

“Turn”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Exodus 2:23-25; 3:1-15; 4:10-17

September 30, 2018

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The animated television series *The Simpsons* begins its record-breaking thirtieth season tonight. By some gross theological oversight, I have failed to mention them in a sermon until now. The Simpsons were attacked as crude and rude when they first arrived, but those who actually watched the show found this family full of heart and morality. And, unlike nearly all other TV families, the Simpsons go to worship every Sunday, at First Church of Springfield. The ethos of *The Simpsons* is one of ethical decision-making, loyalty, and honesty, while unmasking and chastising idolatry, cynicism, and greed.

Fans of the show know the longstanding tradition of special Halloween episodes each year, which take the characters and place them in a series of vignettes that riff on classic horror films, *Twilight Zone* episodes, and other stories about witches or aliens or monsters, all with a bit of spookiness and a whole lot of laughs.

On October 29, 1995 *The Simpsons* presented “Treehouse of Horror VI,” with the first Halloween vignette titled “Attack of the 50 Foot Eyesores.” On a dark night, an “ionic disturbance” causes a freak thunderstorm, which brings to life all of the giant advertising statues and billboards around town. They go on a reign of mayhem. A huge peanut with a cane turns the table and eats a carful of people. The neon cowboy from a beer billboard uses his bottle to start smashing. If it had been Birmingham instead of Springfield, we can imagine dozens of enormous Alexander Shunnarahs wreaking havoc across the city, riding on the backs of Chick-fil-a cows.

Eight-year-old Lisa Simpson — the most *Edgewood Presbyterian-ish* character on the show — goes to the ad agency that created all the mascots to seek an answer to save the day. The ad exec there tells her that — just like advertisements — if the people stop paying attention to the monsters, they’ll lose their powers. With the help of Paul Anka, Lisa sings a jingle to the town:
“Just don’t look! Just don’t look!”

There’s opportunity after opportunity to turn away in our passages from Exodus:

A cry from the people rose up to God. God heard it. And remembered the covenant we’ve been tracking through the generations. And “God looked upon the Israelites...and took notice of them.”

A bush burns, but isn’t consumed, and Moses looks and consciously decides to “turn aside and look” instead of walking away. Once he realizes what’s up, he hides his face “for he was afraid to look at God.”

God explains that, having witnessed the misery of the Israelites, God knows their suffering and has a plan to do something about it. Awesome.

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Oh.

Moses discovers that this plan doesn't involve God wiggling the holy nose and making everything better. No, this plan involves him having to show some courage and to speak for the powerless and voiceless and to trust this God he's just met through a flaming shrubbery out in the middle of nowhere. He tries to turn away.

"Who am I?" he asks. And God doesn't answer that, but promises to be with Moses and to bring him and the people back to this very mountain. Moses tries to turn again, "Uhhh...Who are you?" And God responds with words so old and elemental that we don't really know how to translate them. "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." God's name is not a fleeting noun or a simple descriptor, but a twisty sentence with verbs and action and mystery that elicits an existential gulp that echoes through thousands of years.

God is clear — there will be no turning from these troubles, from these groans, from these people who are crying out that they have been hurt and oppressed and that the weight of empire is smothering them. I AM WHO I AM will be there.

Moses tries again to turn. He's not a very good public speaker. It's just not in his God-given skill set. God wonders aloud just who he thinks gave him his God-given abilities. God's got this, and will speak through Moses and teach him.

Moses tries one last time, "O my Lord, please send someone else." And so God improvises — Aaron will be the speaker to the people, but Moses will be the speaker to Aaron for God.

The cries for help rise up, and God will not turn aside.

Yesterday was the Birmingham walk for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Misinformation and stigma leave so many living with mental health problems in the shadows. Their cries are heard by God. But it is so tempting to turn away from illness that isn't a broken bone or a visible wound. If our healthcare system were as poorly supported and funded to deal with gunshot wounds as it is to deal with mental illness, it would be scandalous.

The cries for help rise up, and God will not turn aside.

Women telling their stories of assault and harassment and violence — and whether they or the ones who hurt them are Republicans or Democrats, young or old, loathed or beloved — God looks and takes notice and knows their sufferings.

The cries for help rise up, and God will not turn aside.

More than 800 dead in Indonesia after a massive earthquake and tsunami. Recovery just beginning from Hurricane Florence.

Monstrous behavior and monumental loss of life and immoral systems will not lose their power if we turn away, turn the channel, turn our heads so as not to look upon suffering. Rather, they grow stronger when we pretend they don't exist. They grow like kudzu. They fester like infected wounds.

Not only can we simply not make our problems disappear by not taking notice of them, but at some point God's plan to take them on will cause us to see something out of the corner of our eye and turn

and behold. Catching God trying to get our attention is admittedly getting harder. God is showing off with natural beauty and whispers of holiness in the most ordinary places and signs that we are treading on holy ground. A few years ago, a young woman in my hometown of Staten Island, New York fell into an open manhole that was being guarded by orange cones as a sewer line was being flushed. She was scraped up, but otherwise just fine, and all I'm saying is that if Moses had had a smartphone, I AM WHO I AM might have been waiting in that bush for awhile.

But once we do turn to behold, God has got us. Moses tries every way to wiggle out from the call to be part of God's response to the risen cries, but God has been watching Moses. God saw that Moses was keeping the flock — watching out for those sheep and getting them fed and protecting them and leading them. So Moses was the person for the job. What a relief to find out that God hears the groans and will respond. What a stomach-drop to discover that the response involves you marching into Pharaoh's office and demanding freedom for the empire's workforce.

God gives us the words and the courage and the strength and the direction. We are not all called to be the one to march on Pharaoh with staff in hand, proclaiming God's dream of freedom over and against Pharaoh's culture of death.

But we don't get to turn away. If we respond to God, as Moses did, with the plea that we are not *enough* enough for God to work with, we haven't been paying attention to the stories God has been telling us. *Mhmm*, God replies, *and remind me who it is that made you?* God is not interested in our litany of deficiencies, because the God we know in Christ calls us beloved and gets annoyed when we slam one of those beloved, and because God has been watching and knows what we are capable of today and asks nothing more of us than to live as who we were created to be.

This evening the Birmingham Youth Group will fill packages for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to bring to hurricane victims. On October 13th, you're invited to join EPC in helping build a house with Habitat for Humanity. You have friends and family who have been victims of harassment and assault — and you get to choose whether to listen to them and believe them. Unlike the ancient Israelites and Egyptians, you have a voice in the halls of power in this nation, and you get to choose whether to let your representatives know about the struggles of your community and they almost certainly won't chase you with horses and chariots. You are part of a congregation that is willing — sometimes clearly, sometimes awkwardly, always honestly — to speak out in favor of welcome and beloved-ness and an invitation to all to break bread together.

I'm still waiting on cooler, crisper weather, but let's make this fall a season of turning to notice and hear and know and resisting the urge to look away.

The cries for help rise up, and God will not turn aside. Amen.