

In a time in our lives that Amy and I refer to as “BC,” which stands for “before children,” we took a trip to Venice, Italy. We arrived via train and made our way from the train platform to the docks to board a vaporetto, which is essentially a floating bus. Our route to our hotel would take us down the Grand Canal, surrounded by beautiful Venetian palaces, quaint waterfront restaurants, and all the Italian beauty and charm Venice has to offer.

In preparation for the trip, we had downloaded an audio guide to listen to along the way. I was probably fumbling with the headphones, and so I paid no attention to the signs at the dock. When the next vaporetto pulled alongside, I forged ahead, and Amy and I pushed our way to the bow for a great seat. We plugged in the headphones, pressed play on the audio guide, and settled in as the music swelled and we took in the sights.

A few minutes later, what we were seeing in front of us was not matching what was on the audio guide. In fact, the boat rounded a bend, and we were presented not with grand Venetian palaces and Italian charm and beauty, but rather the Venice dump.

It was clear that in our haste to board the first available boat, we had missed a sign somewhere. And so, at the next stop, we got off the boat. And for a good twenty minutes, we stood there at the dock, just the two of us, taking in the sights and smells of the Venice town

dump, while we waited for a boat traveling in the correct direction.

I had been busy and distracted, and not paid attention to the signs. And fortunately for us, the worst thing that happened was that we spent some quality time, just the two of us, sitting on the dock by the bay, watching the tide roll away.

We’ve all been there, haven’t we? A little distracted, a little lost in our own little worlds, not really paying attention, when we’ve missed a sign, or passed our exit, or wondered, now where was I going, and how did I get here? It happens. And hopefully, the worst thing that happens to us in those moments is a little embarrassment or inconvenience.

But it makes me wonder – how often do we do those same things sometimes when it comes to the things of God? Do we get so caught up in our own lives, lost in our own thoughts, so focused on our own little worlds, that we run the risk of completely missing out on what God is doing in our midst?

Our story from Exodus is a familiar one to many of us. There’s Moses, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, way out there beyond the wilderness. He’s the only human being for miles in any direction. I imagine that except for the sound of the sheep and the sound of the breeze, it’s extraordinarily quiet.

In my mind, I've always imagined that Moses hears the voice of God calling out to him, "Moses! Moses!" and then he turns to see the burning bush, and the conversation continues from there.

But that's not how the text reads. And that is what has caught my imagination this week. Listen again to the order of events.

*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.*

Did you catch that? According to the text, so far, the silence has not been broken. The angel of the Lord appeared, but neither the Lord nor Moses has yet spoken.

And here's the part that caught my eyes and ears this week. Moses begins to speak, but to whom? Is he talking to the sheep? Maybe he's been in the sun for too long.

He says, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God began to speak. God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

God did not begin to call Moses's name until Moses stopped what he was doing and looked around to see what God was up to. And when God saw that

Moses had turned aside to see, *then* God began to speak to Moses and to lay out God's plan for the redemption of God's people.

I wonder – what would have happened if Moses had never turned aside to see? What would have happened if Moses hadn't ever noticed the burning bush? Or if he had noticed it, just shrugged his shoulders, and went on with his business. Would God have conspicuously cleared God's throat? Or called Moses' name in a stage whisper? Or would God have just moved on to someone else entirely?

One thing I know for certain. God was on a mission to God's people from bondage, and so God was going to get that accomplished whether Moses participated or not. God's part in all of this was never in question. But I wonder how the story would have turned out differently if Moses had never turned aside to see?

And I wonder about you. I wonder what bushes are burning in your life this morning. I wonder if God is doing something over here, in your peripheral vision, just waiting to see if you're going to look up long enough to notice.

I've only been here a few weeks, but I feel like I'm starting to get to know some of you. I've had some conversations with some of you recently about what a struggle it is to find some kind of work-life balance. I've seen

some of you up at Holland Park this week as we've passed each other on the way from work to school to soccer and baseball to dinner and home again.

I've had the chance to visit with some of you who are students, who are struggling to balance a course load and an internship and a social life and somewhere in there find time to sleep and eat, and maybe once or twice a semester, do some laundry.

I've had the chance to talk to a few of you who are retired, but you're busier now than ever. And some of you I know decided retirement wasn't for you, and so you went back to work. And some of you I've come to know are in your golden years and still deciding what you're going to be when you grow up.

I know first-hand how one day rolls into another, and then another, and then another, to where things get set on auto-pilot, and you're just off in your own thoughts, your own little world.

My sister, my brother, I believe God has a plan that involves the redemption and deliverance and blessing of all the families of the earth. And I believe that God wants you to play a major role in that plan.

But in my own experience, God doesn't generally just drop down with thunderbolts and lightning, very very frightening, Galileo. More often than not, God shows up in burning bushes,

just at the edge of the field of vision, just waiting to see if you're going to look up long enough to pay attention. And when God sees that you've stopped long enough to turn aside to see, God begins to speak.

So how do we do that? How do we turn aside to see what God is doing?

There are seven 24-hour days, or 168 hours in a week, and those hours are a precious gift from God offered to us for our stewardship, our management.

I have discovered that I have to intentionally claim some of that gift of time specifically for paying attention to the things of God, for turning aside to see what God is doing in my world and in the world around me. I have discovered that if I don't get very intentional about naming and claiming that time, one day begins to roll into another, and then another, and then another, and I'm so busy going from one thing to a next that I don't notice what God is doing, and then I miss out on what God is up to in the world and about what God wants me to do about it.

It's often a struggle to block that time for turning aside to see. There are so many other things that compete for my time and attention, so many ways to become distracted. It's something that I'm trying to live into in my own discipleship, and I invite you to join me on the journey.

So, here's an idea for you for this first full week of Lent, of this season of preparation and attention and discipline.

If you're already in the habit of a daily intentional time of prayer, and I mean beyond the "rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub, yay, God" prayer, but real, intentional attending to the presence of Christ, then in your daily prayers this week, ask God to help you notice the burning bushes in your peripheral vision, and ask God to speak to you in unexpected places and through unexpected voices.

If you're not in the habit of daily prayer, daily attending to the presence of Christ, guess what your homework is? Tonight, go look at your calendar for this coming week, and find one open fifteen-minute block in every day this week. I know that's a tall order, but find fifteen minutes somewhere in each day.

Look at your calendar and schedule a daily appointment with the risen Christ. And for fifteen minutes every day this week, intentionally attend to his presence. Put away your cell phone, turn off the television. Jesus gives you permission to lock yourself in a closet, if necessary, but be intentional about paying attention to the things of God. And who knows, you might notice something that you hadn't seen before, and when you turn your attention to it, God just might begin to speak to you.

Don't forget, we're in this thing together. And so, I wonder what bushes God has set on fire in the peripheral field of view of this congregation? As I've come to know this church in recent weeks, I've seen firsthand that it's a vital missional presence in the heart of this city, a role it's played for nearly 200 years now. A church is not a building, of course, but this building is an incredible tool for ministry, and conservative estimates suggest that this congregation offers Christ's hospitality to somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,500-2,000 people per week. This is truly an incredible place.

But maybe God is still be lighting bushes ablaze in this city, and God is just waiting for us to notice before God speaks. The God who was an is and is to come, the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ, the Messiah, is on a mission for the deliverance and salvation and blessing of all the families of the earth, and God has a role in that plan that is tailor made for the First Presbyterian Church of Athens.

May we turn aside to see, and when the Lord sees that we've turned aside to see, may God call our name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.