

### On Notice

Last week, we left Jacob with a limp and a new name—Israel. His encounter with God marked him for the family blessing business and set him on a path that leads him back to Canaan, the Promised Land where his grandfather Abraham had settled. Jacob has twelve sons, life is good for the most part. Jacob plays favorites a bit, and Joseph rises to the top of that list. Jacob gives him a special coat and listens when Joseph tattles on his brothers. Joseph also has a big mouth about his dreams which seem to point to his ruling over his brothers someday. So no one is surprised when the brothers get fed up with the pipsqueak and connive to get him out of the way. Joseph winds up first in a ditch and eventually in the courts of Pharaoh where he saves Egypt and his family from a devastating famine. The entire family settles in Egypt and all seems to go well, until as the text tells us:

A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’<sup>1</sup>

And so it begins. The Israelites have lived among the Egyptians for centuries at this point, but with the rise of a new Pharaoh and his drawing attention to their numbers, the fear campaign is underway. The plan is shockingly simple, elegant even. Point out the foreign ones and name them as a threat; then the rest will take care of itself, for a while anyway. Not satisfied with the ways the oppressive tactics are working, the pharaoh ups the ante insisting that any and all newborn boys be killed at birth. And as powerful as pharaoh is, there are those who resist, including Shiphrah and Puah, midwives to the Hebrews who let the boys live because they fear God. Pharaoh resorts to plan B and insists that all baby Hebrew boys be tossed into the Nile. But at least one mother does not follow suit. Instead she places her child in a basket, and floats him down the Nile, hoping against hope that he will be saved. He floats his way into the arms of none other than Pharaoh’s daughter who with the help of his mother as nursemaid, raises him as her own son, right under Pharaoh’s nose. The child grows up and sees how his kinfolk are treated. One day he kills an Egyptian who is beating a slave, and later flees to the desert when he fears that “the thing is known.” He makes a home for himself in Midian, tending his father-in-law’s sheep far

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 1:8-10, NRSV

away from the palace, far removed from anyone who might take notice of him as anything other than a shepherd. Meanwhile, one pharaoh dies and another takes the throne. The Hebrews cry out, and God takes notice of their suffering. [Read Exodus 3:1-15]

In the new sitcom, *Perfect Harmony* Arthur Cochran is a disgraced former professor of music at Princeton, who also happens to be a grieving spouse. He has spent the past few months living in a small town in Kentucky, his now-deceased wife's hometown where she wanted to spend her final days. Now that she has died, he is lost. As the actor who plays him has said, Arthur is a man "who has a bright future behind him."<sup>2</sup> At one point, Arthur decides it is time to put himself out of his misery, when he overhears the choir of the Second First Church of the Cumberlands. They are awful and horribly off key. Arthur decides that he cannot let their wrong notes be the last thing he hears. He barges in and interrupts their practice, insisting on fixing them.

Moses, too, has a bright future behind him. If he had kept his head down and played along, he could have possibly risen in the ranks in the pharaoh's household, but he couldn't. That's just not how he is built. He notices too much. And once he notices something, he is hard pressed to let it go. He notices the suffering of the Hebrews and lashes out by killing a brutal Egyptian. He notices shepherds bullying young women at a well and intervenes on the women's behalf. He notices things, and lives in fear that someone will take notice of him. He is a fugitive after all. And he is content in his self-designed witness protection program, or at least somewhat content. He does name his son, Gershom, which means "Alien living in a foreign land." He is out of place here, no matter how settled he may think he is.

Arthur Cochran is an alien in a foreign land, too. His accent sounds nothing like those around him, and his reasons for staying are more about spite than a genuine sense of call. But he also notices things. It is not just the horribly off-key notes of the "Hallelujah Chorus" that catch his attention; he notices that one man has been secretly in love with another choir member for years. He also notices that the child of two divorcing choir members is acting out, not because he is a bad kid but because he is dyslexic, a diagnosis that no one else has even wondered about. Yes, it is a sit-com, and yes, some things are already a bit too neat and tidy, but there is something to this business of noticing, perhaps even something holy and redemptive. Because the choir members begin to notice things about Arthur, too. And in their noticing, they show Arthur not only that he is needed but perhaps more importantly that he is also seen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.today.com/video/bradley-whitford-talks-new-role-in-nbc-comedy-perfect-harmony-69970501897>

This past week, a scholar raised a question about our text that I had not thought to ask: “How long has that bush been burning?”<sup>3</sup> God sets the bush ablaze, but it is when Moses notices it, when he decides to look that God calls out to him. This God tells Moses that he has seen the misery of God’s people, that he has heard their cries and that the time has come to save them. God wants to free the people from Pharaoh, and God wants Moses to help, to lead the way. And Moses responds not with “Sign me up!” but with “Who me?” But he has seen the blazing bush, and he has heard God call to him. He is terrified. He will go on to list all sorts of excuses, and while God will grow exasperated with Moses’s hemming and hawing, the die is cast. God has taken notice of his people’s pain; God has also taken notice of this fugitive scaredy cat with a heart for justice; Moses has seen God’s presence and heard God’s call; and God has decided that Moses is his man and that the time for salvation is now. Once the holy work of noticing has begun, there is no going back, because the noticing is intimately connected with the saving.

This past week I stumbled across an article about a community of homeless men and women who will be without shelter as of today. It seems that a property on Mulberry Street in Harrisburg that has housed a camp homeless people for years has been sold and the residents are being forced to move. There is anxiety among the residents about where they will go and what will become of the community they have found in that place. Advocates are working on their behalf, but the common theme is that until this sale went through, no one who was not looking for them even noticed that they were there. Those who were looking or are looking noticed, though. Volunteers from Compassion Action Network and Downtown Daily Bread know they’re there. These volunteers are already prepared for more traffic during lunch and more need from more people who struggle on the streets. The need is nothing new, of course, but once these ministries saw the need up close, once they noticed these children of God living without a place to call home, they could not un-see it; they could not un-see them.<sup>4</sup>

I don’t know how long the bush was ablaze, but I do know that the Hebrews had been struggling and crying out for years. Moses’s running away to Midian did not change that. God needed him to notice again and to respond. Which makes me wonder, what is blazing just outside of my vision here and now? What or who is God calling me to notice? A brave young woman cried out on behalf of the planet this past week, joining the cries of young people throughout the world. Children are crying out in hunger for justice, and adults are crying out for peace. If I allow myself to notice, I suspect that I will see bushes

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1179](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1179)

<sup>4</sup> <https://theburgnews.com/in-the-burg/out-by-sunday-with-a-property-sale-a-homeless-camp-disbands-and-long-time-residents-wonder-where-to-go-next>

blazing everywhere. God is crying out for me to notice those whom the world ignores or overlook, and once I see them, I cannot un-see them. I tend to notice the clerk's surliness. Maybe now I'll notice that the clerk has bags under her eyes from working three jobs. I tend to notice and avoid the neighbor who makes racist comments under his breath. Maybe now I'll notice that he hasn't had a visit from family in years. I notice the smiling Hispanic student with his father who ride past me on their bikes on the way to school. Maybe now I'll notice that no one says good morning to either one of them. Maybe I will notice bushes large and small ablaze everywhere that have burning right under my nose this whole time. And if I notice, God will likely expect me to move beyond the noticing to the doing, and that terrifies me. I have my list of excuses ready: I'm too busy; the problem is too daunting; those people are unworthy; I'm only one person. But God never expects Moses to go it alone. "I will be with you," God says, and even as Moses is blustering with excuses, God has Aaron his brother heading out to meet him. I suspect that God does not expect me to go it alone either.

There is much to distract us and derail us. There are many who want to shock us and grab and hold our attention. But I'm not convinced that the things the loudest voices want us to be outraged at make for burning bushes. I suspect much of what God notices flies under the radar of the shock jocks and shouters. But make no mistake, bushes are ablaze all around us. We cannot save the world; only God can do that. We can participate in God's saving ways by noticing what God notices; we can turn and look at all that breaks God's heart across the street, across the river, and across the world. And once we notice, God will also call us to go. But maybe I won't worry myself with the going piece too much just yet, because I realize that I need to do a better job of noticing first, of seeing and refusing to un-see what God wants me to see. So I'll begin by working on the noticing, trusting that when it is time for me to go and do, God will be with me, with us, because God has taken notice of us, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.