

# *The God Who Sees*

*Genesis 16: 1-16*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Do you ever find that you can think better in motion than sitting still? I usually get more sermon connections on a walk or a bike ride than at my desk. So a couple weeks ago, I was riding around the lakes, thinking about today's story. I spied a friend sweating out a walk. "Scott Bardwell!" I said, "You are seen and you are loved!" "Right back at you, G," he replied. There's something wonderful about being noticed and regarded.



In the little town where we go in North Carolina, the county has put up some signs with encouraging messages for young people. One reads, "Dear Transylvania County Youth, You are seen and you are loved. Sincerely, all of us." Someone gets it that adolescents today often feel unseen. They long

to know if anyone sees them for who they are and cares about them.

That's striking considering that these days, we are the most "seen" people in the history of the world. We are viewed constantly. There are hundreds, thousands of images of us on social media. People look at us all the time. But that's not really the same as being seen. People *consume* images of us. We become click bait. Our posts evoke admiration, envy, comparison, but rarely knowing compassion. It's really true that no one looks as good as their Facebook profile. (And thankfully no one looks as bad as their passport picture). Amidst all the forced smiles and the manufactured great times we long to be seen and known and cherished, as we are.

That's what's going on in our story today. We're meeting a young woman named Hagar. On the edge of utter despair, she discovered the God who sees. Here's how it went down. We heard last week how Abraham 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 years passed, and no promised child arrived. So finally, Abraham and Sarah decided to help the LORD keep his promises. Instead of staying in God’s hands, they took 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.

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 then all did not go according to plan. Suddenly the servant 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. She was trying to get home, but the desert was wide and the way was long. She had no family, no money, and no plan. 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 for God, “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 seems to be no one who knows us. No one knows the bizarre thoughts we have during the day. No one knows the quirky way we look at life. Even our friends do not know our secret fears. They don't know how like misfits we feel all the time. They don't see the guilt we bear, the sense of unworthiness that haunts us. Even worse, no one would really care if they did know. They all have busy lives. They live for what they live for.

In his book, *Hurt*, youth ministry specialist Chap Clark, has collected many feelings of today's teenagers. Let's listen in. We will discover feelings that cross all generations. 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 just wish I could find someone to talk to who knows me and understands me.

Another says,

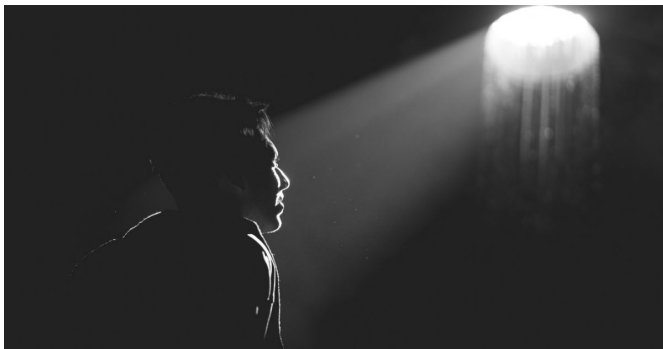
I could stare in the mirror for hours and find no connection between my thoughts and the face staring back at me...I just wish my real life were more like the person radiating from his smile. Other people seem like actors in the same sick drama, almost unreal to me....I suffer in silence, longing to 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.<sup>1</sup>

These feelings aren't limited to teenagers. There are people sitting in the cubicles next to us, walking the LSU lakes where we walk, 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 truckload 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.

And they are *us*. Sometimes, we have been so lost that we thought no one could ever find us. Perhaps we thought we had made a home in hell, far from the company of any normal people. Regular society seemed closed to us. We could never keep time with respectable people again. Outcast from the church, the family, the group. But as we remember the story of Hagar, we recall how God found us. He heard our heart cries. We may have tangled our lives into such a mess that a ball of knotted fishing line seemed easy to unravel by comparison. But the LORD saw us. He regarded us. He scooped us up. He cut us free of the unbreakable knots that bound us. He showed us that he loves us. He set us back in community.



*You are the God Who Sees.* Those years when we were even 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 behind a mask, in a deadening job, or a numbing relationship, our God sees into our true hearts. You are the God who sees. Who notices. 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.

We need the story of Hagar to ground us in the home-creating love of God. But we also need Hagar's story 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.

It is no accident that one of the recurring descriptions in the gospels is how Jesus *saw* people. He noticed. He looked and felt compassion. He felt compassion and he acted. For he was his Father's eyes, literally, in the world. So it's no wonder that the night before his death, he promised his disciples that they would see him again. And even more, Jesus promised "*I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*" He would keep on looking at us after his resurrection. And we would rejoice that not even death could prevent his loving, passionate regard. We would see him seeing us and know that into eternity he is the God who sees, the God who hears, and redeems.

Beloved, the sign is correct: you are seen and you are loved! Our hears our cries. Our Christ 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004, pp. 42, 45, 48.