

You are the God Who Sees

Genesis 16

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In this talk, we will turn our attention to a few narratives that tell us some of the story of a woman named Hagar.

As with any time we look at ancient history, we must take care. It is natural for us to subject this story to our own cultural norms. Many things going on in this story will seem very strange.

To gain a little more understanding, let's begin by looking at the most basic structure of culture – family groups better known as kin groups. There were three kinds of social arrangements in ancient Mesopotamia.

1. *Bayit* – multiple generations of family by blood, and people who became blood by covenant – servants, slaves, concubines, resident aliens, sojourners, day laborers and orphans
2. *Mispahah* – clan that was a large social unit, kinship groups consisting of several households
3. *Mattah* – many clans that eventually form nations.

Reading modern notions of family into the household would be erroneous.

When God called Abraham to become a nation, this is how the nation would have been formed first a bayit then a mispahah and finally a mattah.

Abraham had to depart from his father's household in order to form his own household, clan and eventually nation. Abraham was promised not only descendants like the sand of the seashore, but also land to care for the needs of the household, clan and nation.

When we meet Hagar in Genesis 16, she is part of the *Bayit* of Abraham. By being a servant, she is part of his fictive family – she is a person who became blood by covenant. It is likely that she was part of the increased household Abraham acquired while he was in Egypt because of the favor that Sarah’s beauty bought him. 12:14-16

Hagar has joined Abraham’s household and our story opens with Sarah still being unable to bear a child. Sarah asks Abraham to have sex with her maid Hagar so that they can build a family through Hagar.

So, we need a few cultural translations here. First, the only value that women in ancient Mesopotamia brought to a bayit, or household was their ability to produce children and specifically male children.

The statement from Sarah, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her” is a cry of despair. She is old and has never been able to have a child. This would have been a point of extreme shame and humiliation for Sarah. She has felt the anguish of not measuring up and of being named childless. Her despair would be directly related to the self-doubt that would naturally occur from not meeting cultural norms for women. Although the normative standard is different from culture to culture, every culture puts norms on what it means to be successful or “normal” – for both men and women. In North America being independent, productive, educated and a person who accumulates wealth is highly valued. Women in particular are expected to be the burden bearers of society. Women typically enter the workforce at parity with men in wages, however analysis shows that women begin to lag behind when there are maternity leaves and concerns with caring for children. Statistics show that 28% of men have had to reduce work hours due to child care issues as compared to 42% of women. 39% of women have had to take leaves of absence for parenting compared to 24% of men. There is an expectation that women would be educated professionals and also bear the brunt of caring for children. Loss of promotions, loss of wages, not keeping in-step with colleagues can leave women feeling they have failed as they fall behind.

Not only had Sarah lived with personal and public shame in a tribal group where her husband was the patriarchal father of the entire *bayit*, but every time there was a birth in the family of

any of their servants or slaves, it would have been a reminder that as the wife of the Father of the tribe, she could not make him a Father.

This sense of failure would only have been multiplied when now God has brought this great promise to Abraham – that all the nations would be blessed through his son and that his descendants would be like the stars of the sky. The stress would have been incredible – where is that son Sarah? She would have felt overwhelming pressure to have a child. Remember, Sarah has not been included in God's discussions with Abraham in Gen 12 or Gen 15 – that we studied last week. She has not been given the level of revelation that was granted to Abraham.

Sarah is beside herself and desperate when she makes the suggestion to Abraham that he take Hagar to his bed.

The second cultural norm that is happening here is that when women were childless it was normative for men to have sex with a woman from the household, who was not related by blood but was related by covenant to produce an heir for the bayit. Even when children had been produced by the wife of a patriarch, especially if the bayit was small and just being formed, it was also common for the patriarch to take on many wives so as to get many male sons to begin forming a powerful household.

Although this was a normative social arrangement in the middle east, this was not acceptable to God. This was not in alignment with God's desire for families. Although Abraham was in a social arrangement that was not good, he was a person who had agency. Meaning – it was up to Abraham as to whether he would compromise God's word and God's promises to him by aligning with the surrounding culture, or whether he would follow God. This is a question that we are asked every day. Do the social arrangements around us and the cultural norms of our times become our excuse not to do what is right? It takes faith to follow God when all around we are being formed and pressured to conform.

Abraham makes a choice from fear rather than from faith and creates a social catastrophe for his whole household. Galatians 4 explains that the choice to make a child based on what his own flesh can do instead of what God can do was a choice that represented slavery. Abraham became a slave to what he could do in his own flesh, in his own physical might. We become

slaves when we count on our flesh – meaning when we count on what we can accomplish to bring about God’s kingdom desires or priorities, when we count on what we can accomplish to make us successful at work, when we count on what we can accomplish to provide us with friends, when we count on what we can accomplish to provide the right spouse or to create a healthy family – because apart from God we can do nothing, and when we depend on our own bodies, minds, imaginations, intuition, savvy to get something done, we’ll have to work harder and longer as we continue to fail and flounder. A choice to follow God represents a choice to be free – not enslaved by the limitations of what we can do, but free to believe in the God for whom all things are possible. Every single decision that we make, every single life path we choose is based on faith or fear.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an inter-governmental collective of 38 of the most high-income, technologically developed nations in the world. In 2023 their research discovered that of the 38 nations, the US is the 7<sup>th</sup> hardest working nation in the world. Mexico is the hardest working nation followed by Costa Rica, Chile, South Korea, Greece and Poland. The typical Mexican worker averaged 2,128 hours per year in 2021 compared to US citizens who averaged 1,791 hours. In South Korea the government had to pass a law requiring workers to take time off. The law was in response to declining birth rates and productivity due to overwork. Hours worked does not represent productivity. The average hours for U.S. workers per week is 34 hours, although in logging and mining the average is 54. Unlike their European counterparts, American workers are not guaranteed or paid maternity leave. Americans are also highly anxious people. The national institute of health reports that 19.1% of adults had an anxiety disorder in the year of study and across a lifetime 31.9% of Americans will experience an anxiety disorder. The Anxiety & Depression Association of America tells us that 70% of employees reported work stress interfering with their personal lives. Work stress is related to deadlines, interpersonal relationships, staff management and dealing with problems that arise. Our work is very connected to our anxiety. This is especially true when our identity and how we are named is directly related to work success. The expectations in our culture create people who find themselves enslaved to work – not necessarily related to the hours they work, but certainly related to the anxiety they feel about their work. When your mind cannot

turn off work, when you bring work home with you, when you give up vacation for work – these are all signs that you are a slave to your work. Your work is not working for you. But obviously it is not your work that enslaves you – there is a concern under the work. For Abraham and Sarah, the concern is securing a future for their family. The expectations of their culture drive them towards particular outcomes. However, Abraham and Sarah are both free agents, they can make their own choices. Abraham and Sarah choose, in this narrative, to allow the culture to tell them who they are. They do not choose faith in God’s word, they choose fear, the fear that their future is in their own hands and that they must make it happen. The fear that family is in their hands and they must make it happen. In this narrative Abraham and Sarah are not resting in God, they are trusting in their doing and neglecting their being.

Abraham sleeps with Hagar. Hagar becomes pregnant. Her child is Abraham’s and would ultimately be subject to Sarah as much as Hagar was subject to Sarah.

When Hagar realizes she is pregnant she begins to have contempt for Sarah – why? According to cultural norms Sarah is a failure. The servant woman has now exceeded Sarah in the culture – she is able to become pregnant. This is a further humiliation for Sarah within the household. Hagar finds her value and worth in the fact that she has now risen above her masters and in response she becomes like her masters and thinks little of the one who does not meet cultural norms. Hagar chooses to despise Sarah in such a way that Sarah becomes aware of it. Abraham began a cycle of destructive relationships when he chose to try to produce a child with Hagar rather than waiting on God.

What are the children, in your life, that you are trying to produce right now? What are you trying to create – a good education record? a friendship? a healthy work environment? a family that loves God? a good response to your neighbors? a justice response to your community? How do you connect the things you are working on right now with the need to rest in God? How do you choose to rest in God?

Sarah comes to tell Abraham of how Hagar is despising her and Sarah is right when she accuses Abraham of being responsible for the trouble between them. Although Sarah suggested it in

desperation, Abraham was a free agent who could have comforted his wife in her childlessness and encouraged her to have faith in God.

Abraham chooses irresponsibility again and rather than intervening or speaking with Hagar, he tells Sarah in her state of despair and humiliation to do whatever she likes with Hagar. Abraham does not support either woman.

In 16:6 we learn that Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar the word for harshly is *ana* (aw-naw) which means to humble someone, to oppress someone to make another person low.

In response Hagar runs away. She has been taken from her home Egypt, she has been made a servant in the household of Abraham, she has taken by Abraham to be a secondary wife so she can produce an heir – much like an animal, she has now been oppressed by Sarah and she is pregnant and extremely vulnerable.

This is an ugly and messy story because all of what has happened to her since being in Egypt is at the hands of Abraham the Father of the faithful. What are we to make of this? How is it right for Jesus to use Abraham as a model of faith to the Jews of his time? The record of Abraham shows him giving in to fear more often than exercising faith. The record of Abraham shows him allowing cultural norms to form his household. The record of Abraham shows him as a selfish man who was willing to sacrifice the well-being of others to achieve his own ends. The record of Abraham is filled with darkness – not just darkness in the surrounding culture, but also darkness in his own heart.

Any personal outrage we have towards Abraham may display our lack of understanding of what a heart alienated from God looks like. Our outrage at Abraham may display our lack of understanding about systems of injustice in our own culture. Our outrage at Abraham may display a superficial understanding of what is in our own heart.

We often function in equally self-centered ways to make the world a servant to our needs rather than becoming servants to the needs around us. Do we choose vocation and work primarily based on how it meets the needs of us and our family or for how it will meet the needs of the surrounding community, the national economy and the created environment? Do we choose

where we will live primarily based on how we can love those around us or based on how it will make us feel? Do we choose the activities of our family primarily based on how those activities satisfy our personal needs or based on how we can love and serve others?

We eat off the tables of the poor, we destroy the environment with our conveniences, we invite under-resourced people to be projects rather than our friends, we keep our distance from those “needy” people, we allow the economic divide and resource divide between the working poor and the middle class to continue to grow and allow minorities, displaced persons and new immigrants to fulfill the roles of servants to us in our culture.

Yet we are personally outraged at Abraham’s behavior. We should be outraged at Abraham’s behavior – it does not resemble the heart of God for human flourishing in the least. But before we get to outrage should we not begin with mourning, grief and sorrow. When we look at Abraham’s compliance with cultural norms that demean and deface human personhood, are we not in fact looking in the mirror.

Matthew 5 says blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.

The poor in spirit are those who know their interior poverty, those who know they cannot bring in the kingdom – the cultural norms of Jesus culture- with their best efforts – not into their own hearts and certainly not into the cultural norms around us. They are the people who desperately lean into Jesus as their only hope.

Matthew 5 says blessed are those who mourn. Do we mourn for our own falling short of the glory of God? Do we mourn for how our nation falls short of the glory of God – is this a real thing for us? Not in some narcissistic manner – so that it is still all about us. But really, truly! Do we mourn over our own sin and the sin of our nation?

God is going to show up in this narrative and do you see how amazing it is that he does. God continually shows up in our mess. God continually comes close when our own agency and power has been used in ways that harm others.

Hagar is a victim of her cultural norms, a victim of Abraham's selfishness and a victim of Sarah's cruelty. Hagar is also a perpetrator against Sarah. We are never just one thing. We are a complex of many things.

Hagar is about to encounter the glory of God. We are about to encounter the glory of God if we read this text with a heart open to see God.

The angel of the LORD – meaning God, comes looking for Hagar. Hagar is not crying out for God or looking for God. God comes looking for Hagar. Why? 16:11 – God has heard her misery. Again, as with the blood of Cain, the cry of suffering under the hand of oppression has come up to God. Injustice has a voice, misuse of power has a voice – injustice cries out, it cries out to the Creator of the universe, it cries out to the One who is the measure of justice. Injustice cries out and God responds to that cry. God comes to find the person who is in anguish and despair. God continually journeys to the margins to find the suffering.

In our text, we see God approach Hagar in gentleness. He begins by identifying who Hagar is – he calls her “slave of Sarah”. God then asks her where she is going and where she has come from.

Hagar acknowledges that she is running away from her Sarah.

This dialogue with God can be horribly misconstrued. God is about to do the most incredibly loving thing possible for Hagar he will send her back to the household of Sarah. How is this loving?

First, what are Hagar's options in the social arrangements available in the Mesopotamian area? If she did not return to Abraham's household, she would need to join another *bayit*. There would be no Hollywood romance story where someone could find her in the wilderness, fall in love with her and she would suddenly no longer be a servant, but a well-loved, beautiful wife. First, Hagar has no land, no wealth and therefore no dowry. She has no value to any other household or any other man- except, perhaps, as the wife of a slave of another household. Second, Hagar is pregnant with another man's child, the child of a powerful patriarchal chieftain. If Hagar was taken into another household this could mean war, or the raising of a



child who could eventually unite this household under the power of his father's name. Hagar did not have a choice between being a free woman or a slave. Hagar would remain a slave in the social arrangements of her time.

When God tells Hagar to go back and to submit to Sarah, God is not telling Hagar to submit to abuse. The word for submit that is used in the text is *ana* – the same word from 16:6 – meaning to humble or to make low. God is telling her, Hagar, the reason you were oppressed and made low is because you despised your mistress and made her feel low. So, go back and humble yourself, *ana*. If Hagar does this, she is acting out of her own agency, her own power, her own ability to surrender her power and to surrender to God's word to her. This would take an incredible step of faith, but it would be her choice and she would be acting out of personal authority.

In the original language, God is not telling her to go back and submit herself to Sarah, the actual word translated "her" in your text is *yad* (*yawd*) – meaning to the power of Sarah – meaning you are not to be subject to Sarah but to the power she represents. This is a significant difference as we are about to discover.

So then, to begin, God is telling Hagar that she should go back to the household where she belongs – and is, within the cultural option available, ultimately most safe. He is also advising her to make herself humble before the authority of her mistress. All of this is just the wise advice that a good friend might give you if you were in despair and had run away from home – remember Hagar is probably little more than a teenager herself.

But then, the text takes an absolutely radical turn. The social situation, the systemic injustice that Hagar is part of has been seen by God. He sees her oppression under the hands of a system where women are not full persons, simply the mechanism for providing male children. He has seen that she is under the hand of a vengeful mistress – Sarah. He sees that she is under the hand of Abraham – who is allowing himself to be enslaved to cultural norms rather than being freed to believe God's accounting of reality and God's promises of what his future will be.

God comes close. God's love for Hagar and his response to systemic injustice is powerful in this story.

Hagar, an Egyptian slave, a non-person is given a call narrative like that of so many men in the biblical record and promises. God gives her this in the very same way that he called Abraham. Listen to the promises and the call.

The promises:

1. your descendants, not the descendants of your son, this is a very important distinction. God could have said “the descendants of your son.” These will be Hagar’s descendants – not the descendants of a patriarch – Hagar’s descendants. In a patriarchal society – God has just made Hagar a mother of a nation.
2. Your descendants will be so numerous you would not be able to count them – the success of every woman in this culture is children. Hagar will be the most successful woman imaginable.
3. Her son will be a wild donkey of a man and his “hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him” is what the text says. The Hebrew word here is *yad* (yawd) meaning authority. The text is saying his authority will be against everyone and everyone against him. The original word has to do with the idea of whole authority, full authority, an authority that can stand and will not be broken down. Although he will live in hostility, he will have the power to stand on his own.

This is the promise – she will be matriarch of a new nation; no man will be the household leader of her. She will have more descendants than she can count and her son will have authority – the kind of authority that will constantly be contested but will also constantly continue to stand. The authority that now rules over her, the authority under which God calls her to humble herself will now be placed in her hand.

Abraham was promised a son, descendants and land.

Hagar is promised a son, descendants and authority/power.

What is Hagar’s call? She is to depart, just as Abraham had to depart. She is to depart from her place in the wilderness as a runaway slave with no home. She is to go to her Father’s

house – knowing she will be granted a nation and authority. She is to return to her household; she is to humble herself and she is to bear her child as a foreigner and a slave.

As much as Abraham must live by faith in hope deferred without a child for over 20 years, Hagar will need to live by faith in hope deferred without being freed to be the matriarch of her own household for over 15 years.

Hearing this narrative from our cultural vantagepoint diminishes the subversive and radical nature of what is happening.

God takes a foreign slave and makes her the matriarchal head of a people group that will ascend to so much power that their descendants continue as powerful nations and tribes to this day!

However, the most beautiful gift God gives Hagar is not the promise or the calling. God gives Hagar the knowledge that she is seen. I wonder if Hagar has ever been truly seen? To be seen is one of the greatest gifts we give another.

Hagar names god *El roi* (el row-eee) God who sees me.

The first step to removing structures of social injustice is to see people. God sees Hagar, God sees all of who Hagar is – God stoops down to make Hagar great. But the first step is seeing. God sees Hagar.

What do you think God sees when God sees you?

Hagar's final statement in 16 is hard to interpret but it means something like "I have seen the One who sees."

There is an awe in this statement by Hagar, she has been seen by the One who sees, but she has also seen God.

Some translations say this, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

The Hebrew is ancient in this text so there is no single translation. But this we do know. Hagar was seen, fully seen and fully loved. God met her, God saw her and God committed

himself to her. God gave her promises that she could never have dreamed of while living in Egypt or living in the household of Abraham.

But do you notice the reciprocity here. Hagar is seen and she sees. Hagar is allowed to see the heart of God. Hagar sees the God of compassion who meets her in her misery. Hagar sees the God who sees her.

Hagar also sees the God of power who can take an Egyptian slave girl and make her into the mother of a nation.

To be seen, fully seen, fully known – we must see God. If we see God, we will be fully seen and fully known.

## **DISCUSSION**

We are going to move to a time of discussion. I will put the reflection points in the chat.

There are two questions to consider – and 7 minutes.

Who does God see when God sees you? How do you know God sees you?

## **BACK FROM DISCUSSION**

Many of us hear or read this narrative and focus on the evil cultural systems as the reason for all that occurred. All the heartache, disunity, unrest, suffering, sorrow, oppression could be blamed on the system.

But that would be to miss the point. We are all in horribly broken social situations and social systems – some of us are in far worse social situations than others are. Many of us here are the benefactors of those broken systems.

We need to work to change these. Sometimes, like Abraham this will mean departing to a place we do not know. Sometimes like Hagar it will mean departing and going back home.

God certainly reversed the social systems of Mesopotamia by elevating Hagar, calling Hagar to a specific role – mother of a nation and then making Hagar very great and precious promises.

However, what really strikes me in this narrative is the darkness in the heart of each actor or each person with agency in the story.

Sarah is crushed in spirit and in her darkness, she lashes out at Hagar.

Abraham is lacking faith and allows himself to be enslaved to the limits of his own body instead of being freed to believe the promises of God, so in his darkness he takes advantage of Hagar and creates darkness in his own household. This is a revealing story about how the Father of faith who received the covenant of God was a failed and flawed father. This is a troubling story. It reminds us that our spiritual leaders are also those who struggle with darkness. All leaders, spiritual or otherwise, fight their own shadow selves and the darkness that can so easily leap upon us – like the dragon in Cain’s heart. We have all departed where we were when God called us, but none of us is yet fully home. We have come home to God, but we have not yet come home to the complete renewal and resurrection of the self. This means we must help our leaders be transparent and accountable. It also means that as followers we must hope in God alone.

Hagar is in systems that remove her dignity and personhood by making her a commodity that can be acquired and used to the advantage of others. She is despised and thought little of as a person. We observe her in this narrative when just a little power comes her way—becoming pregnant where her mistress could not. Hagar allows darkness in her heart as soon as there is a reversal of just a little bit of power. None of us are just one thing. We carry many identities. Hagar is both a commodity for the powerful and an agent who exercises power. So are we all to one degree or another.

There is deep and entrenched darkness in the unjust social systems of this narrative, there is also shadow and darkness in the heart of each person in the narrative.

But into all the darkness comes this beauty, this wonder. A God with all the power who moves toward the runaway slave. She is not seeking God, but God hears her misery and seeks her. God does not remove her from her trouble, God comes close. God removes the veil that separates heaven and earth and comes close. How does God break into the systemic injustice? He empowers Hagar with the tools she will need to do the work herself.

God calls her and God gives her great and precious promises. God advises her to return – to the safest place for her in this whole culture. God advises her on how to remain at peace with Sarah – humble herself before authority. God gives her the son who will create a nation.

God is the light who enters Hagar’s darkness. God sees the evil systems. God sees her marginalization. God sees her oppression. God sees how she has been despised. God sees even the darkness in her own heart. God sees every part of her and yet God comes close. As God comes near, he reminds Hagar of her personal agency, her personal power. It is God who grants Hagar this agency, this power and it is God who expects her to use this agency in humility and surrender to his plans for her life.

It is only God who can drive out the darkness from systems that need to be transformed and it is the God who sees you who can also drive out the darkness from your heart and from mine.

We are going to sing Drive out the Darkness.

As that song comes to a close, if you would like to spend some time in prayer with myself, or someone on the prayer team, would you just let Tim know in the chat and he’ll put you in a breakout room.

Are you discouraged and brokenhearted because you do not feel seen or known – we would welcome the opportunity to pray with you.

Do you sense God is asking you to depart where you are and re-enter broken relationships that feel dark – we would welcome the opportunity to pray with you.

Do you feel caught in systems that overwhelm you- we would welcome the opportunity to pray with you.

If you have experienced or continue to experience abuse and you would like to talk with someone. Please contact Pastor Kim by email or Direct Message her on Slack.

Drive out the Darkness song

Pray.