

“Do You See What I See?”
Exodus 3:1-15

In 2007, the Washington Post decided to do an experiment. In an ordinary setting and at an inconvenient time, would beauty be noticed? They asked a well-known violinist Joshua Bell to play his violin at a metro station in Washington D.C. wearing normal clothes to see if people would even notice. By most measures, he looked like a street musician: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed his \$3.5 violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, and began to play. It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by on their way to work. No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made. Three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where average seats went for \$100. Two weeks later, at the Music Center at Strathmore, in North Bethesda, he would play to a standing-room-only audience. But on that Friday in January, Joshua Bell was just another background noise, competing for the attention of busy people on their way to work. During the time he play, only seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

Imagine if these people knew what they were missing! How often do we miss such amazing gifts just because we are too focused on what we think is important? How often do we miss the presence of God and the mysteries of life because we are not paying attention?

Today's Bible story is about being able to see the holy in the midst of ordinary life. Our story picks up after Moses killed an Egyptian man who was mistreating a Hebrew man. The following day he confronts two Hebrews who are fighting and the taunt by one of them reveals that Moses is known as the killer of the Egyptian overseer and furthermore it was known by Pharaoh. Moses fled into the desert and like his forebears before him met his future wife (Zipporah) at a well. Moses settles in the desert of Midian working for his father-in-law, a Midianite Priest. Moses was living an ordinary life and there was nothing special about him in many ways. As he was going about his work, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, he came upon a special bush that had fire around it but was not burning. Biblical scholars have discovered that there is a botanical explanation for this phenomenon. This could happen to a plant called *Dictamnus albus*. The whole plant, especially when rubbed, gives out an odor like lemon-peel. It is due to an essential oil, which gives off an inflammable vapor in heat or in dry, cloudy weather, which also becomes solid, exuding from rusty-red glands in the flowers. This accounts for the fact that the atmosphere surrounding it will often take fire if approached by a lighted candle or a spark, without injuring the plant. So, here we have a great scene that could happen in nature and we consider it to be a great miracle that the bush was burning without being consumed. We miss the point that what was amazing was the fact that Moses paid attention to God's presence in front of him. Among rabbinical scholars, the question was once raised, "why was the blaze burning, but not consumed?" After much theological debate, one rabbi noted, "the bush burned and was not consumed so that one day, as he walked by, Moses would finally notice it?" God was trying to get Moses' attention. Moses was a beaten down man. He didn't even see the potential in himself to be a leader for his people. He argued with God that this was not a good idea because he was not even a good speaker. The burning bush was the beginning of Moses' training in listening to God's voice. Some Bible scholars believe that at the Bush, Moses was receiving a lesser level of prophecy than he would receive in later years.

Jewish thought maintains that there was a crucial difference between Moses' and all other prophets' prophecies. While all other prophets received God's messages in the form of images that had to be interpreted, Moses heard God's word directly without the need for images. The Burning Bush, however, is the one exception to this rule, and suggests that Moses' spiritual perceptions still were in need of development.

So, today's reading is about pausing on the spiritual journey to develop our ability to see God in everyday life. Our faith is about noticing God's presence in everyday life and discovering God's vision for your life; noticing what it means to follow Jesus in dealing with challenging interpersonal situations; noticing God's presence in suffering and personal growth. One question that I often ask myself and others is where did you see God today? Or where am I going to see God today? This helps us pay attention to the pervasive yet seemingly hidden presence of God in our everyday life.

Often times when we feel alone or separated from God, it is because we are unable to see God. Our prayer time, our worship and all other faith practices are about sharpening our vision to see God. Sometimes, the presence of the Holy One also shocks us to see life beyond our views and preferences. Rabbi Abraham Heschel told the story of the woman who had problems participating in the synagogue service. "The service doesn't say what I mean," she complained to the rabbi. The wise rabbi responded, "Madam, I am afraid you have it backward. The important thing is not that the service says what you mean. The important thing is that you mean what the service says."

Moses was not exactly leader material. He was a killer and a fugitive. Yet, somehow he had developed a sense of God's presence in his life. Maybe it was because of his father-in-law who was a priest who might have helped him learn about prayer. Whatever it might have been, the encounter at the burning bush was possible not just because God was there, it was also because Moses was able to see it. Moses goes on to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and slavery because of his ability to see and communicate with God.

In his book, *Awakened Heart*, Gerald May describes the spiritual in terms of *pausing, noticing, opening, yielding and stretching, and responding*. Moses pauses to notice a burning bush and discovers he is on holy ground. Responding to God within the fiery bush calls him to open to the mystery and then follow God's call to a holy adventure. May outlines four ways of practicing loving presence which he has gleaned from the work of the 17th century monk Lawrence: through the little interior glance, through heart prayer, through a personal relationship with God, and through contemplative presence ("A pure gaze that finds God everywhere").

But sometimes even our religious views of God can become a block to seeing God in our everyday life. In her book, *The Cloister Walk*, Presbyterian Kathleen Norris writes about her experience with learning about God's presence in her life. "I have lately realized that what went wrong for me in my Christian upbringing is centered in the belief that one had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God, the insidious notion that I need to be a firm and even cheerful believer before I dare show my face in "His" church. Such a God was of little use to me in adolescence, and like many women of my generation I simply stopped going to church when I could no longer be 'good,' which for girls especially meant not breaking rules, not giving voice to anger or resentment, and not complaining." Kathleen later on discovered the Psalms by accident and discovered that she can bring her whole self before God just like the Psalmists did. So, we are all invited to discover and release whatever blocks us from seeing God in everyday life, what impairs our vision, what holds us back from hearing and following the source of all love and compassion in our lives. I know that an important shift in my image of God came when I saw that God's presence was not limited to being a parent who has authority over me. God's image for me extended and changed to be that of a friend, a loving presence, and a gentle guide. That is when I began to see and know more and more of God's presence in my life. Opening our inner eyes to see God's presence is part of our faith journey. Developing that heightened awareness of the Spirit in our lives takes a lot of practice and intentionality.

Otherwise we would be like all the people who walked by Joshua Bell and never even stopped because they didn't know and were not expecting someone like him to be there on their way to work.

Erik Weihenmayer is blind, yet on May 25, 2001, he reached the peak of Mt. Everest. Erik had lost his sight when he was 13, but that didn't stop him. On a mountain where 90 percent of climbers never make it to the top—and about 200 have died trying since 1953—Erik succeeded, in large measure because he listened well. He listened to the little bell tied to the back of the climber in front of him, so he would know what direction to go. He listened to the voice of teammates who would shout back to him, "Death fall two feet to your right!" so he would know what direction not to go. He listened to the sound of his pick jabbing the ice, so he would know whether the ice was safe to cross. Today we are invited to use and sharpen our spiritual senses. Just like Moses was able to see God in the burning bush which was part of his everyday life and work, we are invited to see God in the ordinary circumstances, people and events of our everyday life. So, wherever you are and whenever you may be, do you see what I see? Amen.