

Eyes

“Open your eyes.”
Exodus 2:1-10

Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes #7

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Alone

I spoke with my mother the other day and she told me that my sister wondered whether it would be safe for her to walk out in the neighborhood anymore. She said that if she fell or anything else happened to her no one was likely to help. Then she told me the rest of the story. She said that the other day a woman was walking her dog down the block. She tripped on a crack in the sidewalk and had been laying there for some time. People had passed her by and no one stopped to see if she were ok. My mother finally saw her and called out to her to see if she were alright. She was the only one.

So, maybe it's true. Maybe when she's out there it can be like that: no one to watch out for her. No one to care. You've probably heard of times that bystanders stood by watching horrific crimes committed, doing nothing. Social psychologists have studied what some have called the *bystander effect* and have come to some conclusions about why people might see something and do nothing to help. They said some are afraid of consequences in the workplace or among a circle of friends or family. Others may see a need for intervention, but also see others also watching without making a response, so they conclude that no help is necessary. Still others may assume someone else who is present must be better trained or equipped than they, so they do nothing.¹ 'Lots of reasons for people not to help, including the chilling notion that it's just that no one has the time and no one cares. Maybe it is true.

Yet, there is also plenty of evidence that there *are* people who care. Several years ago an old friend of mine who had become the office manager at my parents' church talked to me when we crossed paths at a conference. She told me that a friend of hers who lived in my parents' neighborhood had watched my father mowing the lawn, no longer strong as he once had been and as I still imagined him. She said that he came to a slope in the front yard near the curb and lost his balance, falling into the street into the path of an on-coming car. She said she that the car stopped, but thought it would be important that I know. *It was a friend of a friend* and she was intent to get the message to me. *A friend of a friend*: almost like there were eyes out there watching and caring for my parents' well-being.

Since my father died several years ago, my mother has been getting along well, but still has had neighbors watching out for her. One man just cleared her walks every time needed it snowed throughout the winter. At the end of the winter she sent him a gift with a note of thanks and she just got a letter back from him. She showed it to me; it said, "No gift was necessary. I just think that people ought to help others out if they can. And I know that there are a number of other neighbors who would do the same."

It's like there are eyes all over: God's eyes watching and caring and ready to help.

Two Framing Stories

So, maybe what's true is that there are two tendencies out there, and people have a choice at any moment which way to lean. Will their eyes be closed or will they be open to become the eyes of God?

Closed or open? It's not that these are new options, like the world has somehow become worse off than it ever was. Closed eyes and open eyes have always been our choice. The Bible has stories that describe each and offer them as stories that provide frames for our living.

In the Book of Genesis, near the very beginning of the Bible, there's a story about Cain and Abel, the first two children of Adam and Eve. As the story goes, Cain became very disappointed and was jealous of his brother Abel because he thought Abel was blessed by God better than he was. God warned him not to become obsessed with his disappointment or envy because it would leave him vulnerable to the power of evil. God said "Keep frowning and beware, for sin is crouching at the door," like a wild animal ready to pounce when you're not looking.

But Cain kept frowning and, sure enough, as soon as he found a chance he killed Abel. He committed the first homicide. Then, the story goes that God came looking for Abel and asked Cain where he was. Cain said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"² Cain, you see, expected that he didn't have to watch out for his brother. He had no responsibility for him. Abel should have been on his own. Cain only needed to take care of Cain. Closed eyes. It's a choice that has been there since the beginning of time.

But it's not the only choice. The story of Exodus begins with a new Pharaoh who sees the size to which the minority ethnic group in his country has grown. He doesn't have a clue that they descended from a powerful public servant who had been a loyal

servant of an early pharaoh and saved the Egyptians from starvation. And he has no sense that anyone could be watching over him or his people in his day.

No trust. All he sees is a mass of Hebrews who he thinks could pose a threat if Egypt were ever invaded. What if they became allies of a hostile army? So, acting on his fear and in the name of national security, he makes them slaves with ever-harsher oppression and decrees that all Hebrew boys should be drowned in the Nile River.

It is cruel irony that exposes the character of the pharaoh: the very river that has ever been the symbol of life is now to be made a place of death. Who will be the eyes for God when even the government turns against the Israelites and their children?

There is a mother who gives birth to a beautiful baby boy and she chooses not to let him die. She cares for him as long as he can be hidden, then makes a basket of papyrus and pitch that might remind you of Noah's Ark. She nestles her baby in it, safe and snug and sets it among the reeds of the Nile. There, the baby floats and cries.

But the story goes that the baby isn't alone. Moses: helpless and vulnerable, is being watched-over all-the-while by his sister, Miriam. Eyes.

When Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe and hears the cries of the infant she identifies him as a Hebrew, but in defiance of her father she cares. And Miriam, watching, comes out from the reeds. It must be a gutsy move. And she offers her help: she can arrange for a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for the princess. So, Moses is given to his real mother until he was grown enough to be taken into the palace itself and become a prince. And a Hebrew mother is paid from the royal coffers to simply be the mother of her child. The twist of the story had to make the ancient Israelites smile.

Eyes. Miriam *is* her brother's keeper.

Two stories. Either one can frame how you see your life. Do you see yourself as on your own, no one watching over you so you must see everyone as a potential threat? Then when trouble or need comes to stranger or friend, do you close your eyes like Cain or like the Pharaoh?

Or will you believe there are eyes are watching over you: God looking through the eyes of those who care? Then, will you be like a Miriam in the reeds, keeping your brother or your sister?

Lost Children

Sometimes something tragic happens. Sometimes people are too uncaring or just too unaware to see. But not always.

One day Laura and I were with our infant son and not-quite-three-year-old daughter in a crowded festival where we met a friend. James was in a stroller. One of us had had Carrie by the hand. After a while we gave our friend quick hugs goodbye, for just a second, and for just a second didn't see. Then we turned and knew at once something was wrong; we had to ask the chilling question, "where's Carrie?"

In a panic we searched the crowd. Laura stayed-put with James and the stroller, and I walked in larger and larger circles through the crowd looking hard. There was a temporary police station set up in a trailer nearby. So I went in, giving them her description and asking for their help.

It was the worst, cold feeling I ever felt.

Before I was even through making my report, the officer inside gently touched my shoulder and pointed through the window. He asked, "Is that her?" I looked and saw her: hand-in-hand with Officer Washington (I think he was Dearborn's finest) walking their way back over the bridge she had strayed across. I stepped outside in front of them and he asked, "Is that someone you know?" Then she dropped his hand and jumped into my arms.

It turns out that for that split second we were saying goodbyes, the movement of the crowd made her think that we all were moving, too. So she had walked away thinking for a time she right beside us.

But there was a woman watching on the other side of the bridge, and she saw a lost little girl. She stopped and took her hand and led her to the officer who watched over her until she was safe again with us.

Eyes. And I think it's possible that my mother could fall and no one would see. But I also know that there are eyes in the reeds that want to notice. Hearts all over that want to be ready to help.

And I know that there are eyes in this congregation that already see. They see others who need rides because transportation has become a difficult thing. They care enough to notice and provide. They see others who are struggling with health and

aging and they keep tabs on the vulnerable and care. They see where there is need, and with the eyes of God they notice so their hearts can become God's hearts and their hands can become God's hands.

May you can choose to keep your eyes open so they can be the eyes of God.

REFERENCES

- [1] "Bystander Effect" from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Last modified June 5, 2009.
http://en.wiokipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect.
- [2] Genesis 4.