

**Text: Exodus 3.2-15**

When I was young we'd get up every Sunday morning and mom would wash our little faces until it felt like the skin was peeling off. And my sisters put on dresses, and my little brother and I put on suits... and we'd sit down and shine our Sunday shoes and put them on our little feet and load up in the station wagon and head to church. And—I kid you not—those Sunday shoes pinched and hurt, and the best part of a Sunday was getting home and taking off those Sunday shoes.

I remember the church I grew up in with fondness... but I have some conflicted feelings about it as well. It was a place where we collected stars on charts: stars for attendance, and memorizing verses. At Vacation Bible School we got points along with our stars and if you got enough points, you got to go to the picnic at the end of Bible School and there were hotdogs and grape sodas and an endless supply of ruffled potato chips.

I remember worrying about getting enough points to go to the picnic, but I plugged away with my memory verses. If you brought a friend you got bonus points; and I remember that at one point, my friend Brian accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior and they gave him about 100 stars for that, and 1,000 points, and there was no doubt he was going to get into the picnic.

And I tell you this because, ever since—for me—stars and points and shiny stiff shoes have been metaphors for my early faith. It was like everything we did was about earning stuff: earning God's approval, earning forgiveness, earning our place at the picnic, earning our place in heaven. It seemed like my faith was formed around me and what God could do for me. And you could hear it in my prayers: “Oh God, please give me a new bicycle, please get me on the baseball team; oh Lord, please do this and that and the other thing for me.”

After a while I realized just how “me-centered” my faith was... God was a tool I used to get the goodies I wanted in life, God was a servant I sent running this way and that to make sure

my life—and my eternity—would be filled with joy. And at one point I realized just how hypocritical it was to cry out, “O, Jesus, I love you so much that I accept you as my master...” and then treat God as my own personal slave. And at about that time my faith came crashing down around me.

Really, it was the faith of my parents—or some shallow version of it—it wasn’t my own... it wasn’t anything I could own.

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I wasn’t even sure I believed in this God that I prayed to anymore. And this was about the time that I headed off to college, and—in a manner of speaking—when I packed up all my stuff for college I left my Sunday School shoes at home. I abandoned the faith I’d been raised in, and I just didn’t go to church for the next several years. It wasn’t right for me, it didn’t fit, it was all locked up in this stiff legalistic doctrine and this shiny me-centered theology... and I needed some time away.

So, for the next few years I lived as an agnostic—a person who doesn’t think there’s enough evidence to decide if God exists or not. But after a few years of that I thought I’d rather be an atheist—a person who flat out believes there is no God. So I set my course to prove—beyond the shadow of a doubt—that God did not exist.

And through an odd set of events, I found that trying to become an atheist was my path back to faith in God. All I wanted to know was if God existed, so I studied Eastern religions and I studied philosophers, and finally—reluctantly—I looked back at Christianity and I ran up against the resurrection. And I tried as hard as I could to convince myself that the resurrection never happened, but all the arguments I could drum up against it seemed weak and circular. So eventually I came to the point where I had to throw up my hands and say, “I guess I believe that on this one occasion, this one man, was raised from the dead.” And that—for me—was the holy

ground. That for me was the bush that burned and was not consumed. That was the inescapable proof of the undeniable fact that God was standing right in front of me.

For a long time it didn't occur to me that I was a Christian again. I mean, I got that I'd come to recognize the existence of God through Jesus, but all that mattered at that time was the fact that God existed. And that made all the difference in the world. I knew my life had to be different if there was really a God. I knew this wasn't about me. If God exists, if God is real, then my life must be centered on that God, and I knew that turning that God into my servant—as I once had—would be an unthinkable farce; a sin.

I stood before the bush that burned but wouldn't be consumed, and perhaps I'd stood there before—perhaps we always stand there—but at that one moment my Sunday shoes had

been cast aside and I no longer tried to squeeze God into the theologies and assumptions of my youth. Those shoes were off; I could sense the reality and the awesome truth of the living God.

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Slowly, I took back some of the trappings of Christianity, but in the process I allowed myself to question and challenge the assumptions of my earlier faith; and

slowly I came to know a God of grace, a God who calls us to live as servants, and children, and stewards, and friends.

One of the biggest things for me was that—at first—I didn't believe I could ever get into heaven, because I'd turned away from my faith at that one point; and the thing was: it didn't matter to me at the time. It wasn't about heaven anymore—it wasn't about what I could get out of God—it was about just knowing that God exists, and wanting to draw my life into order around the one who brought me and all things into existence. I was satisfied to pray that I might

be allowed to serve God, by serving the children of God—even from outside the gates of the heaven I didn't believe I could ever enter. Later I came to believe God might allow even me into heaven... but the great thing is, I no longer needed the points, I no longer needed the stars, I no longer needed the bowls of hotdogs and the grape sodas and the eternal picnics. All I needed was to know that God Is.

That's the name that God revealed to Moses when he was struggling with the whole idea of doing what God had called him to do. Moses kept making excuses: I'm slow of speech; I'm not the guy; "What shall I say when they ask me the name of the God who sent me?" And the voice from the burning bush said: "Moses: 'I Am.' Tell them 'I Am' sent you." And for me that cuts right to the heart of it. If God is, if God actually exists above and beyond and apart from our imaginations and the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better; if God—the creator and sustainer of this and every universe—actually exists, and calls us, offers us grace, longs for a relationship with us, then what is there for us who are God's creations to do, but follow God, trust God, and open ourselves to our God.

There was a bush that burned and would not be consumed and Moses turned aside to see that sight, and God called to Moses to remove his shoes for he was standing on holy ground. "Strip away your preconceptions... Strip away your doctrines and anything that attempts to squeeze God into some tame form you've habitualized yourself to hold dear... strip away anything that comes between you and the central truth of life: God's existence." And barefoot Moses saw and believed, and God sent him on an adventure that saved his people and revealed God's goodness to the world.

Friends, God still is. God still burns in our world, and coming to know the existence of God is still the holy ground for us. May we be curious enough to turn aside and see God in our midst. May we be brave enough to slip off the shoes of our pinched theologies or anything else

that comes between us and experiencing the God who really is. And may we see God for God's self and go out assured that God is still as powerful and compassionate as Christ Jesus—the living breathing fire that walked among us— revealed God to be. And may we embrace the adventure that that holy fire—empowers us for and sends us on. Amen.



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