind Moses, as someone has said (Max Lucado), that if God can make a stick become a snake, then become a stick again—then perhaps God can do something with stubborn hearts and stiff-necked people.

Maybe God can take us as we are and do something great.

Take this rod, Moses, and remember that I will be with you.

And all these years later we remember that place out in the middle of nowhere that God called holy. That patch of ground was holy because God was there. But we also know it as holy because that is the place where Moses said yes to the call of God.

Mickey Anders tells about a man who went to Europe several years ago. He was excited because he had always wanted to visit the Christian shrines in England and on the continent. He went to Aldersgate where John Wesley's "heart was strangely warmed,"

to Wittenberg where Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses and sparked the Protestant Reformation and to Rome.

But as he saw these places that are shrines for many Christians, he was disappointed. He had expected to be inspired and awed, but these were just plain buildings and towns.

As he thought about his disappointment, he realized that these had been just ordinary places when the action had taken place. Only later were they seen to be important places.

In each case, the thing that made these churches and cities shrines was that each was a simple setting in which a person had made a decision to say yes to God. A time when someone turned with his whole life, faced God, and said, *I will say yes to the call that God has on my life.* And the events that followed that yes were so significant that people now travel for miles just to see the site where the decision was made.

Often we want to look for or wait for a special place or a dramatic circumstance in which we can find God's will or do God's will. But when it actually comes to giving our lives to God, any location will do. Anyplace where we make commitment of our

lives to Christ can be for us a burning bush of decision. Holy ground.

But we have to have the courage to respond to God. Like Moses, we somehow have to get over our fear and self-doubt

Because God just may be calling you to have the courage to be yourself. Maybe there is something great ahead because you have the courage to be who God has created you to be. And what a shame it is when because of our fear we settle for something less than responding to God's purpose for us.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa tells a story about a farmer who raised chickens in his backyard. Up on the mountainside above the farm an eagle's nest rested. The eagle's nest contained four large eagle eggs.

One day an earthquake rocked the mountain causing one of the eggs to roll down the mountain to the farmer's backyard. The chickens knew that they must protect and care for the eagle's egg, so an old hen volunteered to nurture and raise the large egg.

So after awhile amongst this farmer's chickens, there was one that looked a little odd. It behaved like a chicken. It walked like a chicken. It pecked away like

a chicken. One day a wise woman came along and said to the farmer: *You know, that isn't a chicken. It is an eagle.*

The farmer said: *No way. That is a chicken.* And he looked at the odd bird and said: *Don't get any fancy ideas. You are a chicken.*

I don't think so, said the wise woman. She picked up the strange-looking chicken, climbed up the nearest mountain, stood at the edge of a precipice and waited until sunrise. Then she turned the bird toward the sun and said: *You are an eagle. You can soar. You can change your world. Go fly.*

The strange-looking chicken shook itself and tentatively spread its wings. It looked up at the sky. It looked down - way down - to the bottom of the precipice. It took a few steps back in the direction of the other chickens, where it had been so comfortable, where it had a daily routine and food to eat. *Sorry,* it said to the wise woman, *I don't feel like an eagle. I feel like a chicken. And I don't think I can fly.*

That's your choice, the wise woman said softly. *But remember, you are responsible for the decisions you make. If you don't dare to fly, you will never be fully alive. You will never reach the sky.*

The place where you and I make the decision to be and to do what God has created us to be and do—that is holy ground.