

The God Who Sees
Genesis 16:1-13
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One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that it tells the stories of people who generally don't matter to others. And one of the remarkable things about Bible readers, and particularly Christian ones, is how little attention these stories receive, even though the Christian story is populated by those whom the world esteems not. The story of Hagar is one of the most striking of these stories. For the most part, Hagar has escaped the notice of commentators, who generally view her story as little more than an appendage to the more prominent story of Abraham and Sarah.

I want to bring Hagar's story front and center as we reflect together on the issue of human trafficking. Hagar is a slave, a person whose identity is shaped by others, whose decisions are made by others, and whose value is determined by others. After a brief introduction, in which she is defined with reference to her mistress Sarai, Hagar moves to the edge of the story. She makes no decisions, and she says nothing. Although the narrator dignifies her by calling her by name, her name is not uttered by Abram or Sarai. To them, she is only "the slave girl" (vv. 2, 5, 6). And she is valuable for only one reason: her sexuality.

In the eyes of Abram and Sarai, Hagar is property; she is an available sexual partner whose purpose is to fulfill the desire of her owners. As the story begins, her owner Sarai wants a baby but cannot have one. Hagar has an available womb. Sarai gives her slave to her man as a sexual partner. And Hagar is silent and compliant as her sexuality is bartered. She has no choice. She cannot refuse. The decision about whom she will give her body to is made for her. The text conveys no sense of love, affection, or intimacy with the old man to whom she is given. Giving her body is all she is good for.

The terse language of the story gives us plenty of space to wander around inside it. We do not know how Hagar, an Egyptian, was sold into slavery. Perhaps she was the child of slaves. Perhaps her parents were impoverished and sold her to this wealthy couple in order to sustain the rest of their family. Perhaps she was kidnapped by ruffians or marauders. Whatever the case, her life was not her own.

Hagar's story is reflected in the lives of countless millions of human beings in today's world. The U.S. State Department reports that 14,500 to 17,500 people, primarily women and children, are trafficked just to the U.S. every year. Although human trafficking takes many forms for many purposes, the vast

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majority of those who come to the United States, or who are enslaved within the United States, are trafficked within the commercial sex industry. Like Hagar to the interpreters, they remain largely unnoticed by a Church whose focus is directed elsewhere.

The Lord, however, is a God Who Sees.

Hagar's story takes a turn once she becomes pregnant. When she does, the biblical voice tells us, she looks "contemptuously" at Sarai. One can hardly blame her, although many have. Sarai had started things off by elevating Hagar to the status of "wife," no doubt one of those "seemed like a good idea at the time" decisions. We do not know the source of Hagar's contempt. Does she disdain Sarai for her childlessness? Does she now see an opportunity to gain more value in the warped hierarchy that configures Abram family values? Or does it go deeper? Does she finally express how she feels about her mistress, who has given her to a man she had no decision to be with?

What *is* clear is that, although now a wife, Hagar is still under the control of others. She is still not free, and she may not express her feelings or opinions. She is not allowed to hold any other attitude toward her owners than compliance. Slaves are not permitted to talk back. In a harsh reality check, Sarai appeals to Abram to set things right. And she appeals to God: "May the Lord judge between you and me" (v. 5). Her words open a window into the theology of the slave-owner. Sarai and Abram see nothing wrong in the way they are treating Hagar. People do not appeal to God as a judge for one thing if they suspect God will judge them for another! In their world, and in their view of the world, their exploitation of another human being is completely justified. We may ask, "Will not the Lord judge between Abram, Sarai, and Hagar?"

The reality is that Hagar remains in under the power of her owners. And now that she has become a problem, Sarai makes life miserable for her. Life becomes unbearable, and she flees. We are not told that anyone pursues her. Perhaps she has become more trouble than she was worth and Abram bids her good riddance. She flees alone into uncertainty. We are not told that anyone notices or helps her, this pregnant woman with desperation in her eyes and anguish on her face.

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The Angel of the Lord finds her near a spring near a place called Shur. The Angel's appearance at this point in the story has drawn the attention of many interpreters, take the opportunity to wax eloquent on the identity of the Angel and the theological ramifications of his appearance. Is the Angel a high-class heavenly being? The pre-Incarnate Christ?

How easily we are distracted by theological rabbit trails when the things that break God's heart are staring us right in the face!

"The Angel of the Lord found her." Does that verb strike you as an odd way of talking about a God who knows and sees everything? "Finding"

assumes “seeking,” and “seeking” assumes “valuing.” “Finding” conveys Hagar’s worth to God. No one from the family has come after Hagar. No one along the way has noticed her. But God has been searching for her. Do you remember the shepherd who drops everything and finds the one lost sheep? Or the woman who finds the lost coin?” No human being looks for her. But God finds her.

When the Lord finds her, he calls her by name and speaks her name and the identity human beings have given her: “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai (v. 8).” He greets her with a question (v. 8), which is what people do when they want to communicate connection and caring. We say, “How are you” or “how’s it going?” A question upon meeting invites a response and draws the hearer into dialogue. That is a different kind of conversation than slaves are used to having. Conversations between slaves and masters tend to be one-way. For the first time in the story, Hagar speaks. “I am running away.”

The Angel speaks and Hagar confides, but the next words come as a shock: “Go back to your mistress and put yourself under her power” (v. 9). I confess that I don’t know what to do with this. The conversation takes place near Shur, which is close to the border of Egypt. Hagar has been trying to get home and, just at the point of freedom, God meets her and tells her to go back to intolerable enslavement.

I could offer any number of explanations for God’s command at this point, but I suspect all would pale in the light of Hagar’s own questions. I can explain this puzzle no better than I can explain why thousands of Israelites would later live and die in Egypt, waiting for God to deliver them. Or why God would take so long to respond to the cries for freedom from generations of enslaved people in this country. Or why those who escape from today’s trafficking are often recaptured and returned to even greater misery. Perhaps you have an answer.

We should not miss, however, that this command is joined to the promise that follows. “I will greatly increase your seed” (v. 10). “Descendants” or “offspring” doesn’t really capture the sense of what is happening here. In the ancient world, “seed” comes from men, not women. To those familiar with the larger story of Genesis, God’s promise has the ring of the familiar. It is the same kind of promise, in almost the same language, that God gives to Abram (12:2; 15:4-5). In a warped world where power, position, and value are tightly intertwined, the Lord comes to an escaped slave and gives her the same promise that he gives to the high and mighty. What’s more, the promise of posterity follows a command to go into an uncertain future, just as does in the story of Abram’s call across-the-River.

The Angel is not finished with this. Hagar will bear a son, who will be named Ishmael, “God will hear.” Like Abram’s other better-known son, Ishmael will personify God’s promise. “God will hear”; *yishma*, the kind of hearing that evokes a response. “Ishmael” is both a confirmation and a promise.

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God has heard her cries, and God will continue to hear. With this promise, Hagar recognizes and takes heart in the dignity and attention God has given her. "You are the God Who Sees!" The God of creation has given life and dignity to a runaway slave. Human beings devalue and turn a deaf ear. The Lord has heard. Human beings cannot lower their eyes to look upon her. But God sees.

This is where Hagar's story ends for the moment. Later we learn that she does indeed return. Like Abram, her faith in God's promise is risky and costly. Abram leaves his family and surroundings and ventures into the unknown. In response to the One who has asked the unthinkable of her, Hagar returns to a place of pain that she knows all too well (21:8-19). She returns, however, with purpose and promise. She knows that God who sees and hears is her helper.

Hagar's story is one of those stories in the Bible that gives us a vision of what matters to God in a world gone bad. It invites us to align our vision with God's, to see what God sees and as God sees, and to hear what God hears and as God hears. Where and who is Hagar today, if not those who suffer the degradation and despair of forced labor and sexual trafficking? How will God come to them with a human face and human hands? Who will be their helper and deliverer? Who cares to notice their unspeakable misery? Who sees them as God sees them? How does God's vision redefine our ideas of what is really important?

There is so much wrong with our world. It can be overwhelming. None of us can answer every need that presents itself to us. But we can all see and hear. And perhaps the Lord will call some of us to be an Angel to someone who needs to know that God sees.