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 Text: Exodus 1:8-14, 3:1-15

God Sees, God Comes Down, God Sends

Introduction to Scripture

This fall, we are hitting the highlights of the Hebrew scriptures, to get a sense of the sweep of what the great German biblical scholars of the last century called *Heilsgeschichte*. I have to throw in that fifty-cent seminary word just because it's so fun to say. *Heilsgeschichte* means "salvation history," i.e. the grand story of God's redemptive activity in the world.

We began in Genesis with the creation of humanity, i.e. all of us with belly buttons. Then came God's call of the childless couple Abraham and Sarah with the promise to make of them a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. That promise seemed pretty ridiculous, until at long last when Sarah was ninety, they had a baby named Isaac. Last week, we heard about Isaac's son Jacob, who wrestled with God alone at night by the ford of the Jabbok and received the name Israel.

Today we move on to the book of Exodus. In doing so, we skip over the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons who, you recall, was the one hated by his brothers so much they threw him into a pit. Providently, he wound up in Egypt and through his gift of dream interpretation became Pharaoh's right-hand man. This was very helpful when years later Joseph's brothers showed up, looking for famine relief. With Pharaoh's blessing, Joseph's whole family immigrated to Egypt and settled there. These Israelite resident aliens prospered, and some four hundred years passed¹.

So now we come to our text for today. Listen for God's word: *Exodus 1:8-14*

Next, the narrator tells that Pharaoh was so threatened by the population growth of the Israelites that he turned to genocide. He ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the baby boys. But in the first recorded act of civil disobedience in the Bible, they did not. Between their courageous action, and that of three other females (a mother, a sister, and Pharaoh's daughter) involving a basket in the river, the baby Moses escaped certain death. He grew up an adopted child in the palace. Later, though, he fled Egypt, having murdered an Egyptian he witnessed abusing one of the Hebrew slaves, and became a shepherd.

We pick up the story here. Listen again for God's word: *Exodus 3:1-15*.

Sermon

"Follow the money." That was the catch phrase used in movie "All the President's Men," indicating the trail to discovering the truth about the Watergate break-in. Follow the money to find the truth about corruption.

However, if you want to discover the truth revealed in the Bible you need instead to "follow the verbs." Following the verbs in a Bible passage can lead you right to the heart of its

meaning. Verbs, after all, are where the action is.

As I looked at this story of Moses and the burning bush, I was struck by three verbs, in particular. God is the subject of these verbs. So, from them we learn what God was up to in this story and, I might add, is still up to today.

The narrative begins with Moses minding his father-in-law's sheep and minding his own business out in the middle of nowhere, "beyond the wilderness," according to the text. Actually, it wasn't nowhere. It was at the base of Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God. That's our first clue that this isn't going to be an ordinary day for Moses. Mt. Horeb is elsewhere called Mt. Sinai. It's the same location where later there will be thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and earthquake—all signs of God's holy presence--when Moses ascends to receive the Ten Commandments. Now, there is a flaming angel and a burning bush. These get Moses' attention. God calls out to Moses from the bush and orders him to take off his sandals. These are important actions and important verbs, but they are not the ones that I want to focus upon.

The verbs I want to focus on come in the speech that God delivers to Moses as he stands before the fiery bush barefoot, knees knocking, his face hidden out of fear. God begins his speech with the declaration, "I have seen." That's our first verb—God *sees*. "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt," God tells Moses. God has observed their affliction. God has taken notice of their unjust treatment. God is not deaf to their cries and knows their suffering. God sees all, and not with an unsympathetic eye, but with compassion.

The current Pharaoh who has intensified the oppressive program of forced labor his predecessor began doubtless does not know that God sees. But before it is over, he will. Before it is over, the ruthless king will have to reckon with the God who sees. The "Eye of Providence" which is atop the pyramid of the reverse side of a dollar bill sees every transaction—financial and otherwise. Those in power who take advantage of the weak may be lulled into thinking that no one is watching, but God is watching. God is witnessing the systems that work against the vulnerable. God sees the suffering of every child that goes to bed hungry because their families are trapped in poverty. God sees the suffering of every political prisoner who is unjustly jailed. God sees the casualties and collateral damage of war—the body bags and grieving loved ones. God sees not just the tragic consequences of sin but of calamity—the family whose house burned down, the cancer patient whose life is spinning out of orbit, the hurricane victims who have lost everything.

But God does not just see and feel sorry and do nothing. God is not the clockmaker who winds up the world and sits by and lets it tick. This is not the philosopher's unmoved mover. This is the God of Moses' ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who gave Abraham and Sarah a baby named Isaac in their golden years, the God who tested Abraham to see if he were willing to sacrifice Isaac, and who wrestled Isaac's son Jacob in the night. This is the God who gets personal. This is not a bystander God but one who gets dirty hands, who gets involved. This is not the God who stays up in heaven but who comes down.

That's our second verb: God *comes down*. God tells Moses, "I have come down to deliver my people from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." God responds to suffering with God's own presence and power to effect change. God makes a move to deliver the chosen people from their old land to a new land. God comes down to rescue them from the land of oppression and bring them to the land of blessing. God's eternal movement is coming down to transform lives. God comes

down to earth, as it were.

The ultimate expression of God's coming down is Christmas: the incarnation. It is Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, the living bread that came down from heavenⁱⁱ. In Jesus God came down to us in the most dramatic way possible. Jesus put skin and bones on the heart of God. He displayed God's compassion toward those who suffer when he healed the hoards who came to him with wounds and ailments, diseases and demons; when he befriended folks shoved to the margins of life; and when he hung on a cross for our sakes. God came down for the Hebrew slaves, came down in Jesus, and continues to come down as the Holy Spirit working deliverance in our lives and in the life of the world.

So, God *sees* and God *comes down*. But God does a third thing in his speech to Moses out of the burning bush. There's a third key verb here and that is "*send*." God says to Moses, "I will send you." God commissions Moses like a general commissioning a platoon leader to the front lines. "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." So now the intent of God—which is deliverance, rescue, blessing—becomes human responsibility. God sends Moses, sends us, to get the job done. God deploys us to go toe-to-toe with the death-dealing powers that be, with systems that abuse the weak, with whatever holds captive God's people—be it grinding poverty, injustice, drugs, violence, corruption, greed, ignorance, natural disaster, disease, or a host of other evils that sap life. God sends us to be liberators and agents of compassion.

"Whoa!" we say. "That's a mighty tall order!" Carrying out God's commission may feel like "Mission Impossible." We may think, "That's too hard. We don't have the time. We don't have the energy. We don't have the money. We don't have the volunteers." Just like Moses we have a pocket full of excuses. We might think that the needy don't merit our help, that God helps those who help themselves, so we don't want to go. We might feel that we should focus our efforts on our own family or own church members, that charity begins at home, so we don't want to go. We might just feel worn out or even lazy, so we don't want to go. We might be plain afraid, so we don't want to go. There is something in us that resists this divine sending. After all, what God sends us to do is inevitably risky and difficult.

Moses had five excuses altogether—we heard his first two in the part we read. First, he cites his own inadequacy, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" In reply, God doesn't give him a pep talk on how great he is, or how he's got what it takes to confront Pharaoh. God merely reassures Moses of the divine presence and says that the sign he'll get will be, after he's finished the job, that he will bring the Israelites back to this mountain where they will worship.

Second, Moses objects and says he doesn't even know God's name. In reply, God tells him the divine name, which isn't a regular name at all like that of the Egyptian gods, e.g. Osiris, god of the underworld and afterlife or Anuket, goddess of the Nile. It's a rather mysterious name that is rooted in the verb "to be" and means "I am" or "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." It conveys presence and power and sovereignty over all being and existence. Moses dishes out two other objections and finally gets to our favorite plea, the one quoted on a plaque in Ryan's office, "O my Lord, please send someone else." Isn't that what we all say to God, "Please, just send someone else"?

But as they say on Star Trek, "Resistance is futile." We dare not turn our backs on God's summons forever. (Just ask Jonah about that!) God is insistent, and we do well to go where God

sends us. And God sends all of us. No one who has passed through the waters of baptism is exempt. All of us are sent. For a few maybe it's across the world to be a missionary doctor in Africa. For most it may be across the street with a casserole for a grieving family or a lawnmower to cut a widow's grass. We may be sent to places of power to address the challenges that face communities, institutions, and countries, or we may be sent to places of vulnerability to mentor a kid whose home life is in shambles or to dish up a hot lunch for folks down on their luck.

When we do go, we can be assured that we do not go alone. We go with God's empowering presence. We go with God's wind in our sails. We go in fear and trembling, but we go in faith because God asks us to. It is exciting to be enlisted in the eternal movement of this God –this God who *sees* our suffering and is compassionate, this God who *comes down* to deliver us, and this God who *sends* us to work for good.

We have been summoned. Let's go!

ⁱ Gen. 15:13, Exodus 12:40-41

ii. John 1:14, 6:51