

The God Who Sees and Hears

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Genesis 21:8-21 NRSVUE

The child [Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah grew], and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian [Ishmael], whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac. "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring. "So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him. "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Hagar on that day? Banished. Sent away. Walking through the wilderness with her son. One arm wrapped around Ishmael. The others carry what little food and water they have left.

And then the water runs out. The sun grows hotter. The child grows weaker. Until finally Ishmael can go no further. Hagar lays him down beneath a desert bush and walks away.

Not because she does not love him, but because she loves him so much that she cannot bear to watch him die.

The horror of that moment is unimaginable. The fear. The grief.

And then, into that quiet, into that wilderness space, God's voice breaks through.

"Do not be afraid. I have heard the voice of the boy."

And suddenly: life giving water. Hope, restored.

But this raises an uncomfortable question. Where was Abraham? This is not an easy Father's Day text.

If we were looking for a Bible story about ideal parenting, this probably would not have been our first choice. Today we hear how Abraham—whom Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all honour as a spiritual ancestor—sends his eldest son, Ishmael, into the wilderness with his mother, carrying only the food and water they can take with them.

One thing we can take from today's reading is that if you've ever lain awake wondering whether you got everything right as a parent, Abraham may offer a strange sort of comfort. You're not the only one.

Just last week we heard about Abraham's extraordinary hospitality, welcoming strangers with generosity and compassion. Today we heard a rather different story.

And that is one of the things I appreciate about the Bible. It is not a collection of flawless heroes. It is a collection of deeply human people. People capable of remarkable faith and remarkable failure. People who love deeply and sometimes hurt others anyway.

A complicated family

But despite human frailty, God continues working and loving us. Even a complicated family like this one. Let me introduce you to them.

First there's **Sarah**, Abraham's wife. For years she could not have children. In a culture where family and inheritance meant everything, that was a deep sorrow. In fact, it was a source of shame not to have a child. So, Sarah gives her enslaved servant Hagar to Abraham in the hope of having a child through her. Hagar gives birth to **Ishmael**, Abraham's first son.

Later, against all expectations, Sarah herself gives birth to **Isaac**. You heard about that last week. Instead of bringing joy to everyone, the situation creates jealousy, fear, and division. Hagar and Ishmael become expendable once Sarah's own son arrives.

Which brings us to **Hagar**, an enslaved Egyptian woman with little power and few choices. She is used by Sarah and Abraham to give them the child they want. One theologian, Phyllis Trible, calls this one of the Bible's "Texts of Terror." It is at heart a story shaped by slavery, exploitation, and oppression. The people with power (Abraham and Sarah) largely fail to see it because it is simply normal for them. That should make us pause and ask what injustices our own society treats as normal.

And at the centre of it all stands **Abraham**, a man capable of great faith and great hospitality, but who in this story appears to fail both Hagar and Ishmael. He worries about his sons, for sure. He prays. He hears God say, let them go free. There is a redeeming grace in the fact that he lets an enslaved woman go free. That is good. But he sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness alone. Remember, he could have walked with them until he knew they were safe. He could have sent an escort. He does not. That's really the problem. It's not that he gives freedom back to this enslaved Woman. Of course, God is in favour. And sometimes when families split up it's honestly the best solution. But it is wrong to send her off with child in one arm and just the water and food she can carry in the other. This is where we see the challenging part of humanity.

So, we have a lot at play in this family: jealousy, fear, competition, power, weakness, pain, love, and failure. In other words, while I hope none of us go as far as Sarah and Abraham, the feelings in this story would be awfully familiar in most families.

Families

Today in Canada we have many expressions of families. That makes our world richer. Families joined by marriage or reshaped by divorce or death. Families are brought together through adoption or held together by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends.

Families that don't fit neat stereotypical boxes. Families that love each other, even if they don't always get everything right. The truth is, as we learn from this story, families have always been complicated. And always loved by God.

What is striking in this story, when we think about families and parenting, is where God is mentioned.

God appears to Abraham, a father worried about his sons.

And God appears to Hagar, a mother at the point of desperation over the life of her son.

If you are sitting here today, fearful for your children, the young or the old, God sees you. God hears you. God cares about your family. God is speaking to you.

Now you may be thinking in the quiet of your heart, that you're not worthy of God. That God may have cared about Ishmael and Isaac, but you're not important enough for God to care about you or your family.

Nothing could be further than the truth.

The Margins

The focus of this story is not ultimately upon the people who seem to have it all together, those who have power or privilege. It is about what happens when the God who sees and hears all, encounters people everyone else overlooks.

Hagar is a slave. An Egyptian. A foreigner. A woman with little power and little status. She does NOT appear to belong.

And yet God sees her. God hears her son. God speaks to Hagar at her most extreme moment of desperation. And believe it or not this is not actually the first time Hagar has experienced the presence of God either.

Earlier, while pregnant with Ishmael, Hagar fled into the wilderness after being mistreated by Sarah, Abraham's wife. She was upset and afraid and could take it no longer.

Then too she encountered God. There too she discovered that she was not forgotten.

In that earlier story Hagar gives God a remarkable name: **El-Roi**. "The God who sees me."

Think about that. Abraham never names God. Sarah never names God.

But Hagar, the first African woman to be explicitly named in the bible, does.

A non-Hebrew slave woman in the wilderness becomes the first woman in scripture to give God a name born from her own experience. "The God who sees me." El-Roi.

Hagar does not describe God as powerful or distant or terrifying. She describes God as attentive, and present. A God who sees. And the son she names becomes a living reminder that God hears too, because "Ishmael" means 'God hears me'.

Many centuries later another marginalized young woman, betrothed but not yet married, will have a child under unusual circumstances and give him a name that echoes down to us. Mary the Mother of Jesus will call her son Emmanuel, or "God is with us." And Joseph, his earthly father will be by her side.

The message is profound and true. God loves us all. God loves all families. God does not care where you come from or what you have done, for you are a child of God.

The Well

Now of course, many of us will do anything other than accept that we are beautiful and beloved by God.

Hagar and Ishmael find a well at their darkest moment, but you may be asking, “where is *my* well?” Why won’t God save *my* family? Why am I alone?

But that’s a misunderstanding of the story.

There was no magic here. God does not suddenly appear to Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. Because God was already with them. God had always been with them.

Every step they took throughout their entire lives God was there. And the same is true for you. The miracle is not that God was present. The miracle was that Hagar was able to hear God, out in the wilderness, beyond the noise and complications of life.

The water of the well mentioned today, is water for all of us, beloved as we are, children of God as we are, living our complicated lives.

Father’s Day

On Father's Day, I find that deeply moving. God has many names, including the one given by Hagar “El-Roi”. Another one of them is “Father”.

So, it’s not about asking ourselves just what we can learn about fatherhood from Abraham but also from God. From Abraham we learn humility, because we are not perfect. We learn to try.

From God we learn about care, compassion, presence, endless love, joy. We learn about all the best things God has given us and that we receive from so many fathers. We are grateful. We learn that in our darkest moments we are not alone. That when we walk in the desert, the One we sometimes call our Father is with us.

And we learn about the willingness to nurture life. The willingness to put the well-being of children first. Not just our own children. All children.

National Indigenous Day

Which brings us to National Indigenous Day.

For generations, many Christians read stories like this from the perspective of Abraham and Sarah—the people with power.

But what happens when we read through Hagar's eyes? What happens when we listen to those who have been pushed to the margins rather than from the centre?

Indigenous peoples in this land know something about exclusion and displacement. They know something about having others make decisions about their children's future.

And yet Indigenous communities have also preserved a profound understanding that the Creator is encountered in the land itself—in forests and rivers, in sky and rock, in places where the sacred can still be heard. Perhaps that should not surprise us.

The God of Hagar has always been found in the wilderness. Not because wilderness is always easy. Not because suffering is holy. But because when human power fails, God's presence remains. During this season of Pentecost, we remember that God's spirit abounds in creation.

God refuses to limit love to only a few. God blesses Isaac. And God blesses Ishmael. Last week God promised a future for Sarah's child. This week God promises a future for Hagar's child.

Human beings draw lines, but God keeps widening the circle. Human beings create outsiders but God our mother and our father keeps calling them beloved. Human beings worry there is not enough love, but God keeps offering abundance.

And that is good news. Good news for fathers trying their best. Good news for families in all their beautiful complexity. Good news for Indigenous peoples whose relationship with this land stretches back through countless generations.

Good news for anyone who has ever felt unseen, unheard, excluded, or forgotten.

Because the God we meet in this story is still the God who sees. Still the God who hears. Still the God who meets people in the wilderness.

And still the God who leads them toward life. All of them. All of us.

Thanks be to God.