

**To Be Seen By God**  
**Genesis 16:1-16; Lamentations 3:19-26**  
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**Lewinsville Presbyterian Church**  
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The story Spencer read to us this morning from Genesis is a genuine complicated human mess that we find ourselves witnessing. This past week in Bible Study- one person honestly stated that they could not understand why this story was included in the Bible! And another person said they were glad for the opportunity to discuss this story because it had always confused them. The Story of Hagar, Sarai, and Abram (Later to be renamed Sarah and Abraham) is complicated for many different reasons and one of those reasons is that we don't know who to side with. If Genesis 16 were a movie, would we know who the bad guy is in this story?

Is the bad guy Abraham? Thinking disapprovingly of Abraham makes us uncomfortable, but Abraham ultimately approved this whole thing. Abraham has all the power, so he must be the bad guy, right?

But really, isn't it Sarah? Sarai is the one who comes up with this plan. Sarai is anxious and decides to take matters into her own hands instead of waiting for God to provide the child that God promised. Sarah is the one who treated Hagar harshly, which can also be translated as having Hagar beaten.

Or is it Hagar? Hagar instigates some of Sarah's anger, when she looks at Sarah with contempt. Maybe Hagar overstepped her role in the household. Was Hagar provoking Sarah the whole time? Does she just get what she deserves in the end?

Or are they all just doing the best they can. Abraham is trying to be faithful. Hagar is oppressed. Sarah is being proactive.

Over centuries, there has been a whole bunch of interpretations of this story that sets a clear distinction between who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. John Calvin thought it was clear who was in the wrong; for him it was the women. He said that Hagar had a temper and Sarah overstepped the bounds of a modest wife. The apostle Paul has a clear opinion, in the fourth chapter of Galatians, instructing his readers to side with Sarah over Hagar, for Sarah represents freedom and Hagar slavery.

One commenter I read notes that picking sides in a story like this is more revealing about who we are than the people in the story.

But this isn't a movie. There is no bad guy. Rather, this is a troubling, confusing story. This is a human story. The reality is that none of us live in a movie with clear lines of who is good and who is bad; rather we live in a complicated mess and we are just doing the best with what we have at the time and asking for God's help in the midst of it all.

Out of the three people we hear about in this story Hagar is the one whom history has been most unkind. When her name is brought up often people don't really know who she is but think

Hmmmm, wasn't she some sort of bad character or wasn't she really mean to Sarah. The history of Interpretation of this story has for the most part been unkind, and she has been associated with words like contempt, wild donkey, the other woman, foreigner, slave.

But when you turn to scripture and pull back the curtain's history you discover that the heart of Hagar's story is one of a faithful woman trapped in a horrible situation; you find a story of God's grace and mercy, and Hagar a woman of profound strength and courage.

In our text today we are told that Hagar, thinking she has no other options, decides to run away into the wilderness, running as far away from home as she can get. But though she finds freedom from Sarai's harsh treatment she also finds herself lost and with no resources for survival. While in the wilderness God appears to her! God provides her water and a blessing. God promises Hagar that she will be the mother of multitudes (the same blessing given to Abraham in an earlier chapter) and that she should name her son Ishmael for God has heard her misery. In response to God Hagar shows us how courageous she is. She names God! She says you are not only the God who hears, but you are also the God who sees and I will name you El Roi, The God who sees.

The late Rachel Held Evans, a Christian author wrote in her final book *Inspired* *Just one person in all our sacred Scriptures dared to name God. And it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was Hagar- foreigner, woman, slave; her station ranked her among the invisible.*

But she is not invisible. And neither are we.

From this story, we can know that in the midst of one's messy and hard life God sees you and uses your story to bring about God's plan for the world. (this is why my former congregation made of up incarcerated women chose her to name our congregation after). For the very fact that this story is in the Bible tells us that God does not shy away from the hardest or messiest parts of life, God is not scandalized by this story; rather God is in the midst of it and is present with Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah somehow bringing light, salvation, and blessings to all in the midst of all the human mess.

Ultimately, I believe this is why Jesus, the son of God, became human and dwelt among us; humans left to our own devices are a mess and unable to figure out a way forward on our own one preacher states:

*"One of the great conundrums of God is that God sent Jesus into the center of history- and into the center of our lives- in order to befriend and to transform difficult, mean, sneaky people, arrogant and rude people, cynics and solid citizens alike."*

We are seen by God and we are not just seen by God in our projections of how we would like to be seen, but rather we are seen (and loved) in those moments we think we are invisible, those moments we feel like a mess and hope that no one sees us. Those moments that we think there is no way any good can come from this. The same preacher states:

*"Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in..." Jesus did NOT say, "Polish the silver, organize your closets and freshen up BEFORE you open the door. No, just open the door. Come as you are. Feast with me in reality."*

Our second reading today comes from the book of Lamentations which the name of the book is a good indication of what you will experience while reading it. It is essentially a book of five poems and its author is Lamenting the human experience of grief and loss following the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Israelites. These are words to God about the human experience of pain. What doesn't translate in English is the type of poetry; each chapter is an Acrostic poem, meaning each line of the poem begins with each letter of the alphabet. One commentator suggests that the poet is saying: Here is all our suffering from a-z- but my pain is so great I have to tell to you about it from A-Z over and over and over again. But then, in the very center of the book of Lamentations, is the text we read today the only hopeful words uttered in the whole of the book:

*But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,\*  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
Great is your faithfulness.  
<sup>24</sup> 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,  
'therefore I will hope in him.'*

These profound words of hope that are centered in the midst of significant amounts of lament and grief! It is interesting to note that the book of Lamentations does not end on a hopeful note. The book ends offering up the question: what is God going to do? So, you may wonder why the hopeful stuff is in the middle. In Hebrew, what comes in the middle is always the most important, not to be too nerdy, but in Hebrew every word is based on a tri-slabic root, which are three letters. You then add letters to the front or end of the word to change meaning or make it a verb or so on, but this means when you are translating Hebrew, you are always on a mission to discover what the three letters are in the middle meaning that the middle is the most important. Which is why I think these hopeful words are placed in the middle of the book. Because this hope in the steadfast Love of God, the new mercy that comes every morning, flow outward into the rest of the book. Letting us readers know that we can turn to God in our worst moments of grief, anger, shame, and heart ache because we ultimately know that no matter our circumstances we will be met by God's all encompassing steadfast loyal love that is fresh and new every morning. We are not alone, we are seen, and heard, and loved by God.

My mother-in-law, Rev. Patricia Kitchen, who is a presbyterian Minister and writer and has written about her life (she is a wonderful writer) and in one essay tells a story about when the church was transformed for her. She writes:

*In the fall of 1990, I found myself steeped in a place of deep pain in the life of my family. We were members of a beautiful, very traditional Presbyterian church in southern California. Week after week members of the congregation looked well and they spoke well. All seemed to be well, very well, all of the time. It did not seem to be a place that was comfortable accepting brokenness. And in that broken moment in time, I did not have the energy nor the inclination to pretend the coast was clear, because the shore of our lives was ragged. I needed some kind of assurance that God was real. So, one Sunday I slipped into the car and drove across town to a church in Pasadena that I had heard welcomed somewhat unconventional characters to worship in a fairly conventional manner. I did not know what to expect, except acceptance.*

*Sometime after the Call to Worship I glanced down the row, where I had slipped in at one end, and saw a gentleman in a wheelchair beside a beautiful black woman, a middle-aged couple in jeans and an emaciated young man whom I later learned was diagnosed with AIDS. And there I sat, emotionally empty and disheveled, and slowly I smiled for the first time in a long time thinking, "Maybe THIS is what the kingdom of God is really like. Pretty people, poor people, broken people, lonely people, contented people, scared people – not ANYWHERE near perfect, but authentically present in the presence of God.*

*Can God's radical love and acceptance of us help us be more radically accepting and open to others in our midst?*

Today is world communion Sunday which celebrates our oneness in Christ with all our brothers and sisters around the world. We sometimes say during Communion that God's people will come from north and south, from east and west, and sit at table in the kingdom of God and on world communion Sunday we imagine folks from all places and spaces sitting at the feast of God together.

*The Church is a cornucopia of diverse people, who are all completely seen by God. Such was the Divine intent of God our Creator; of Christ our Perfecter, and of the Holy Spirit – our Comforter, who hears us, sees us, and loves us. So today as we celebrate Communion, . Come, fully welcomed to this table, those who seek, those who are overworked, those who are hopeful. "Just as I am?" one might ask. Yes. ALL- no matter are especially welcome. No need to straighten up first. The hospitality of God frees us...no matter who you are, or what you have done or neglected to do in your lifetime. *We are freed by faith to throw open the doors of our life to God only to discover that God has done likewise long ago. Amen**