

The Lord Sees. The Lord Hears.

Third Sunday After Pentecost

June 25, 2017

Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:24-39

It is hard to justify what Abraham did, so I'm not going to try.

Years earlier, he and his wife set out on a long journey at God's invitation. God promised to make a great nation out of them, though he and Sarai were old and had no children. Still they followed, and generations later we can admire their faithfulness.

But at several points along the way, their faith wavered. At one of those unsteady points Abram's wife Sarai grew tired of waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled. Though God had promised descendants like the stars in the night sky, she did not believe God's promises would be fulfilled in her. So she came up with another way. She suggested to her husband, "Go in to my slave girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." Since this story is in the Bible, we tend to read it in a forgiving light, but this was an ugly arrangement. Hagar was a slave woman raped by her master. Sarai used Hagar to get what she wanted.

Though this was Sarai's idea, once Hagar conceived, Sarai changed her mind. She accused Hagar of looking on her with contempt and sent her away. Then an angel of the Lord met Hagar and sent her back to Abram and Sarai with a promise that God would bless her, too. Hagar called the Lord El-roi, the God who sees. She returned, and when her son was born she named him Ishmael, meaning the Lord hears. Hagar had learned the Lord sees and the Lord hears.

For thirteen years, Hagar and Ishmael lived in this household, with Abram and Sarai whom God later named Abraham and Sarah. Then, miracle of miracles, Sarah actually had a child herself. She named him Isaac, meaning laughter, because no one could believe her good fortune.

A few years went by. Isaac was weaned. And that brings us to today's lesson. Sarah's convenient plan from years ago no longer seemed like such a good idea. There were no split estates in ancient times. The oldest child would inherit everything. Sarah did not want Ishmael to inherit in place of Isaac. She could not simply enjoy the blessing God had given her in Isaac. She wanted more. So once again, she convinced Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away.

Put yourself in Hagar's sandals, if she had any to wear. This situation was not her fault. She had not been asked whether she wanted to bear Abraham's child. She had not signed up for any of this. She had been used and now she was thrown out like trash. She was sent into the wilderness

with nothing but bread and a skin of water. When the water ran out, which it quickly did, she left her son under a bush and went away so she would not have to watch her child die.

Muslim tradition tells this story slightly differently. Islamic tradition traces its lineage back to Abraham through Ishmael, not through Isaac. In the Koran, as in Genesis, the birth of Ishmael led to strife between Sarah and Hagar. God told Abraham to handle the matter by resettling Hagar and her son in the desert. That decision is seen as a test of Abraham's faith. Though it was difficult, Abraham obeyed.

According to the Koran, after a few days, Hagar ran out of water, and baby Ishmael started to cry from thirst. Hagar panicked and ran between two hills desperately looking for water. Finally, on the seventh trip, an angel appeared and hit the ground with his heel causing a spring to rise up in that very spot. The spring is still in existence today, a few meters from the Kaaba in Mecca. As part of the Hajj, pilgrims retrace Hagar's steps seven times and then drink from the well.

Genesis tells the story differently. The birth of Isaac sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, not the birth of Ishmael. The boy was thirteen years old by this time. Hagar had loved and cared for him all these years. She could not bear to watch him die. She lifted up her voice and wept.

But though they differ on the timing, in both versions of the story, Hagar and Ishmael were saved. The Lord sees. The Lord hears.

If you have ever wondered if anyone notices what you are going through,

If you have ever felt alone in your grief,

If you have suffered an injustice,

If you have been mistreated or abused,

If you have watched the news with a broken heart and wondered how things like this could happen,

If you have come to the end of your rope and feared you might not be able to hold on,

You have been where Hagar was.

And like Hagar and Ishmael you are not alone. The Lord heard the voice of the boy, the one named The Lord hears. The Lord saw Hagar. The Lord opened her eyes and showed her a well of water. The Lord sees. The Lord hears.

So on the one hand this story is a profound comfort. We are never alone. When we feel abandoned or exhausted or beaten down, the Lord sees. The Lord hears.

Jesus promised, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted.

The Lord sees. The Lord hears.

I have often heard these words of Jesus this way: God has so many things on God's mind, God takes care of the whole universe, and yet God also pays attention to the sparrows and counts the hairs on our heads. The Lord sees and hears even me.

But because of Hagar, I am thinking about these words of Jesus differently today. The masses who crowded around Jesus were like sparrows. They were worthless to many. Last week's lesson said they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. They were like Hagar, expendable, used by others to achieve their own ends.

But the Lord sees. The Lord hears.

It is not that God casually happens to catch a falling sparrow out of the corner of God's eye. Instead, Jesus is saying that God's attention is focused on sparrows, on worthless things. God is looking at the least of these in the finest detail. God pays the most attention to those who need the most help.

So who is God seeing and hearing today?

The Lord sees and hears 66.5 million displaced persons in this world, 20 people a minute fleeing from war and terror. The Lord sees and hears victims of human and sex trafficking, people caught in situations much like Hagar's. The Lord sees and hears the pain of black men and police who fear getting killed for very different reasons. The Lord sees and hears the unemployed and underemployed. The Lord sees and hears people desperate for health care. The Lord sees and hears people in need of food in one of the wealthiest nations on earth. The Lord sees. The Lord hears.

And because the Lord saw Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, the Lord also saw when Sarah and Abraham sent them away. The Lord sees when we close our hands and turn our backs. Jesus said, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." The Lord sees. The Lord hears.

Now imagine what might have happened if Abraham had refused to send Hagar and Ishmael away. God did eventually comfort him in his dilemma and let him know Hagar and Ishmael would survive. But what if things had not gotten that far? What if Abraham had seen Hagar's value and heard Hagar's pain the way the Lord did?

It is possible Sarah would not have responded well. Jesus said, "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." That might have happened in Abraham's household. Had Abraham seen and heard the way the Lord did, had Abraham refused to cast them out, there may have been strife with Sarah.

But maybe, maybe, Sarah would have realized the fullness of God's promise. Maybe she would have seen the stars in the sky and realized the family of Abraham was bigger than she thought. Maybe she would have accepted that the promise of God was coming true in Ishmael and in Isaac and in countless ways she never could have imagined. Maybe that is what God meant in the original promise to Abram – that the world would be blessed through his descendants because in following God his descendants would treat all the world like brothers and sisters.

It's not that Jesus wants to ruin family gatherings. It's just that in Jesus our family gets a whole lot bigger, as numerous as the stars in the sky.

That is part of what it means to acknowledge Jesus before others. We are called to do more than love him. We are called to recognize his love for everyone and make that love our own.

The Lord sees. The Lord hears. Thanks be to God.

(info on displaced persons from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>)

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