

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 10, 2017

Taking Notice

Exodus 2:23-25; 3:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21

Intro to the reading:

Two Sundays ago, Leslie preached on the first chapter of Exodus,
about the descendants of Abraham becoming enslaved by the Egyptians,
and the story of Shiprah and Puah,
the Hebrew midwives who disobeyed the command of Pharaoh
and saved the lives of the Hebrew baby boys.

In that story, the baby Moses was delivered from death,
hidden in the reeds of the Nile,
discovered by Pharaoh's daughter,
and taken to be raised in Pharaoh's household.

One day, after he had grown up,
Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves,
and he killed him
and had to flee from Egypt and from Pharaoh.

So Moses settled down in the land of Midian,
married Zipporah, daughter of the priest of Midian,
and became a shepherd.

And so today we pick up the story...

READ EXODUS 2:23-25; 3:1-15

In the story of Shiprah and Puah,
the Hebrew midwives who delivered the Hebrew babies,
from the womb and from death,
we learned something about the character of God.

We learned that God loves his people,
has compassion for them when they suffer and will act to help them.
And God's way of helping his people is often unexpected,
turning to some rather unlikely candidates to get the job done
— at least, unlikely by normal human reckoning —
**often the more humble the character,
the more fit they are to be God's agent
in God's great acts of mercy and deliverance.**

In today's story,
God calls Moses to carry out his next great work of deliverance —
Moses, who himself was delivered from death by the faithfulness of the humble.

We dig into this story of Moses with the help of a scholar
who was our Church Retreat speaker a few years ago:
Anna Carter Florence,
an internationally known teacher of preachers.
And Anna taught us — as she teaches preachers around the world —
how important it is to pay attention to the verbs in the Bible.
If we want to really know what God is doing...
well, not to be too elementary, but it's the verbs that show us.

One of the passages of scripture Anna likes to talk about
is this one from Exodus:

So let's take a look at the verbs...

The Israelites groaned and cried out...
and their cries rose up
and God heard their cries and remembered his covenant...

God heard and remembered;
that is, God remembered he had a story with Abraham's descendants,
a story that God loved because God loved the people,
a story in which God and the people had made promises to one another.

And so God looked upon the people [or in the Hebrew, simply, God saw them]
and God took notice of them...that is, God considered their situation.

God heard, remembered, looked upon and took notice.

When we start paying attention to the verbs in scripture, we discover some interesting things.
In chapter 3, we begin to see some verbs attributed to Moses.
At first, these are verbs that have to do with Moses' ordinary, every day life
as a shepherd in Midian.
But then, not-so-ordinary things begin to happen.
There is this bush that is on fire.
And we read that Moses looked upon the bush [in Hebrew, simply saw]
same verb as God a moment ago who looked upon his people's suffering.

Then Moses said,
'I must turn aside and look upon this great sight,
and see why the bush is not burned up.'
And... *the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see...*

Anna Carter Florence wonders about this bush.
She wonders just how long this bush has been burning in this way,
burning without being consumed.
Who knows? Maybe this bush has been burning there for 20 years,
but no one ever bothered to turned aside and take notice of it
until Moses does this day.

But Moses did. He turned aside and took notice.
And God sees Moses turn aside and take notice,
and then things in the story really start to happen:
*When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see,
God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'
And Moses said, 'Here I am.'*

So God has gotten Moses attention,
and Moses has taken notice of God's presence in the burning bush,
and there are many more God-inspired verbs yet to come.
many more twists and turns,
many more troubles and triumphs.

First, God clears up the question of who he is, speaking out of this burning bush:
this is the God who has an ongoing story with the Hebrews,
as story that goes all the way back to Abraham.

Then we get another very clear expression of God's character:
*'I have taken notice of the misery of my people who are in Egypt; [same verb]
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...*

So God calls Moses to be his servant in this endeavor.
A very clear call
except with Moses there is a good bit of conversation, a lot of back and forth,
and Moses puts up some stiff resistance to God's call.

Moses says, but God...
...but...but...but...but...but...5 times, as the chapter goes on.
Moses says, "*But God...*"
But who am I to do this?
But how will they know that you have sent me?
But what if they don't believe me?
But I'm not really the outspoken type!
Finally concluding with a sort of whimpering whine,
But, Lord, please won't you just send somebody else?!?

But God reminds Moses of this long and amazing and unexpected story,
as story that he is now in the middle of whether he likes it or not.
God even gets a little angry with Moses.
God gets "stoked," literally "kindled" with Moses...
...and finally Moses realizes that God has swept him up into God's purposes,
and he relents from his resistance.

So God takes notice of God's people.
And Moses takes notice of God's presence.
And God takes notice of Moses' taking notice and says, this is my guy.

And so the story of God and God's people,
and the promises they have made,
and the history they share,
and the love they have one for the other,
rolls on.

So today our story rolls on,
and we have come to our annual event of the Ordination and Installation of Officers
in the Presbyterian Church.

We are still living in this story of God taking notice of the world.

There may be times when we, like Moses, have slipped away to Midian
and are hoping we have escaped God's notice, and are quietly tending to our sheep,
whatever our daily task may be.

But the God who loves the world, and takes notice of the world,
the God whose character compels God to be at work in the world,
who calls servants like Moses to do this work in the world —
God still sees us.

Somewhere along the way,
these men and women who will be ordained and installed today,
took notice of God's work
and God took notice of these men and women's taking notice,
and God said, these are the ones I want,
these will people my peeps!

And when the Lord saw that they had turned aside to take notice
God called to them out of their respective burning bushes,
called them by name,
and they said, "Here I am."

They may have said it tentatively, sheepishly,
or even while trying to walk in the other direction.
They may have put up some resistance.
They may have said, "But...but...but...but...but..."
Or they may have accepted eagerly...this time — everyone's story is a little different.
But by whatever route,
God has called them,
and so here we are today.

So I would say to these women and men —
or more importantly, the story of Exodus would say
to these women and men who are about to be ordained and installed
as Elders and Deacons for Fourth Presbyterian Church:

Keep taking notice.

Keep taking notice of what God is doing in your life,
and in the life of this congregation.

You are being called to a way of life that pays attention,
that turns aside to see things, and wonders about them,
asking, How might God be at work here?
and, What might this mean for us as the people of God?
and, How might God be calling us to respond?

And, of course, no one here today is off the hook.
It's not just these who are being ordained or installed today,
or have been ordained and installed in the past.

The call to ordained service is a particular kind of call
to a particular kind of "taking notice"
but the call to turn aside in your life and see what God is up to
is the call of every disciple.

To everyone, this story ought to prompt us to wake up in the morning and pray,
"Lord, help me to see.
Help me to take notice of what you are up to.
Lord, don't let me miss the burning bushes you put in my path every day.
Lord, get my attention today."

But be warned.

Moses would warn you:

it is a risky thing to turn aside and see, to take notice of God.
It might be easier to keep your blinders on.

**God might ask you to do something hard.
Something out of your comfort zone.**

When we turn aside from the normal, everyday,
and take notice,
God might call us to do something for God
that we...never...thought...possible,
or at least, never thought possible...for...us.

Apparently... this is the way God chooses to work in the world.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
for ever and ever.*

Amen.