

Exodus 3:1-10 Sermon on Touch

We're beginning a series on using our senses in worship. It was planned way before the coronavirus hit, and therefore there is a certain irony about dealing with 'touch' as our first one. For many of us, particularly at the moment, the touch of one person to another is something we feel very keenly as a lack. For some of us, perhaps this has been something we've become used to not having. For all of us, locked out of the church building, there is something about being in the space, touching the ground, sitting in the pew, and feeling like we have entered a holy place, which may seem important. And so we are going to talk about 'touch' as part of our worship this morning, the first of a series where we will look at sight, taste, hearing and smell in following weeks.

There are many points in the Bible where we could look at touch. Oftentimes, Jesus himself touches people, both to bless them and to heal them. But for us, we wanted to look at the sense of touch in worship. And this is because, as humans, we do not simply worship with our minds and our voices. Christian theology says that we are embodied creatures. We aren't people who just live in a body for a while – we **are** that embodied creation. Our bodies and our minds aren't separate. Therefore, our posture, our senses, and everything about us are all involved when we worship God.

It was the same for Moses in our reading from Exodus. This passage is part of a narrative which builds up to the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God. This is an iconic moment in Israelite history and Jewish religion, and it leads on to the receiving of the law from God and the movement into the promised land. But here, we find Moses, a shepherd and an outlaw from Egypt, tending his sheep in a desert area near a mountain where God was present. Moses is drawn into God's presence by 'the angel of the Lord' in the form of a bush which was burning but not being consumed by the fire. He then hears God calling him by name.

Already we have Moses seeing and hearing as part of his encounter with God. The initiative for the encounter belongs to God with the burning bush, but Moses has to also have 'turned aside' before God speaks to him. This is important, since so often we expect God to speak to us, and yet we don't put aside time to allow this to happen. It is also important to note that God's initiative in attracting Moses's attention also required that Moses lift his eyes from his day-to-day grind of following sheep around. Both of these initial happenings required that Moses was looking out and willing to turn aside. I wonder how many of us would hear and see more of God around us if we consciously looked around to see God at work, and turned aside from our normal day to listen for God.

Also, as a side note, it is worth just mentioning that God used a bush to attract Moses, but it was not damaged, despite being taken over by the fire of God. Often, we can hold God at arm's length in order that we may not be 'damaged' by letting God get too close – so our relationships aren't damaged by our giving them over to God and letting our faith shine in public; so our finances aren't damaged by our giving to God's work in tithing; or so our time or hobbies aren't damaged by having to spend time doing things in service to God. The fire of God, which burns within the bush is fiercely attractive, but does not harm the bush itself. May the fire of God burn similarly within each one of us, without us suppressing it fearing that it would leave us damaged.

Moses was called by God by name, and he responded vocally: 'Here I am.' Then God commanded that he remove his sandals for the place he was standing was holy ground. And so, we come to touch. Imagine that moment where Moses took off a sandal, hesitantly, perhaps fearfully, and then maybe gingerly placed his bare, dusty, probably smelly foot on the ground. Imagine, as it sank a

little into the warm dust and the sand moved between his toes. Imagine what it must have felt like to touch holy ground...

This touching leads further to God introducing himself. Ironically, and slightly amusingly, Moses then hides his face, presumably whilst leaving his feet on the ground. He was afraid to look at God, but allowing his dirty, smelly feet to touch the holiness didn't seem to occur to him as a potential issue. God then gives him instructions for the next stage of the adventure – the rescue of the children of Israel and navigation of them to the promised land.

But let's just stay with the touching for a bit. Have you ever wondered why God would instruct Moses to take off his shoes because the ground was holy? This thought may conjure up images of Muslims taking their shoes off before entering a mosque to pray, and thus preventing the dirt of daily grime entering the holy sanctuary of Allah. However, I don't think that this is what is going on here. Muslims have also to ritually wash as part of entering the mosque. This wasn't required of Moses. I don't think that this story is about God wanting Moses to prevent the day's grime getting into his holy presence. In fact, I think it may be quite the opposite.

If God was worried about Moses's dirt, he shouldn't have chosen to engage a shepherd in the middle of a dusty, hot desert who had probably gotten hot and sweaty from his day's work already. Instead, this is a picture of a God who gets himself dusty in order to reach out to his people. In which case, Moses's removing his sandals after being invited to do so, becomes about there being no barrier to God's presence. It is not so much about God's holiness being contaminated by human dirt and thus spoiled, but God's holiness infecting humanity, and thus making them clean and holy.

This is the same model we see from Jesus as he is touched by the woman with the bleeding problem in Luke 8 or as he touches the bier carrying the dead body in Luke 7 and resurrects the man. Far from the accepted wisdom that Jesus would be contaminated by this touch, Jesus's touch brings the life of God. This is why, when we take communion, we don't worry about contaminating the bread and wine with our touch and making it less consecrated. Instead, through the sacramental touch and taste, we are touched by God's grace.

Touch is therefore an important part of our worship of God. God seeks to touch his people in a transformative way. I've been doing a 1000-piece puzzle recently of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel and this brings to mind the central image of man reaching to God and God reaching to man. Michelangelo represented this reaching of God to humanity and humanity to God in terms of touch.

Moses takes his shoes off, he touches the holiness of God and is transformed and equipped for the mission he is given. That is not to say that there is no distancing involved in this – Moses shouldn't come any closer or God's holy otherness might damage him – but Moses doesn't need to worry about contaminating God.

But why was this ground holy in the first place? It was the Mountain of God, Horeb, we are told. But really, what this means is that this was where God was. The mountain wasn't Holy already and so God decided to move in. You can imagine a heavenly 'Escape to the Earthly Country' TV show where the host describes this mountain as the wild-card property, saying it is holy and therefore ready for God to move in! That would be completely wrong. Rather the mountain is holy because God is there. And so touching the holy mountain with his shoes off, was Moses touching God's presence. The sand between his toes was only holy because God was there. There was nothing intrinsically holy about the sand itself.

And so we can contemplate the implications of being locked out of our church building. We may feel a loss of a building where there is peace, quiet, and a feel of God's presence, where people have prayed for nearly 150 years and where we have met with God so many times in the past. We may miss the familiar touch of the pews, the handshakes of those we wish the peace to, and the feel of the kneelers on our legs as we pray. There is much to touch in church which aids our worship. More widely there is much to sense in our worship in church.

However, what Moses found was that holiness was where God was. God's location was not defined by human controls or geographical considerations. Similarly, at this time of being locked out of church, of being locked away from perhaps the building which has been our own Mount Horeb in the past, we must learn again what it means to touch God's holiness. We touch God's holiness where God calls us to be and where we 'turn aside' to meet that call. That could be in our own bedroom, living room or kitchen. It could be in the garden, or on our daily exercise. It could be that just the act of turning off our TV and deciding to sit quietly is enough to sense the holy presence of God, who was always there, but was waiting for us to notice.

It may be that this week, we turn aside to notice God, and as we do, perhaps we might even take our shoes and socks off, perhaps feeling the carpet under our toes, and knowing as we do so that holy ground is where God is. We bring our tainted lives, and ask God to touch us and make us holy. Knowing that God meets us where we are, through his Holy Spirit, when we invite him, let's reach out to God, like Adam on Michelangelo's ceiling, not in a church or a chapel, but in our homes and on our walks, that they too may be holy ground, touched by God himself. Amen.