

Seeing God

Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15

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“Often we miss seeing something happening right before our eyes because our brains are focused on something else,” Gretchen Rubin writes in her book, *Life in Five Senses*, before describing how she has rediscovered much of what she had been missing by retraining her eyes to see what her brain had deemed unimportant. ¹ “The more I looked, the stronger the habit grew,” Rubin notes before making her case through pictures.

Rarely does a day go by without my seeing a FedEx delivery truck in downtown DC. But I had never noticed a small detail in the FedEx logo until Rubin pointed out where to look. There is an arrow formed between the E and the x. It’s right there, before my eyes. But I had never seen it before. What about you?

There is a similar detail on plastic bags holding Hershey Kisses. I have purchased several sacks of these small sweets. I even stocked up on them when creating hotel goody bags for guests at our wedding. But I never noticed the kiss creatively lodged between the K and the l. Now that I have been trained to see it, I see the kiss whenever I’m in a candy aisle.

A similar detail is on bags holding my favorite brand of tortilla chips. Have you seen the happy people formed by the middle two T’s who appear to be eating chips when opening a bag of Tostitos? Again, I had not until someone invited me to see what is right there—before my eyes.

Now that I have seen the arrow, the kiss, and people eating chips, FedEx trucks, bags holding Hersey Kisses, and containers of Tostitos will never look the same again.

Not only do I now see all these small details that are in plain sight, but I also wonder what else I regularly miss.

What signs, symbols, and sights are right before my eyes but go unnoticed?

What about when it comes to our faith?

Where are there glimpses of God’s presence and covenant fidelity all around us—signs we can see if we train our eyes to pay closer attention?

In the book of Genesis, we read how it did not take long for humankind to lose its innocence. In fact, the writer of Genesis describes how every inclination within the hearts of humanity was evil, causing God to be so deeply grieved that God crafted a plan to blot out everything God created. Everything was to be destroyed except for one righteous person. Noah was instructed to make an ark of cypress wood and, when finished, take his family and two of every living creature on board.

When everyone is on board, God opens the windows of the heavens, flooding the earth for forty days and forty nights. With each passing day, the waters increased, allowing the ark to ride across its surface until the ark was high above the earth. Everything on the ark lived while “everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.”²

When the flood waters subsided, Noah built an altar to the Lord on which he offered burnt offerings. The smell was so pleasing to God that God said in God’s heart, “I will never

¹ Gretchen Rubin, *Life in Five Senses* (New York: Crown, 2023), 23

² Genesis 7:22.

again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.”³ God then transforms the promise of God’s heart into a covenant before taking a bow, the archery weapon of a warrior, a tool of death and destruction, and making it a reminder of the promise God has made to never again destroy life.

Most covenants are made between two parties who each promise something. But God does not ask anything of Noah or his sons. Rather, God accepts self-imposed, unilateral boundaries that will prevent God from ever brutally retaliating again. And should God ever be tempted to forget God’s promise to remain faithful even when we are not, God only needs to look and see what happens when sunshine is mixed with a bit of rain. God sees rainbows and remembers God’s promise to us.

Ryan Bonfiglio explains, “While we think of human remembering as a mental process that entails calling to mind something from the past, divine remembering is of a different sort. It is about attention and intervention. It bespeaks Gods’ commitment to be in relation with sinful humanity, to deliver out of destruction those who are not yet inclined to do good, and to suffer with, and sometimes because of, a broken world. That God is a god who remembers is the only thing that ultimately holds back the waters of the flood, and it is the only thing that makes new life possible.”⁴

What do you need to see to remember how new life is possible?

If you search “rainbow nursery décor,” Google will provide over 22 million results in a third of a second. Amazon will eagerly sell you rainbow paintings and potholders, rainbow mobiles and macrame, rainbow crib sheets and cabinet knobs. If you have Amazon Prime, you could be surrounded by signs of God’s covenant fidelity before 7 o’clock tomorrow morning.

But we do not need to order rainbow décor to see signs of God’s steadfast, unwavering love and grace.

Some of you are aware that I was in my office three weeks ago, on Monday, January 29 when a single shot was fired in an attempted carjacking just across K Street. Hearing the shot and watching the victim be carried off on a stretcher while his wife climbed in the back of an ambulance is forever etched in my mind. It is the closest I have been to such evil, a proximity that produced a lot of processing. When talking about it with Lee, Lee reminded me of something Alan Storey shared when he was here in the fall of 2022.

Friends, if I am ever a victim of gun violence, please do not react by going and purchasing another gun. Do not confront evil with evil. Instead, make my death the source of a political uprising that demands change in a country that is actively choosing to accept one senseless act of gun violence after another instead of doing something to reduce the number of weapons available. And then please go and visit whoever shot me in prison. Proclaim Jesus’ mercy and grace. Embody God’s steadfast love that knows no boundaries.

The words haunted me when I first heard them. They have since become my desire if I ever become a victim of America’s maddening addiction to guns. I’m convinced that such a sight of forgiveness, an embodiment of, “I know you did something horrific, but I want you to

³ Genesis 8:21.

⁴ Ryan P. Bonfiglio, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 25.

experience God's love and mercy," would allow others to see God in a way that makes God's presence come to life.

When the flood waters rising, clouds prevent the sun from shining; plants and animals are destroyed; and the space between the waters above and below the earth disappears. So much is destroyed that the earth again becomes a formless void, back to where God began. It is into this chaos that God sends the *ruach*, the spirit, to restore order.

Jane Anne Ferguson writes how, "Individually, chaos comes into our lives through relationships broken by death, estrangement, and divorce, through illness of body or mind, through addictions of all kinds. Much of this chaos we bring on ourselves, through our resistance to God's ways. To see and know God as the 'One Who Remembers' us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life's chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption."

While you may not have recognized it as God's presence actively working in your life, just as our eyes have not always seen the small kiss on a bag of Hershey kisses, where might you be able to see God through the redemption you or another person has experienced if you took a closer look?

I have long had a deep respect for Bishop Kenneth Carder who came to teach at Duke Divinity School after retiring from the Episcopacy. When on staff at Duke, his wife, Linda, was always at his side for school functions. Linda was later diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and countless people watched as Bishop Carder embodied the vows, "in sickness and in health," with unwavering steadfastness until Linda died a couple of years ago.

Bishop Carder's November 20 Facebook post garnered over 1000 likes. The post reads, "Saturday, November 18, was a glorious day of celebration of new life and expanded love as Norma Sessions and I entered the covenant of marriage surrounded by our loving and supportive families. The service began with this Introductory Greeting:

Friends, we come together to witness and bless the marriage of Norma Joy Sessions and Kenneth Lee Carder. They enter this sacred covenant after sharing a special friendship formed over a decade of mutual support as they cared for their beloved spouses, Dale and Linda. Their love for one another is an expansion of the love they shared with Dale and Linda, who helped them to mature in love and become who they are today. The covenant into which they enter was established by God who created us for one another and who brings order from chaos, light out of darkness, reconciliation amid brokenness, comfort from sorrow, and life out of death. We celebrate their marriage as a visible sign of the newness of life made possible by God's steadfast and boundless love incarnate in Jesus the Christ, who blessed marriage by his presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee."

I now see every post Bishop Carder shares about his new marriage as a way to see God bringing order from chaos and comfort from sorrow.

Beloveds, I do not know where you find yourself today.

Some of us may be emerging from the wilderness of temptation and others might still be in the thick of it all.

Some of us may be engulfed in chaos caused by a broken relationship, a challenging illness, or addiction's grip.

All of us can testify to how life is so beautiful and life is so hard.

The season of Lent is an opportunity for all of us to ponder where we need to repent or turn around, where we are seeking change, and where we are ready for redemption.

How might we train our eyes to see God's signs of covenant fidelity all around us, trusting that God is longing to make all things new?