Sermon: Take off your shoes!
Scripture: Exodus 3:1-5

Take off your shoes!
As I’ve mentioned many a time, I began my ministry in a small town in Southwestern Manitoba. Just forty minutes from the Saskatchewan border… some might say – there’s not much to see out there. In fact, the folk in our small town used to tell Saskatchewan jokes, because it was the only place flatter – less interesting than Manitoba. What’s the provincial tree of Saskatchewan they’d say – the telephone pole. We became accustomed quickly to life in a small town on the prairies. We’d join the congregation for brunch after church at the Shell or the Esso – the only restaurants open on a Sunday afternoon. We went to rodeos and 4H cattle sales and as I’ve said before we learned to boot scootin boogie and two step. But when friends came to visit – friends from the East... we sometimes fretted over how to entertain them. There was only one movie theater in town and it always showed movies that most of the country had already seen. There was a performing arts hall – but it was only opened up at Christmas and maybe 4 times a year for a travelling show. Usually, we take our company for drives; show them section after section of maturing wheat fields or brilliant canola and then we’d head to Carberry.
The coolest place within two hours of our home...Carberry is the home of the Carberry Sandhills. Set amidst Manitoba’s best potato farmland, the Sandhills are an oddity – they are a vast and natural desert – long heralded by the First Nations people in Manitoba to be Holy Ground. Mile after mile of pure soft white sand... in the middle of Canada’s heartland. When you walk over the first hill at the Sandhills, you feel like you’re in the middle east or north Africa. Not a tree to be found. No prairie grass. I can recall hiking there one Sunday afternoon with some friends from Ontario. We walked up that first hill from the parking lot through the brush... stopping to read the various information signs along the way... At one point, several little boys bolted by us – anxious to reach the sand dunes just ahead. We could hear their parents hollering behind us – reminding them not to run too far ahead. Finally , we could see the path opening up before us revealing the magnificent hills of sand – as far as the eyes could see. The little boys chattered to each other, turned back and jumped up and down to get their parents to hurry up.
“Take off your shoes!” they shouted!
Take off your shoes!!
And quick as a wink their shoes were left in a heap at the start of the trail and the boys were wiggling their toes through the hot white sand.

This is perhaps the closest image I have to the place where our scripture reading today takes place. I’ve never travelled to the far east... I’ve never walked through a sub-Saharan desert... In Today story, you remember, Moses was tending his father in law’s sheep, guiding them through the desert, our passage tells us, maybe looking for pasture land on the other side. Now, the desert in the land of the Bible did not instill the same excitement which it does in Southern Manitoba. No, for the folk of the Bible, the desert was wasteland. It was the place where no crops could grow , no livestock could graze. No one lived in the desert in Bible
times...except for perhaps a few tribal groups. At best, the desert was a necessary passageway on the way to someplace better. No need to take off your shoes, from their perspective.

No, Moses’ mood in the desert was decidedly different than those little boys on the Carberry Sandhills.

The desert in Bible times wasn’t a tourist destination. It was a wasteland. It wasn’t a spot to sight see, it was place to pass through as quickly as possible. Think of those parts of town which you pass by without reading the signs on the buildings: innercity wastelands.

Think of those places in this great country we celebrate today – which we tend not visit but fly over or drive through at night. Think of those times in your life and in mine, those ordinary times when we’re just plain weary, or bored, when we see little hope, when we are between achievements, when we can’t see much life. Think of those times when we feel like we’re in the midst of a bit of wasteland. It was in just that kind of a place that Moses found himself this morning in the desert, on his way somewhere else, not seeing much hope. And it was exactly there that God spoke to Moses and said: “Moses, take off your shoes... for you are standing on holy ground.”

Imagine that – that most ordinary of places. That most hopeless of situations, in the middle of desert and God says: Moses, take off your shoes... you are standing on holy ground...

This week I visited a woman from our congregation who is an artist. I love this woman’s home – it’s filled with collections of seemingly ordinary things – friendship balls, marbles, hat pins, cups and saucers, teddybears. It sounds cluttered but in fact, it’s not – every corner is little vignette. This past week, my friend she pulled out her collection of sketches and paintings from under her bed and we waded through her work. She’s been painting for over 20 years: watercolours, and pencil sketches and ink drawings. What struck me as we looked at painting after painting – was that generally the most beautiful of her pictures were of the most ordinary of things. A single feather...An old barn... A few droplets of water on a small green leaf...

A piece of driftwood... She has an artists’ eye – she sees beauty in the things you and I sometimes overlook, in the things you and I – we might just pass right by on our way to somewhere else.

Today is the beginning of summer for most of us – the first long weekend. In the weeks ahead – during these hot summer months – I think God is inviting us to take off our shoes; to realize that the God we worship is not confined to a black Bible or a sub-Saharan desert thousands of years ago or a Presbyterian Church between the hours of 10:30 and 11:30...

No, the God we worship creates and finds beauty even in the midst of our deserts...even in the midst of our everydays...

The God we worship is able to talk with us in downtown St. Thomas and in a farmer’s field outside the city and on the beach of Port Stanley – even on the golf course or while we’re waiting for a bus or sitting in a doctor’s office... if we will only be like Moses and be prepared to listen, when he calls our name...

The God we worship can appear to us – even when we find ourselves in a bit of a desert in life... when we’re in an inbetween place on the way somewhere else...whether figuratively or literally...

The God we worship can speak to us – even when we can’t see much hope in our lives... If he spoke to Moses... He can speak to us today too...
So this July 1st weekend...take off your shoes...
Wriggle your toes in the sand...
Remember Wherever you are, wherever you are headed – you are standing on holy ground.