

A few months ago Staci and I discovered on Day Road in Mishawaka a Gurdwara, a place of worship for Sikhs, which is a religion that began around 1500 in India.¹ The Sanskrit word *Sikh* means “disciple or student,” the same word we cherish in our name as Disciples of Christ. Although I had met Sikhs when living in the St. Louis area, I had never had the opportunity to visit a Gurdwara. As Staci and I drove by their worship center, we noticed a car parked in the driveway, so we decided to see if someone could give us a tour. We were warmly greeted by a young man, and although he was still learning English, we were able to communicate and understand one another. Before we entered their sacred place of worship, he requested that we remove our shoes and wear a head covering, both signs of respect.

This request reminded me of the times I took college students as part of the class I taught to visit a mosque to observe worship, for in the Muslim place of worship we also removed our shoes and the women wore scarves on their heads. In both the mosque and the Gurdwara, removing our shoes

reminded us that we entered sacred places and stood on holy ground.

Before taking students to visit the mosque, I reminded them to wear socks since they would remove their shoes when entering. I prepared my students for this holy encounter, but Moses in the story from Exodus had no warning that he would need to remove his sandals as he approached holy ground.

Moses was having an ordinary day, watching the sheep for his father-in-law, when suddenly he saw a bush on fire that was not burning up. From the bush came a voice, “Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.” If I had been there, I probably would have asked, “This piece of dirt? I’ve been watching sheep in the mountains for years. What makes it holy now? Wait...how is it that a burning bush doesn’t burn? And how does a voice come from a bush?”

Before even having a chance to ask a question, God’s voice from the bush continued, “I have seen the suffering of my people, and I would like you,

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Moses, to lead them to freedom, help them escape from the captivity of the Pharaoh.”

Here in the light of a burning bush, in the midst of the very presence of God, what does Moses do? He begins with a question! “Who am I to go to the Pharaoh?” (Ex. 3:11)

Seems like a reasonable question, doesn't it? How is an ordinary shepherd supposed to confront the armies of the Pharaoh and lead a bunch of people out of slavery?

Thousands of years later Thomas and Hannah Bullas may have wondered a similar question on their farm near what is now Notre Dame. Back in the 1800s it was illegal to help runaway slaves, but Thomas had helped a slave named Peter escape in 1825, for which he was fined \$1500. Rather than giving up, Thomas and his wife Hannah used their home as part of the Underground Railroad,² helping runaway slaves escape to freedom.³ I imagine they had many nights when they questioned their safety and wondered, “Who are we to challenge the laws and help slaves escape through our home?”

Thousands of years earlier God offered Moses some reassurance by saying, “I will be with you, and you will return to this mountain with all the people to worship me.”

“I'm not so sure this is a good idea, God,” Moses objected. “What if the Pharaoh wants to know your name? Who will I say sent me?” (Ex. 3:13)

The voice replied from the bush, “I Am Who I Am,” or as some suggest the Hebrew word might be better translated, “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” Author Terence Fretheim writes that this statement means “I will be God for you.” He explains, “The force is not simply that God is or that God is present but that God will be faithfully God for them.”⁴

Twice God has reassured Moses that he would not be alone, that God would be with him, but Moses still questions God, “But what if they don't believe me or pay attention to me? They might say to me, ‘The LORD didn't appear to you!’” (Ex. 4:1, CEB)

A third time God offers reassurance by suggesting that Moses throw his walking stick on the ground, thereby turning it into a snake. God

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suggested, “You could even turn the river red, along with a few more signs, that will show them I Am God and I Am has sent you.”

You’d think by now that Moses would have enough courage to confront the Pharaoh, enough faith to trust that God would help him get through the challenges ahead.

But no, a fourth time Moses objects, “I don’t talk well. I’ve never been good with words, neither before nor after you spoke to me. I stutter and stammer.” (4:10, *The Message*)

I imagine many of us have used this excuse, especially here in the church when the nominating committee offers you an invitation. “I’m wondering if you would like to serve as an elder?”

“Well, I don’t like to pray in front of others. I don’t speak very well. My words stumble when I speak in a crowd. Maybe you could find someone else.”

Or when asked to serve as a teacher for a children’s class, some might reply, “I don’t know the Bible very well. What if the children ask me a

question I can’t answer?” That was a problem encountered by a

salesman who worked door-to-door selling children’s encyclopedias. He had concluded his presentation to the mother of a five-year-old boy. Although he sensed that he had already convinced her of the value of the books, he went on and used one more of his highly charged sales techniques.

“If the answer to any question your little boy asks can’t be found in this encyclopedia, I will refuse to sell these books to you,” he said to the mother. Then, turning to the five-year-old, he said, “Ask me a question, sonny. Just ask me anything you want to know, and I’ll show your mother where she can find the answer in this wonderful encyclopedia.” The five-year-old thought only a moment before he asked, “What kind of car does God drive?”⁵

Needless to say, that was the last time the salesman used that sales technique!

You might find yourself in a similar difficult situation, possibly a time you don’t know how to

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answer, a time when you don't have all the information, a time when you don't think you're the person God has created you to be. Moses didn't feel he could help God, and even when Moses objected that he couldn't speak well, God suggested that he take his brother, Aaron, to speak on his behalf. Even with all these reassurances, even in the light of God's presence, even when God promised to be with him, Moses questioned his own abilities another three times.

Seven times Moses said "no thanks, not me," but God remained persistent, promising to be with Moses each step of the way. You know the rest of the story, right? How Moses helped the slaves escape across the desert, through the waters, and to a new life—but that's a story for another day.

¹ www.goshennews.com/news/local_news/global-faiths-sikh-gurdwaras-function-like-a-christian-congregation/article_081c596b-3b61-5c3f-82d0-701ffa986a3b.html

² www.in.gov/dnr/historic/4165.htm

³ "Behind the Name: Abolitionist honored," October 19, 2015, www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/history/sb150/behind-the-name-abolitionist-honored/article_7fd46a3d-c87c-52dd-9cc7-33ddba7a1a5b.html.

⁴ *Interpretation: Exodus* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 63.

I sometimes wonder why the biblical writers included these seven instances of Moses' resistance. They could have left out a few of these questions and objections, moved the story along a bit faster, made Moses look like an even better hero.

Maybe it was to reassure generations of followers, even you and me sitting here thousands of years later, that God invites ordinary people—even reluctant ones like us—to bring hope to the world. Even in God's presence, when we're questioning in the light, God reminds us: "You are not alone. I will be with you. Bring hope to my people—those around you, in your community, and around the world."

⁵ Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1442-1444). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.