

Genesis 16: 1-13
Genesis 21: 1-2; 8-21
Matthew 10: 24-31

The God Who Hears and Sees
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Just in case you thought that the Bible was boring, or irrelevant, or pious, today we get to hear the story of Hagar and Abraham and Sarah. It's not a love triangle, exactly, but a story as shocking as any soap opera or HBO miniseries. Betrayal, manipulation, injustice, sexual slavery, jealousy, and family inheritance: it's all there. The Bible scholar Phyllis Trible calls this one of the "Texts of Terror" in the Hebrew Scriptures: not Good News, but Bad News for the female reader.

This is a good time to remind ourselves that not everything in sacred Scripture was written for us to take as an example for our own behavior. It is clear that we cannot read about Abraham, for instance, and assume that we should follow in his footsteps for every decision and every move. Some parts of the founding narrative of the Hebrew people were written (and should be read) so that we can recognize injustice, or misunderstanding, or fear in the lives of otherwise faithful people. Because so many of us experience these things and observe them every day, we can be edified by knowing that they are part of our spiritual history: part of the glorious and wounded humanity that God seems to hear and see and love without measure. We participate in these stories through empathy, and this might lead us to make sure that we **never** "go and do likewise."

In order to achieve this empathy, we have to leap across some cultural barriers. First, the worries about having a son to continue the line. In Abraham and Sarah's time, there was no belief in an afterlife. The way to triumph over death was through children and grandchildren: as many as possible. The childlessness of Abraham and Sarah was not just an emotional or marital issue. It was an existential disaster. Apparently, Sarah was beginning to lose confidence in God's promise that the elderly Abraham would be a father. Or, perhaps she was just doing what many of us would do, and helping to make God's promises happen. There was a legal and ethical way out of the seemingly endless waiting. The law codes of ancient Mesopotamia (the nearest empire) stated that if a wife gave her husband a concubine for childbearing, he would not be allowed to take one of his own. So Sarah's actions were pre-emptive in more ways than one: this was not a snap decision.

Should I even open up the ethical issue of slavery? Of course we recoil from the idea that a slave girl or servant can be handed from one person to another. Hagar was a vessel, what today might be as valuable as a test tube or petri dish, a necessary tool to an end desired by the would-be matriarch Sarah. But the limits of dehumanizing another became apparent when the pregnant Hagar "looked with contempt on her mistress." Who knows what form this look of contempt actually took? All we know is that slavery is no impediment to bitter rivalry and shame.

Abraham does not come off very well here. When Sarah complains to him, he casually remarks, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." And so the predictable outcome: the abuse and flight of Hagar, pregnant with the supposedly precious child of Abraham. So many strikes against her: a foreigner, enslaved, traded, used, abused, alone, helpless, and probably suicidal.

Several times in the Book of Genesis, we get appearances of the divine which are ambiguous. Big surprise. Is this an angel? Is God speaking? This is the kind of experience Hagar has by the spring in the wilderness after running away. We should note here that this is the first description of a divine encounter with a woman in the Scriptures. The angel asks her a profound question: “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” When Hagar gives the direct answer: “I am running away,” the angel says, incredibly, “go back and put up with the abuse.” We have to admit that this is another huge cultural leap for us: what about God’s purposes of liberation and justice and compassion? But with this crushing order comes an amazing affirmation for the slave: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” Her son will bear the name of God within his name: Ishma – El, “God Hears.” Hagar seems to be emboldened by these words, and gives **God** a new name: El-Roi, “God Sees.” Imagine the courage it takes to name God; imagine the courage it takes to trust God, and go back. Hagar is quite a woman.

Fast forward about 14 years, to chapter 21. Sarah now has a son of her own, but relations have not improved between the two mothers. It is not only jealousy and personal rivalry. Sarah has concerns about the inheritance. Once again she approaches Abraham to solve her dilemma. This time he hesitates, troubled with the direct and harsh order from his wife: “Cast out this slave woman with **her** son.” After, Ismael is his son too, his first born. God speaks to the troubled father: “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you...as for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” In effect, God is telling Abraham that he will adopt his oldest son into his care, so Abraham does not need to act as father himself anymore. God sees, God hears, and apparently, God takes a father’s place.

The next scene is distressing, even if we have overheard God’s promises. A woman and a child, a loaf of bread, a skin of water, and the vast wilderness. A woman and a child cannot survive alone out there, and Hagar knows it. She knows that they are both dying. The only option she sees is to leave Ishmael lying under a bush so that she does not have to see or hear what is coming. A bow-shot away, the flight of an arrow – how far is that? Is it far enough, is it ever far enough to distance a parent from the pain of her child? This moment of crisis brings Hagar’s second encounter with the divine. The angel says, “God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Do not be afraid. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

The exhausted woman travels again that bow-shot distance, and cradles the boy close to her heart. She opens her eyes and sees a spring of water – was it always there, but she couldn’t see it? – the life-saving, living water that will save her and her child. They both drink, hope and future restored. And, we are told, “God was with the boy, and he grew up.” God was with this child of abuse and manipulation and slavery. They stayed in the desert: a more hospitable place, apparently, than the tents of Abraham.

This story from below, from the depths, about the underdog, so to speak, is woven into the triumphant story of the Patriarchs, the insiders. Ishmael is the not-quite-legitimate, the half-Egyptian, half-wild warrior, the shadow half-brother, of favored and beloved Isaac. For 10 years, he was Abraham’s only son. Then came the family rift, and a new pathway opened up. The rift, though, was not complete or final. Later we hear that Ishmael dutifully shares the funeral rites for Abraham with Isaac. So goes the story: the way that our ancestors tried to make sense of the complicated tribal alliances and conflicts of their time.

Can we be edified by such a story? What are the limits of our empathy? Can we forgive Abraham for his passivity? Can we forgive Sarah for using her slave girl, then discarding her? For that matter, can we forgive Hagar for leaving her child and walking a bow-shot away to cushion her grief? Can we understand what makes even those who walk and talk with God act in such self-serving ways? Or can we use our shock at their behavior to look more closely at our own?

The truth is, we put distance between ourselves and others, whether a bow-shot or longer, when we do not want to hear and see as God does. Who wants to open up like that and hear the pain, see the differences, feel the need? Sometimes it is literal distance, when we live and move in circles of privilege. Sometimes it is mental distance, when we use labels of ethnicity and class and politics. We need that deafening, blinding distance to attend to our own needs and our own priorities.

Hagar was quite a woman. She was used, cast out and abandoned by those who held her life in their hands. She had listened to and talked to and named God. She had the courage to live in impossible circumstances. But even she loses hope, walks the bow-shot away, and weeps bitter tears of hopelessness. But God hears the one she has abandoned, and opens her eyes. There is one more vulnerable than she is, and she is the one who must find the water and save a life.

God shows the hopeless mother the far reach of compassion. Divine love is not limited by location, or gender, or nationality, or class, or any other box we use to keep ourselves intact. God reaches across the distance of a bow-shot, of the broken relationships, of the prejudice and rivalry of the past, to pull Hagar, and us into an unexpected future.

What is the distance that we put, and what are the strategies that we use, to keep others from deep wells of life-giving grace? Who is the one even more vulnerable, even more in need than we are in our darkest moments? Our story tells us that these are the points of growth and possibility and new life – points of resurrecting power. We would do well, as individuals and as a congregation, to open our eyes and ears. First we would recognize our own pain and insecurity. Then we might be able to hear with the God of Ishmael, and see with the God El-Roi. And then great things might happen: lives saved, relationships mended, future restored. May it be so. Amen.