

What Are You Lookin' At?

Exodus 2:11-15; 3:1-6

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

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.

Not long after I came to TPC I remember being in a session meeting. It was late- it was a little after 9, which is when I really like us to be out. But we were engaged in a conversation about a staff member, one who left years ago now. And while it was an important conversation, I really didn't want to be having it then, at the end of the meeting- when we were all really pretty tired.

Well, just as I thought things were beginning to wrap up, one of the elders who had been pretty quiet up to that point jumped in. It became clear the elder had strong feelings about the matter and wanted to express them. My heart sank. I can't remember exactly what I said now- but I do remember that I interrupted this elder, and I know my tone was sarcastic and dismissive. And I saw this leader, this leader elected by the congregation and called by God for the very

purpose of speaking the truth in love, even when it was late, become very quiet, shrink back, and not say another word.

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Moses knew all about shrinking back and fading into the background. Last week we heard Linda beautifully read the story of his extraordinary childhood. We heard how Pharaoh, nervous about how powerful the Hebrew slaves were becoming, ordered the midwives to drown the male children, but how Shiprah and Puah, perhaps symbolic of Hebrew midwives everywhere, pulled the wool over the eyes of the Egyptians and defied Pharaoh's orders. We heard how Moses was spared and placed into a little basket and placed into the Nile. In one of those fascinating connections - the word for Moses' basket is *kiboton*, the exact same word used for Noah's ark- both vessels of protection, salvation, at an extreme time, even if Moses' ark was slightly less animal friendly. And we heard how Moses was found and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, and how, almost like a musical or soap opera plot, Pharaoh's daughter hired Moses' own mother to be his nurse.

It was a miraculous childhood, a rags to riches story if ever there was one. Moses was rescued from death and slave status to grow up as Egyptian royalty. He had a new, powerful home. He had a new royal lineage. And he still had his mom. He had everything- everything except a real connection with his own people. Moses had learned how to let his identity fade into the background- he had figured out how to fit in.

But the consequence was that Moses was a man divided. His adopted mother conferred upon him an Egyptian identity. But in secret, under the cover of night, his mother sang to him the old, old stories of his own people- she sang into him his Hebrew roots.

And it all came to a head that hot, hot day. Moses had gone out to his people, the text says- and by 'his people' the text means the Hebrew people. So you have this sense of Moses in all his Egyptian clothing, with all his Egyptian status, going out and seeing the Hebrews literally slaving away in the burning sun- and it's killing him to see his own people treated like this when he is free to prance around and live in a palace.

Then, he's drawn by a great noise. One of the Egyptian taskmasters had singled out one of the Hebrews. The slave had fallen, overcome by the heat. The Egyptian was yelling at the man, yelling at him, and beating the man- warning him he had better get up or it would be the last mistake he would ever make. Moses saw all this- he couldn't turn away.

And then, looking around, looking this way and that- Moses did what no one else would, maybe what no one else could- Moses stepped forward and killed this Egyptian. Moses killed him with his very own hands. And he buried him in the dry, desert sands- Moses wondering what he had done.

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A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of sitting at the feet of Dr. Ellen Davis, professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School. Reading directly from the Hebrew she translated this scene for our class, and when she was done, she asked us- "So what's going on here? What is happening? Why does Moses look around before killing this man?"

Well, we all thought the same thing. Moses had come upon the scene, was torn between his Hebrew and Egyptian identities, and not wanting to be seen, he looks this way and that to make no one's around before he kills the man. We all agreed- it was the act of a man divided. On the one hand he wanted to protect this Hebrew slave, but on the other hand he didn't want to get caught.

Prof. Davis nodded and said, "I know. That's what I used to think, too." And then, with masterful skill- she opened up an entirely different way of hearing this story. She started with what Moses saw in the first place. Our translation reads: "He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk." And the word in Hebrew for Moses saw, ra'ah- it's a very common word. It's exactly what you expect. But what's unusual is the preposition the text connects with ra'ah with 'el', the preposition 'upon'. Moses didn't just look at his people, he 'looked upon' them. And this construction only occurs at significant moments in the Bible. It happens when Hagar cries out to God: "Let me not look upon the death of my son." It happens when Judah cries out to God: "Let me not look upon the death of my father." And it describes the way God looked upon Rachel and Hannah when they were unable to bear children. The words ra'ah and el are used together only when someone sees what is happening and is moved in the deepest part of themselves. Moses here isn't divided when he sees what is happening- he is moved in the deepest part of him.

So what about him looking around before intervening. I have to confess that I have always read this as Moses was looking around to make sure no one was looking. I always read it him being somewhat sneaky.

Ellen Davis said while it's possible this is what was happening- she reads it differently. For one thing slaves tend to work in large numbers. Egyptian overseers didn't manage small numbers of slaves either- they managed huge groups. And geographically, this was a sandy plain- you could see for miles. It's not like there's a lot of cover. And further, in the next text Moses comes upon two Hebrew slaves who are fighting, and he's going to break it up- and they say to him: "Who the heck do you think YOU are? Are you going to kill one of us like you did the Egyptian?" Moses didn't kill this Egyptian furtively. It wasn't a secret. There was a crowd around him when he stepped forward and killed that man.

The reason he looked around? Prof. Davis says again the Hebrew helps us. The phrase here for looking around, looking this way and that, it's extremely similar to Isaiah 59:15-16. In Isaiah 59 the prophet laments that the people are not doing justice, that righteousness stands at a distance, that truth is stumbling and lacking. And God? Isaiah says God sees this. And God looks around- God looks this way and that. And seeing no one God is appalled there is no one to intervene, and so God acts.

When Moses sees what's going on he's moved in the deepest part of him- he sees and he doesn't turn away. And he looks around, he looks this way and that- not because he's being sneaky and doesn't want to get caught- he's looking to see if anyone is going to stand up to this Egyptian and act. And seeing no one, Moses is appalled and raises his own arm against the man, because no one else will lift a finger.

§ § §

And it's the same thing that happens later when Moses is herding the flocks for his father-in-law Jethro. After Moses chased them beyond the wilderness, and God appears to him blazing in that bush- Moses sees it. And then rather than saying, "Hey that's interesting but really, I've got a lot to do," or "Hey that's something, but I've got to get after those sheep," Moses sees it, and he acts- he turns aside. He allows himself to be interrupted. He acts on his wonder.

Moses sees and he acts. He doesn't get distracted by everything he has going on. He doesn't second guess himself, talking himself out of his convictions. He doesn't pretend not to see, knowing how much easier life is when you don't get involved- no matter the cost to people being wronged.

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This deep connection between seeing and acting- I think this may be the greatest casualty of our information age. Never has there been a time when you and I have had access to more information. One of my favorite facts is when Lincoln was assassinated it took three days for the news to make it to Portland, OR and twelve days before Europe found out. That's incredible to me. The President of the United States has been assassinated, and it took the Pacific Northwest three days to find out and 12 days for the rest of the world? Crazy. Today, with social media, you can know within seconds when Lindsay Lohan eats a twinkie. We are literally awash in a sea of news, much if it bad news, and there's often so little that you and I can directly effect. The information age as great as it is- so often severs the connection between seeing and acting. In some ways we're being conditioned to see and hear and then immediately look away, just to

survive. But what about matters that really call for us to be involved- what about times when we really can make a difference?

In 1964 Kitty Genovese was attacked in her apartment in New York after she came back from work late one night. There were neighbors all around. One neighbor yelled at the attacker to keep it down- but no one intervened. Despite the woman screaming for help one even called the police. People often chalk this up to what's called bystander syndrome- no one did anything because everyone assumed someone else would. And this is true. But I also wonder if this tragedy is the act of people who, even then, were jaded by so much information- they were people used to seeing problems and then looking away.

Is this what explains our own community and the recent death of 5 year old Oleander Labier? Several days ago the Oregonian ran one of the most chilling stories I have ever read about the abuse and finally the death of little Oleander- right here in our own backyard. The worst part of the story to me was not in the details of everything that happened to her- as horrific as the details were. The worst part were the numbers of people who admitted they suspected or knew there were problems- but who did nothing about it. Family members, preschool teachers, anyone who just crossed paths any one of them with a single phone call, might have made a difference. There were people who saw but who didn't act. They didn't turn aside to get a better look- they turned away.

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Well, we finally got out of that session meeting. And I didn't see that elder for the rest of the week. I didn't feel great about that night, but by the next Sunday I started to put it out of my

head focusing on other things. But then, the very next Sunday, that elder asked to speak with me. And do you know- that elder said they had been thinking about that meeting, and needed to tell me how hurtful my actions were. It wasn't so much what I said, but how I said it. It made this person feel unimportant and shut down and that was not OK. This elder, who really didn't know me very well yet, who had been hurt by me, took the time to speak with me and tell me I had hurt them. This person had no idea how I would react. They had every reason to believe I wouldn't take this well. But they didn't back down. They didn't pretend what happened didn't happen. They didn't look at that moment and then turn away. They were going to look and keep looking and make sure I saw it, too. It was absolutely one of the most courageous moments I have ever seen. It led me to apologize not only to this elder but to the session for my behavior. And when I did, the session wasn't like, "Oh, you don't need to do that." They all nodded and accepted my apology, letting me know that they didn't appreciate my tone either. By seeing and then acting- this elder made me a better pastor, a better person.

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Beloved, this week is going to come at you so fast. Fall is upon us. School is cranking up. There will be every reason in the next few weeks to see things and then just look away- you will have every excuse not to look and act. But these are exactly the kinds of times when it's crucial for us to keep our eyes peeled- these are exactly the kinds of times when people fall through the cracks. These next couple of weeks, I urge you- if you see something that doesn't seem right, if you have an intuitive sense that someone needs your help- well trust your gut. If you see something that catches your eye, turn aside to see better, and then act. It might be nothing. Sure. But what if it isn't? **Amen.**

1. Session- sarcastic with elder- elder shrinking back
2. Moses- knew about shrinking back. Story of him growing up shrinking into background. Man divided. Then, killing that Egyptian- wondering what had he done.
3. Always thought I understood this story until two weeks ago- Ellen Davis. A) Moses not divided. When he looks upon his people- rare usage. Means being moved in deepest part. B) When he looks side to side, not being sneaky- seeing if anyone would intervene. Isaiah 59.16. Moses sees the people, is moved in the deepest part, and then acts.
4. Same thing that happens with the bush. He sees it. And then he acts. He turns aside to see it better. Doesn't get distracted. Doesn't talk himself out of it.
5. Greatest challenge of our information age- the connection between seeing and action severed. Lincoln example. -Kitty Genovese. Oleander Labier. 5 years old 28 pounds. Worst part- so many people knew but didn't say anything.
6. Well, we finally got out of that session meeting. Wasn't happy with it, but quickly moved on- a new week of stuff. But the very next Sunday that elder asked to speak with me. Told me what I had said was hurtful and made this person feel unimportant, unwanted, and this was not ok. This elder had every reason to believe I wouldn't take this well, but said it anyway- it was the most courageous thing anyone has ever said to me. This person saw what happened between us, and didn't look away- but just faced it head on and acted. Led me to apologize- it made me a better pastor, a better person.
7. The week is coming at us fast. School starting. Fall approaching. Every reason in the world to look and then look away. But I say to you- when times are busy it's more important than ever to look well and act- because this is when folks fall through the cracks. This week ask yourself- what am I looking at?