

## I

Just before the impact, out of the corner of my right eye, at the very edge of my peripheral vision, I saw a flash of movement. But by then it was too late. There was a tremendous bang, and the next thing I remember was looking up at the blue sky from my back, and then the face of my coach looking down, checking to see if I was still in one piece.

I was a defensive end on my high school football team, and in that practice, I had just taken the hardest hit I've ever taken, before or since. I'd been so focused on playing what was right in front of me that I never saw what was coming from the edge of my vision. Fortunately, after a few moments, I was able to dust myself off and go on, but I'll never forget the sound of that impact for as long as I live.

## II

So often in life, we tend to get consumed with all that is happening right in front of us. There are work and school deadlines to meet. There are bills to be paid and responsibilities to be met. Life can sometimes come at us so very fast that it's all we can do just to keep up.

But often times, the most important things, the things that have the potential to change our lives, the things that have the potential to have an impact far beyond today and tomorrow, they don't happen right in front of us, but rather, out there on the margins, out there in our peripheral vision. And if we're not careful, if we can get so focused on the urgent things right in front of us that we

miss the truly important things on the edge of our vision.

And so often in the biblical story, and in life, when God begins to move, when God begins to act, when God begins to change lives, God begins not at the center, but out on the margins, out on the edges. And such is the case in our story today from the Book of Exodus.

## III

This Fall, we're reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Old Testament. We started last month in the Book of Genesis, and we noted that shortly after Genesis describes grand, cosmic events like the creation of all things, the narrative dramatically narrows its focus down to this one particular family, and much of it reads like a soap opera.

We left off our story last week with a man named Jacob, and our reading ended with a promise from God that Jacob's descendants would become as numerous as the stars, and that God would never leave Jacob until God brought Jacob back to the Land of Promise.

Jacob eventually became the father of 12 sons and one daughter, and through a long series of events that are detailed in the later chapters of Genesis, the whole family ended up living not in the Land of Promise, but in the Land of Egypt, and that's where the book of Genesis closes.

The Book of Exodus opens on an ominous note. A new pharaoh came to

power in Egypt, and this king did not see the descendants of Jacob taking refuge in Egypt as neighbors, but as a threat. And so the pharaoh began subjecting them to a program of forced labor and genocide.

About that time, a Hebrew baby boy named Moses was born in Egypt, and again through a long series of events, that boy came to live in Pharaoh's palace until he grew into a man. One day, he noticed one of the Egyptian taskmasters abusing one of his Hebrew kinsfolk, and when he thought no one was looking, Moses killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.

But Moses' murderous deed was discovered, and so Moses fled Pharaoh's palace before Pharaoh's officials could arrest him. Moses settled in the wilderness and met and married a woman named Zipporah. Moses and Zipporah had a son, and Moses went to work for his father-in-law Jethro, tending his sheep.

And that brings us to our story for today. So I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Exodus 2:23-3:15.

*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*

*Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to*

*him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

*Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."*

*But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':*

*This is my name forever,*

*and this my title for all generations.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

One of my favorite teacher's favorite sayings is, "Pay attention to the verbs!" Verbs are action words, and as I read this story again this week, I was struck by how many verbs involve a reference to sight or vision.

*"God looked."*

*"God took notice."*

*"Moses looked, and the bush was blazing."*

*"I must turn aside and look at this great sight."*

*"When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called."*

*"And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."*

*"I have observed."*

*"I have seen."*

Ultimately, the bible isn't about a family saga or ancient Egyptian history. Ultimately, the bible is about God. It's God's gift to us, the tool that God has given us that we might come to know who God is, who we are, and what we have to do with each other.

And so one of the things that we can say definitively about God in this text is that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is the God who sees. The God who takes notice. The God who observes.

God is neither blind nor indifferent to injustice. God is neither blind nor indifferent to human suffering. God is not deaf to the cries of the hurting and the oppressed. God has not forgotten God's promises.

At the same time, though, when God takes action regarding what God has seen and heard, when God acts upon God's promises, for reasons passing my understanding, God does not do so directly. God could have squashed Pharaoh and the Egyptians like a bug and simply teleported the Israelites out of Egypt. But for reasons passing my understanding, God chooses to work in and through human beings to accomplish God's purposes.

And more often than not, the humans that God chooses are seriously flawed individuals. Moses had murdered a man and buried his body in the sand, hoping that no one would find out. He was on the run from the law. He had started a whole new life in the wilderness. He had a wife and a child; he had a good job in the family business. His life hadn't

turned out the way perhaps that he thought it would when he was growing up, but he had left all that behind. He was settled now.

And so it's God decided to call Moses, God didn't just boom Moses' voice from the heavens out of the blue. And even though the burning bush was certainly unusual, God didn't just plop it down right in Moses' path. The bush was placed at the edge of his field of vision. That's where God's call started.

God's call started in Moses' peripheral vision. Moses had to turn aside from what he was doing at the time to see what God was doing. And when God saw that Moses had turned aside to see, when God saw that Moses was paying attention to what God was doing on the margins, on the periphery, then God began to lay out for Moses God's plan to liberate God's people from their suffering and to outline for Moses the role that God had in mind for him.

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called.

#### IV

My friend, I don't know what you're going through right now. But God does. The God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Jacob and Rachel, the God of Moses and Zipporah, is the God who *sees*.

I don't know what you've been suffering through. But God does. The

God who showed up in the burning bush is also the God who took on human form in Jesus of Nazareth. God knows personally what it is to love someone so much it hurts. God knows personally what it is to have that love betrayed. God knows personally what it is to be human. The God we worship and serve became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we rightfully call the Christ, is the God who *hears*.

Whatever you're going through right now, whatever you're suffering through, God sees you, my friend. God hears you. God knows you. God has not forgotten the promises God made to your ancestors, the promises that are made yours through the waters of baptism.

My friend, I imagine that you are frustrated with the state of our world. I imagine you just wish God would hurry up and do something about it already.

But the thing is, for reasons passing my understanding, most of the time, God doesn't work that way. Instead, when God begins to act upon the suffering and injustice that God has seen and heard and observed, God chooses to work through human beings. And most of the time, the human beings that God chooses are seriously flawed people.

Abraham almost killed his own child.

Jacob was a liar, a cheat, and a thief.

Moses was a murderer on the run from justice.

And we have barely even made it into the second of the 66 books in the bible!

And if God can work in and through people like them, well, then maybe there's hope yet for people like you and me, too.

But here's the other thing. More often than not, when God begins to move, when God begins to call, God doesn't just boom a voice from the heavens or plop a neon sign in our laps.

More often than not, when God begins to move, it starts in our peripheral vision. It starts at the margins. It starts at the edge of our field of vision.

There is so much that is urgent in your life right now, my friend. I know that sometimes it's all you can do just to make it through what's right in front of you for another day.

But I wonder. I wonder what important thing God might be doing at the edges of your life. I wonder what bushes God has set on fire out there on the edges, out there on the margins, just waiting to see if you'll look up long enough to notice.

For when we turn our heads and minds and our hearts to the edges, that's when God begins to speak to us about how God is going to change the world in and through us.

## V

And as we live out our discipleship in Jesus Christ together at First Presbyterian Church, there is much that is at the center of our attention these days.

We are all doing the best we can to navigate this wilderness of uncertainty together. There is plenty enough that is right in front of us.

One pastor recently posted on his social media account a frustration with his church's leadership board, because they asked him, "Pastor, what's your vision for the church for the next year?" and the pastor answered, "Next year? I can barely see next Sunday!"

But I wonder. I wonder if God has a plan in mind to change the world, a plan in mind to bless all the families of the earth.

I wonder if God has a plan in mind that justice might roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

I wonder if God has a plan in mind that mourning and crying and pain and hunger and poverty and racism would be no more.

I wonder if God has a plan in mind that God's kingdom might come and God's will might be done, right now, on earth, as it is in heaven.

I wonder if God has a role for the First Presbyterian Church to play in what God wants to do in Athens, Georgia, and beyond, and God has set a bush or two on fire somewhere nearby.

I wonder if God is just *watching* and waiting for us to turn aside to *see*.

May it be so.

Amen.