

Genesis 16:1-16 – God Sees Me

Can you see me? I remember when my children were younger – maybe around 1-2yrs old – they both loved to play the game hide-n-seek. At such a young age, this meant only that they would cover their eyes with their hands and assumed that because they couldn't see me, then I couldn't see them. And of course, I would play along and say "Where's Henry and Natalie? Where did they go? They've disappeared!" Then they would uncover their eyes and say "Hear I am!" But my son, Henry, would sometimes give himself away too soon by covering his eyes and asking "Can you see me?"

Our scripture reading today focuses on the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sarai who becomes the mother of Ishmael, Abram's firstborn son. Now as you may know Abram and Sarai play an immensely important role in Jewish and Christian history as God chooses them to become the mother and father of the people of Israel, and in just a couple of more chapters we find God fulfilling that promise by changing their names to Abraham and Sarah and announcing that she will give birth to a son whom she will name Isaac – and this, well after she had already surpassed her ability to conceive.

But here is Hagar, whose name and whose story is rarely mentioned in our telling and retelling of God's promise to God's people through Abraham. In fact, she is only mentioned 4 times in all of scripture. Yet the more I sit with her story, the more I give God thanks for Hagar. I give thanks that God sees, hears, remembers and responds to the voiceless and the powerless, the seemingly forgettable people like Hagar.

Indeed, when you read her story here in Genesis 16, you can see that Hagar has no voice, no power of choice or self-determination. *She* isn't the one making the decisions about her own life; instead, others are deciding for her – Sarai *gives* her to Abram and when things get messy Abram *gives* her right back to Sarai to "do to her as you please."

Of course, this has much to do with the status of women and the practice of slavery in this ancient culture. You see women were not considered worth much unless they could have children. If a woman proved to be barren then she believed to be cursed by the gods. In addition to this, many people – especially women – who found themselves living amongst people who were not of their particular clan/culture would "guarantee their survival by becoming servants of those among whom they lived." These slaves were considered property and their "reproductive" abilities could be donated at will by their masters and mistresses. And so, in order to not be seen as cursed, a barren woman could use her slave as a surrogate mother in order to produce children on the mistress' behalf. This was a very common occurrence in this ancient culture. Sarai, Abram and Hagar are

all simply playing their part according to the rules that the culture of their day had established.

We see vestiges of this in our present day culture, where many women continue to struggle with the stigma of infertility with little support from their communities or the church – all the while, our culture continues to support the *cruel notion* that a single woman cannot be complete unless she has a man to take care of her and have children. Every girl, just like every child, should grow up knowing that they are made in the image of God and their worth as an individual is not contingent upon their relationship status.

Yet, the issue here in the text is not so much that they are all playing into the established roles of their surrounding culture. The issue isn't even that Hagar the slave begins to disrespect or *belittle* Sarai, her mistress, for being childless, nor is it the fact that Abram denies any responsibility for what's happening or even that Sarai responds to Hagar with violence and cruelty. To be sure, all these are things that can and should be addressed. But perhaps a deeper issue here is that they're all hiding – hiding in fear that they may never become the persons they most long to be; hiding in shame because they are different and their sense of family and their own sense of worth doesn't feel or look normal.

The writer of the book of Genesis takes great care to make sure we understand Sarai's plight in not having a child....that her worth as a woman is somehow diminished because she does not have children, and while her family and even her servants are having children and "normal" families, she is left to feel lost and less than her full self as she watches her child-bearing years become a memory. Sarai is hiding in the shame of infertility, trying every means at her disposal to "fix" herself in a world that believes she is cursed.

Abram's plight is more economic – without an heir, his role and status, his name and legacy is lost. And, if we read this chapter in the context of God's promise to establish Abram and his family as the source of blessing for the world, then we can understand that perhaps rooted deep within Abram is a fear that God is a liar or worst yet a figment of his own imagination.

And then there is Hagar, the one in this story who has nothing to gain and everything to lose. What little she does gain as Abram's second wife and now mother to his only son, is taken from her as Abram and Sarai both remind her of her place as a slave – that is, without any rights or claim of her own but solely at the pleasure and disposal of her master and mistress. Being in bondage of any sort – whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual – carries with it its own set of fear and shame. Bondage is never positive or life-giving, and those who have experienced this in any form know all too well how you begin to believe **that the chains themselves have more right to bind you than you do to live in freedom.**

In this story, Hagar does the only thing she can do, the only thing she is allowed to do – she runs. She flees from her oppression and her oppressor. It should be noted that there are striking resemblances between this story and the Exodus. Here the father and mother of the soon-to-be Hebrew nation has enslaved an Egyptian, and when an issue arises over the slave's fertility, her masters respond with considerable force so as to keep her in her place. In the first couple of chapters of Exodus, you find almost the exact same thing happening – only it's the Hebrews who are being oppressed by the Egyptians.

Nevertheless, in both instances God sees, hears and responds. God comes and finds Hagar, the one who has nothing to gain but everything to lose – the one whose story is relatively unknown and who is barely given any attention throughout all of Jewish and Christian scriptures. God comes to her and gives her – this woman, this slave woman – the same covenantal promise and blessing which was given to Abram in chapter 15. God gives it to *her*. God makes this seemingly forgettable nobody a somebody – a somebody with intrinsic worth and value, with meaning and purpose....a somebody who actually matters *to somebody*. God sees her for who she is, calls her by name and summons out of her the fullness of her sacred worth.

Sometimes, we can get so bogged down with the hand that life has dealt us that we, too, feel like we don't matter or that whoever we are or wherever we came from somehow makes us less than others. Sometimes life can knock you down so low that you become not just unsure of yourself, but you begin to believe that everything bad in your life is somehow your own fault and thus you deserve to be knocked down – physically, emotionally or spiritually. Sometimes its just plain hard to ignore the voices surrounding us that tell us who we *should or shouldn't* be and that ultimately shame us into feeling like we are not complete unless we do this or do that. And ...there's a loneliness, too....feeling as if no one really understands what's going on inside and not sure that any one really cares.

But God sees you. I mean that's the good news of Hagar's story and really the whole of God's story with God's people – that God is not aloof to your situation. No, God really sees you and aims to bless you so that you may know and live fully into what it means to be God's beloved. In essence, this is the meaning of your baptism. Whether you were baptized as an infant or adult, the same is true: that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God has claimed you as God's own beloved child, cleansed you from sin through the redemption of Christ Jesus and by grace calls you to live a new life of freedom, peace, love and justice.

I'm reminded of a song by an artist named Marvin Sapp. It's a simple song with only a few words:

*He saw the best in me when everyone else around could only see the worst in me.
He's mine and I am his; it doesn't matter what I did;
He only sees me for who I am.*

God not only sees you, but God sees *the best you*. And when we think back to the story of Hagar and of Abram and Sarai, we can see that God doesn't see the best in us simply so that we can feel all warm and fuzzy about ourselves. No, God sees and calls forth the best in us so that we can be a part of how God intends to bless and save the whole world. The covenantal promise extended to Hagar is not simply an affirmation of her sacred worth as a beloved daughter of God, but it then places her and everyone connected to her squarely in line with how God intends to bless the world. In the language of our baptismal liturgy, Hagar is incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation.

Her story becomes for us yet another example of how God continues to call the least likely among us. And even if you think you're on the outside of God's plan for the world, God still searches you out, calls you by name and invites you to participate, to be a part of this new family of misfits who can and who do and who will literally change the world by the grace of God. Like Hagar, we are sent to bear witness to this God who sees us, calls and claims us. We proclaim to all those who will listen that the God of Hagar will exchange dignity for shame, confidence for fear, and new hope for despair.