

The God Who Sees

Genesis 16: 1-16

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Abraham is known as the premier man of faith. He left his home to journey to the place God led him. He trusted that though he was advanced in years, the LORD would indeed give him children too numerous to count. Genesis 15 says that hearing God's promises, "Abraham believed God, and God counted it to him as righteousness." He put himself into the hands of God before the promises were fulfilled.

Yet such is the human heart that we are faithful one day and faithless the next. The Bible is relentlessly honest about the failings of its human characters. After the great mystical experience of God's walking the blood path in Genesis 15, the very next chapter shows Abraham and Sarah trying to help the LORD keep his promises. Instead of staying in God's hands, they decided to try take matters into their own hands. Unintended consequences followed. People got hurt: that's always the case when we act as if we know better than God.

The drama moves from Abraham on center stage to Sarah, his wife. The text tells us bluntly, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Her barrenness shamed her every day. The LORD had promised them children as numerous as the stars. But now in her mid-seventies, there were still no offspring, and hope sank. So Sarah had the idea to offer her young maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. Perhaps Abraham could have the child of promise through her Egyptian servant, thus helping the LORD along a bit with the timing. Sarah would then consider the child of the slave to be her own. Abraham needed no persuading. Soon Hagar conceived. But all did not go according to plan. Suddenly the slave girl began to look down at Sarah the first wife. Hagar had what Sarah could not have: a baby in her womb. Sarah was filled with jealousy. She dealt so harshly with Hagar that Hagar fled from her. She started back towards Egypt her homeland. But when she was alone in the middle of the wilderness, Hagar met God.

So what we learn about God today will be intertwined with a young woman whose relationship with the father of their child was not legitimate. She was a

foreigner. She was without economic standing. She was trying to get home, but the desert was wide and the way was long. In this seemingly forsaken place, we read that the angel of the LORD found her. Hagar was in a place where no one she knew had any idea where she was. But the LORD knew where she was and came to get her.

The angel spoke as a messenger on behalf of the LORD I Am: “Return to your mistress and submit to her. I will surely multiply your offspring....Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the LORD has listened to your affliction.”

The angel gave her the name of the son she would bear. She was to call him Ishmael, which means “The LORD hears.” In response, Hagar gave a name to the LORD who had saved her in the desert. She said, “You are El-Roi, the God of seeing, for truly I have seen him who sees me.” Hagar named the LORD *The God Who Sees*. She named the well where she stopped *Beer-lahai-roi* which means *The Well of the Living One who Sees me*.

Hagar had been in a desert place. No one could see her. No one could hear her even if she screamed her lungs out. She was as alone as alone could be. She had been a fool to agree to this scheme of bearing a son through Abraham. She had been a fool to mock Sarah. She was sorry she had left her home in Egypt. She was pregnant and alone. But the LORD found her. He saw her. He regarded her situation. He did not reject her. He did not cast her off. He gathered her in. He heard her cries and promised her that her boy would live. She was not of the family of the covenant and the promises, but the LORD grafted her in.

Many of us have been there. We have felt as alone as if we were in a desert. We might have been surrounded by hordes of people. We might work amidst dozens of folks, make our way in the traffic with thousands of others, but we are alone. Because there was no one who knows us. No one knew the bizarre thoughts we have during the day. No one knew the quirky way we looked at life. Even our friends did not know our secret fears. They did not know how like misfits we feel all the time. They did not see the guilt we bear, the sense of unworthiness that haunts us. Even worse, no one would really have cared if they did know. They had their lives. They lived for what they lived for.

We have felt what it is to pass hundreds of people yet never be seen. No one gave us a second glance. No one ever stopped long enough to regard us, to care what we thought or even take time to find out what we feel.

In his book, *Hurt*, youth ministry specialist Chap Clark, has collected many feelings of today's teenagers. Let's listen in on these kids' hearts. One says:

I can't ever find someone to talk to who knows how I'm feeling. [My parents] don't know what I'm going through. So I am forced to keep my feelings bottled up inside. Sometimes I just crack. I get onto everyone I am around. I wish I could find someone to talk to who knows me and understands me.

Another says,

I could stare in the mirror for hours and find no connection between my thoughts and the face staring back at me...I just wish my real life were more like the person radiating from his smile. Other people seem like actors in the same sick drama, almost unreal to me....I suffer in silence, longing to be understood but refusing to share such a nightmare with the unknowing. It is a lonely place in the mind of an unwilling actor.

One more:

I've always been prone to episodes of extreme loneliness and longing for a place where I could feel safe enough to let down my defenses. Because I was an extremely outgoing and energetic girl, no one would ever guess how alone I felt...something has always felt like it was missing. Every so often this "hole" pops up in the pit of my stomach...I just wish sometimes I could find somewhere to belong.¹

These feelings aren't limited to teenagers. There are people sitting in the cubicles next to us, wandering the mall while we shop, or even sitting in these pews who feel that there is no one who sees them, who truly knows them, or who seeing them would even care. They are wandering in the desert of the soul. They carry a truck load of shame and anger from the family dynamics they inherited. They carry heavy carts filled with the dumb choices they made. But they have no place to bring those burdens. There is no path to finding some resolution. There is no home in their hearts or souls.

Then the angel of the LORD found Hagar. He saw her. He saw her and named her life. He calmed her fears and showed her a way home. So she named the LORD in return. She called him “The God who Sees.”

We have been so lost that we thought no one could ever find us. But God found us. He sees us. He regards us. He loves us.

We tangled our lives into such a mess that a ball of knotted fishing line seemed easy to unravel by comparison. The LORD saw us. He cut us free of the unbreakable knots that bound us.

We thought we had made a home in hell, far from the company of any normal people. Regular society was closed to us. We could never keep time with respectable people again. Outcast from the church, the family, the group. The LORD saw us. He regarded us. He scooped us up.

You are the God Who Sees. Even when we were lost to ourselves, God knew where we were. As David prayed, “If I take the wings of the dawn and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day, for darkness is as bright as light with you” (Psalm 139).

Our God sees. *Our God sees in the dark!* We cannot get so inky black with sin and shame that he cannot still see us underneath. Our God has infrared vision. Even when we seem lost to ourselves, lost behind a mask or in a deadening job, or a numbing relationship, our God sees into our true hearts. You are the God who sees. Who regards. Who cleans us up, leads us home and fulfills great and glorious promises in the likes of us.

Some of us know Hagar’s story from our own experience. We know what it is to meet others who were lost and now are found. In small groups, in circles and Bible studies, we tell our stories and hear that we are not alone. Others too have walked where we walked. We are not so odd. We are all a mess. We need a God who sees us as we are, where we are, and comes to find us.

Perhaps, though, it has been a long time since you felt so lost. You may wonder why you have to hear this story and this sermon. May I suggest a couple of reasons why this story of Hagar is so important for all of us to learn and take

within us and speak about with others? First, growth in Christ means a constant and deepening awareness of our need for Christ. The authentic Christian life involves a curious dynamic. Growing Christians feel two things at the same time: A) we feel increasingly our need for God, our shame over sin, and our constant sense that our hearts are prone to wander. B) At the very same time, we feel the joy and assurance that God sees us, loves us, forgives us and is working in us. We feel the indescribable thrill of relying totally on Christ as our righteousness, our salvation, our source of life. Hagar is thus part of every active Christian's life. We are constantly discovering both our lostness and our found-ness in the dynamic of our salvation.

Second, we need the story of Hagar to remind us that God's big story is not just about me. People in the world are hurting. They are lost and think that no one sees them. We meet their happy faces at work or the club or in the shops. But we need to hear what's going on under the surface of a great many lives. There are a lot of people in the desert. We worship a God who sees. But they are not going to know that unless and until *we see them*. Christian, you are God's frontline presence in the world to people who are lost. God wants you to see them. To see them and feel with them in the pain and loneliness and wandering and difficulty of their lives. See them, regard them, and love them. Gather them in. Tell them the story of a God who sees. Show them with your love and tell them with your lips: Our God finds pregnant slave girls who are lost in the desert and brings them home. He brought me home and he can bring you home too.

Our God sees. The way God sees us and opens our eyes to see him so that we enter a relationship with him is a key theme in Scripture. I want to highlight just one important passage. In John 16, Jesus is having his final words with his beloved disciples before his arrest and eventual crucifixion. Jesus knows what is ahead and wants to give his disciples some hope and comfort.

He says, "A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." Naturally, the disciples do not understand how they will be able to see him again. Jesus explains that when he is crucified they will see him no longer. They will indeed weep and lament. "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy...you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Of course, at the least, he's speaking about the resurrection. But notice how he relates it to *seeing!* You will see me no longer, then you will see me. As he

explains, Jesus repeats and we expect him to say once more, “You will see me.” Instead, Jesus says, “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice.” Jesus will see them. Jesus is the seeing of God come among us. He is The God Who Sees come to us in the flesh with eyes we could gaze back into. He is God’s regard and compassion for his lost children come all the way down to find us. He did not just see us from afar. He came to us. He sought us. He searched in the far country until he found us in our lostness. He scoured the roadsides and looked under the bushes. He entered the God-forsakenness of hanging on the cross with the sin of the world plastered upon him. He sees what we go through. He has been through deeper depths, passed through wilder waters and hotter fires. He sees us so clearly because he has lived our human life in this broken world.

This is the one who said, I will see you again. I will continue this relationship of seeing you and loving you. Your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you.” When Jesus sees us again we rejoice. Our joy is based on his resurrection. Our hope is only as secure as the one in whom we hope. Who is that one? He is the Seeing God who has looked upon us until his heart broke and he entered our world. He passed through death and rose victorious in resurrection. All lostness, loneliness, separation and death piled upon him on the cross. Then he bursts those bonds and lives again. My joy is as certain as his resurrection life. Nothing is more powerful in all the universe than the resurrection of Jesus. God took death and hell upon himself, then triumphed. “I will see you again.” Jesus’ resurrection is the foundation and anchor of joy. The strongest powers of evil and death in the universe ripped him away from us. But the stronger power of God’s love raised him again. My joy is anchored in that resurrection. No matter what happens here, it can be no worse, no stronger than what Jesus went through and conquered. He is El Roi, the God who sees.

Beloved, we have a God who sees and hears. He hears our cries. He sees us even when others overlook us. He sees us even when we are lost due to our own idiot choices. He sees, he regards, and he loves. This is the story we have to tell to people outside these walls. Come see our God! Come join the community of Hagar—we are the family of those who have been lost in the desert but got found by God. Come be found, too. That is the message of real Thanksgiving!

ⁱ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004, pp. 42, 45, 48.