

The God Who Sees

Genesis 21:8-21
Mark Schloneger
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“The man we think of,
the man we admire,
the man we talk about,
the man whose wonderful story we read and re-read,
is Christopher Columbus,
the greatest human benefactor of the human race.”

Those are the words of Rossiter Johnson. He published a book in 1897 about the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. That world’s fair was a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of America, at least that’s how it was promoted.¹

But all of us know better than that. And all of us know better than to think of Columbus as the hero of the human race.

Yet, many of us grew up with textbooks that celebrated Columbus and in schools that celebrated Columbus’ day, the only national holiday named after a non-citizen. Even today, many people see the arrival of Columbus as the discovery of America, the beginning of American history. But the peoples of nations already present in the land see his arrival as less a discovery than an invasion and a conquest, the decimation of their history.

What is our history? It depends, doesn’t it, on the meaning of “our”. When we say “our”, to whom are we referring? The way history is understood depends so much on who’s telling the story – that’s true for family history, national history, world history, church history. The telling of history is an argument – these are the important people, these are the important events; this is what they mean both back then and now.

But who sees the people whose stories get untold or erased?
Who sees the people whose stories get shaped, bent, and distorted,
to fit the myths that we like to tell about ourselves?
Who sees clearly?

In Genesis, chapter 18, three strangers appeared near the entrance of Abraham’s tent, and they promised him that his wife Sarah would bear him a son.

Sarah laughed.

Abraham was old, she was old, and it was ridiculous, laughable, this thought that she could have a baby. Yet, she conceived and gave birth to a son. He was named Isaac, meaning “laughter.”

We know this story.
God creates a future where there is none.

¹ Rossiter Johnson (ed.), *A History of the World’s Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897). https://archive.org/stream/cu31924021896331/cu31924021896331_djvu.txt

God fulfills God's promises. Through Abraham, Sarah, and now this miracle baby, Isaac, God will make a great nation, a people of God's blessing, through whom the entire world will be blessed.

Genesis 21:8-21, from the Common English Bible:

*[Isaac] grew and stopped nursing.
On the day he stopped nursing,
Abraham prepared a huge banquet.
Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing,
the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham.
So she said to Abraham,
"Send this servant away with her son!
This servant's son won't share the inheritance with my son Isaac."*

*This upset Abraham terribly
because the boy was his son.
God said to Abraham, "Don't be upset about the boy and your servant.
Do everything Sarah tells you to do
because your descendants will be traced through Isaac.
But I will make of your servant's son a great nation too,
because he is also your descendant."*

*Abraham got up early in the morning,
took some bread and a flask of water,
and gave it to Hagar.
He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away.
She left and wandered through the desert near Beer-sheba.
Finally the water in the flask ran out,
and she put the boy down under one of the desert shrubs. So
he walked away from him
about as far as a bow shot and sat down,
telling herself, I can't bear to see the boy die.*

*She sat at a distance, cried out in grief, and wept.
God heard the boy's cries,
and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven
and said to her,
"Hagar! What's wrong? Don't be afraid.
God has heard the boy's cries over there.
Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand
because I will make of him a great nation."*

*Then God opened her eyes,
and she saw a well.
She went over, filled the water flask,
and gave the boy a drink.
God remained with the boy;*

*he grew up, lived in the desert,
and became an expert archer.
He lived in the Paran desert,
and his mother found him an Egyptian wife. (Genesis 21:8-21, NRSV)*

The writer of Genesis tells us that her name is Hagar, but we don't know her true, Egyptian name. You see, Hagar in biblical Hebrew means something like "foreign thing".² And so calling her Hagar is in itself a dismissal, a denial of her importance, her history, even her humanity. Every time her name is mentioned, the reader, the listener of this story is reminded that she doesn't belong. Yet, here she is, in the Hebrew scriptures.

When we're first introduced to Hagar, in Genesis 16, she's already an Egyptian slave-girl in Abram and Sarai's household. Sarai can't have children, and so she tells Abram to lie with the slave girl, The Foreign Thing, a common practice in the Ancient Near East.

When Hagar became pregnant, she disrespected Sarai in some way, and so Sarai begins treating her harshly, oppressing her. Hagar runs away into the desert, pregnant and alone.

It's here when a messenger from God appears to her and tells her to return, promising that she will bear many children. The Lord's messenger said to her:

*"You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son.
You will name him Ishmael
because the Lord has heard about your harsh treatment."*

The name Ishmael means "God hears."

But the Lord isn't the only one doing naming here. Hagar, The Foreign Thing, in turn, names God, "You are El Roi" (meaning, "The God Who Sees"), she says, "for can I still see after he saw me?" The God Who Sees.

But this story is not complete. Three chapters later, in the scripture before us, Hagar doesn't run away; she is driven away. Cast out this slave woman with her son," Sarah tells Abraham. Similar language is used to describe Pharaoh's action toward the Israelite slaves.

And like the Israelites after they were freed from Egyptian slavery, Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl and Ishmael, her son, wander in the wilderness.

When their water was gone, Hagar couldn't bear to watch her son die, and so she placed him under a bush, and sat down a distance away, weeping with grief. Stopping here, this is a dark, heartbreaking story.

But again, God sends a messenger to deliver this message to her: "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy." God hears Ishmael. God hears *God hears*, Ishmael. "Come, lift up the boy," the messenger continued, "and hold him fast with your hand for I will make a great nation of him."

² Karen González, *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong*, Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019), 74. See also J.K. Gayle, "Turning Tables and Snatching Wigs (& Translation Matters)", *BLT* (September 23, 2014); <https://bltnotjustasandwich.com/2014/09/23/turning-tables-snatching-wigs-translation-matters/>

Then, the God Who Sees opens the eyes of The Foreign Thing, so she can see a well of water. And she gives her son a drink.

Who sees the people whose stories get untold or erased?

Who sees the people whose stories get shaped, bent, and distorted,
to fit the myths that we like to tell about ourselves?

Who sees clearly?

The woman named Hagar, The Foreign Thing, is the first person in the Bible to receive an annunciation, a special message from God. The woman named Hagar, The Foreign Thing, is the first person in the Bible to give a name to God. Hagar is not a Foreign Thing to God.

She is a bearer of God's promise.

She is seen by the God Who Sees.

She is heard by the God Who Hears.

I've never preached a sermon on this scripture, and, to my knowledge, I've never heard a sermon on it either. Maybe it's not surprising that it took someone like Karen González, an immigrant from Guatemala, to open my eyes to Hagar and her story.

González is a speaker, writer, and immigration advocate, and she recently wrote a book published by Herald Press, entitled *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong*.³ It's a beautiful book, beautifully written. In this message, I've drawn from what I've learned from Gonzalez. For me, this book points to the importance of reading and listening to people who come from a different background than your own.

This story of Hagar is in many ways a counter-story to the one that dominates the rest of the Hebrew scriptures.

It's no accident that this woman is an *Egyptian* slave.

It's no accident that she's dehumanized as The Foreign Thing.

It's no accident that she is mistreated as a slave.

It's no accident that she's driven away by the patriarch and matriarch of Israel,
using words that are repeated to describe the actions of Pharaoh.

It's no accident that she wanders in the wilderness.

And it's no accident that God hears the boy's cries of distress, sees Hagar,
provides for them, and promises to make from them a great nation.

All of these are allusions to the beginning of Israel, the Exodus, and they serve as a reminder that the God who will free the Israelite slaves. is working beyond that story, too. Do not forget, this story reminds us,

that The God of The Exodus,

the God who heard the cries of the Israelite slaves in Egypt,

the God who liberated these Foreign Things from Egyptian oppression

the God who provided for them as they wandered in the wilderness,

who delivered them to the land of promise

and who gave Israel its name and its future as the People of God

³ Ibid.

is also the God who sees and hears an Egyptian slave and her son.

Who sees the people whose stories get untold or erased?

Who sees the people whose stories get shaped, bent, and distorted,
to fit the myths that we like to tell about ourselves?

Who sees clearly?

God does.

Your God does.

To those of you feel neglected, alone, unappreciated, depressed, oppressed, mistreated, hurt,
unworthy, abandoned,

to those of you who feel like you will never
have the life that is constantly put in front of your face
as the good life, the one to which everyone aspires,

God sees you,

God hears you,

just as the God Who Sees saw Hagar,

just as the God Who Hears heard Ishmael.

All of us should rejoice that God's saving acts are not limited by our limited understandings of God and are not restrained by the stories we think we know.

Here in Elkhart County, we've seen COVID infection rates dramatically increase, particularly among the Latinx community, including immigrants who fill positions of "essential work" but who don't have access to adequate health care and who must live in the shadows. There's a reason why coronavirus cases have spiked in our county, among the Latinx community. There's a reason why our elected officials didn't adequately prepare for what was so easily foreseen.

Who sees the reality of this counter-story to one told of the large RV manufacturers on which our local economy depends? This past week, I read an *Indianapolis Star* article about the infection rates in Elkhart County and how local leaders are trying to respond to it.⁴ I wasn't entirely surprised to find two members of our congregation quoted in this article, and I know many of you are working on these same issues. Who sees? God and God's people.

In Mark chapters 7 and 8, we're told two stories of Jesus. Some people brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on him.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. (Mark 7:31-37)

And then some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.

He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and

⁴ John Tuohy, "[Elkhart officials alarmed at rise in positive coronavirus cases, warn of another lockdown](#)," *Indianapolis Star* (June 12, 2020),

laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again. He opened his eyes, and his sight was restored. He saw everything clearly. (Mark 8:22-26)

Who will see the people whose stories get untold or erased?
Who will see the people whose stories get shaped, bent, and distorted,
to fit the myths that we like to tell about ourselves?
Who will see clearly? Who will hear their stories?

"The One we think of,
the One we admire,
the One we talk about,
the One whose wonderful story we read and re-read,
the One who we follow for life
is Jesus,
The God who frees us to see and to hear.