

Genesis: *The God Who Sees*  
Genesis 16:1-16

Today marks the first day of Holy Week and the day we often refer to as Palm Sunday. It is a day that we commemorate our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem; a day when the crowds waved palm branches and declared, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" I have delivered many messages on this famous story, and those messages are available on our website in both the Gospel of Luke series as well as the series on the Gospel of John. This morning, however, we will continue our journey through the book of Genesis which brings us to Genesis 16, a very famous story that has much to teach us as we enter into Holy Week. So, please stand and let us read Genesis 16:1-16:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. <sup>2</sup> And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup> So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. <sup>4</sup> And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup> And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" <sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." <sup>9</sup> The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." <sup>11</sup> And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael,  
because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

<sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild donkey of a man,  
his hand against everyone  
and everyone's hand against him,  
and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

<sup>13</sup> So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." <sup>14</sup> Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup> And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Synergism; 2) The Blame Game; and 3) The God Who Sees.

### **I. Synergism**

As we enter into Genesis 16, it's now been ten years since Abram left Hebron in obedience to God's call on his life. If you recall, Abram was 75 years old, and his wife Sarai was 65 years old, when God sent them out with a promise of countless descendants. Even recently, God doubled down on that promise in Genesis 15, reminding Abram that his descendants would outnumber the stars. At that time, Abram believed God, and his faith was reckoned to him as

righteousness. But now, as we return to the narrative, the camera turns away from Abram and zooms in on Sarai. It's the first time that we've heard her name in a while following the debacle in Egypt when she was swept up into Pharaoh's house as a concubine.

Like Abram, Sarai has been waiting. For ten years she has been waiting to get pregnant, struggling to believe the promise that God made to her husband. But, as is often the case, time has a way of eroding our faith. As we pick up the narrative, we read in vss. 1-2: Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

Sarai is now 75 years old, and her ability to even fathom a pregnancy in her old age has all but vanished. She blames God for preventing childbirth, and she's lost confidence in God's promise regarding her role in bearing a child for her husband. In fact, Sarai is now thinking that God never specifically promised that *she* would bear a son for Abram; rather, God's promise was that Abram would have descendants, but by whom he would have descendants was perhaps a bit unclear.

Sarai is our representative in this story. She is parsing the Word of God as we often do, looking for loopholes and exceptions. She is assuming that God probably didn't say what He meant or mean what He said. In other words, if God is going to provide an heir before Abram keels over from old age, God is going to need some help! So, Sarai looks to the resources at hand. Her young handmaiden, an Egyptian by the name of Hagar, is exactly what the doctor ordered.<sup>1</sup> Sarai approaches her husband and says: Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.

Now, I know the idea of sending your husband into another woman's tent may seem a bit extreme to some, but Dr. Ken Matthews writes that "Ancient Near Eastern custom provided for the substitution of a slave for the purpose of bearing a child in the case of a barren mistress." Note that there is no prayer offered by Sarai. She is tired of waiting on the LORD, and she takes matters into her own hands. OT scholar, Dr. Bruce Waltke writes: To attempt to independently "help God" accomplish His purpose is what theologians call *synergism*. Synergism only leads to disaster.<sup>2</sup>

Church, how often do we engage in synergism? How often do we jump ahead with our best thinking, our best strategies, our best intentions with no prayer and no consideration for what God actually said? At the root of our sin is this conviction that God's Word cannot be trusted. When God's Word does not align with our desires and/or our timeline, we improvise. We rationalize. We substitute our will in place of waiting on the LORD. And we have plenty of disasters to show for it, amen?

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26* (Brentwood: B&H, 2005) 184. According to Dr. Ken Matthews: Ancient Near Eastern custom provided for the substitution of a slave for the purpose of bearing a child in the case of a barren mistress.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 256.

So how does Abram respond to the synergism of his wife? How does this 85-year-old man respond to his wife's suggestion that he jump into bed with a young, beautiful Egyptian woman? Shockingly, or not so shockingly, he agrees. We read in vs. 2ff: And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.

Church, can you see that this is yet another Fall story in Genesis? The language is almost identical to the Garden of Eden. Once again we find a wife leading her husband to sin. Abram listened to the voice of Sarai as opposed to trusting the Word of God. Sarai "took" and "gave" Hagar to her husband as a second wife, and Abram partook of that which he should not have partaken. The consequence will be a child who will change the world, though not necessarily for the better. We'll come back to that observation here in a bit.

Let us turn now to our second subheading...

## **II. The Blame Game**

There is a human tendency we are all familiar with, though you may wince when I point it out to you, and it's called "The Blame Game." It goes something like this: 1) We are unhappy and dissatisfied with living under God's Word, so we launch ahead with our improvised, synergistic decision to do things our way; 2) predictably, that decision leads to some very unpleasant circumstances; 3) we then blame God or blame others because we are now even more unhappy than we were in the first place. Does anyone know what I'm talking about?

The "Blame Game" is clear to see in what comes next here in vss. 4ff: And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

We might assume that prior to having Hagar sleep with her husband, Sarai likely had a good relationship with her handmaiden. Understandably, in her mind, she could give Hagar to her husband, get a child as a result, and all would be well. Not surprisingly, however, once Hagar is found pregnant, the dynamic between the two women becomes strained.

Now, for those of us who have been married for some time, we can imagine the conversation in Abram's tent as the aging couple is getting ready for bed.

"Abe, did you see the way Hagar looked at me this evening?"

"Huh?"

"Did you see how she looked at me? She looked at me with contempt!"

"Huh...really? I didn't notice."

"Are you blind??? Every woman in the camp saw it. All my friends kept coming up to me because they were shocked by the way she was looking at me!"

"Well...did she say anything?"

“She doesn’t need to say anything you old fool! The way she looked at me said it all—she holds me in contempt because she is pregnant and I am barren. She thinks she is better than me, and she’s a slave! She thinks her pregnancy makes her ‘the chosen one’ even though she is my maidservant!”

“You got all of that from the way she looked at you?”

“YES! How can you not see that? You are emotionally obtuse! And this is all your fault! Look what you’ve done!”

The edited version of that conversation is provided in vs. 5: And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”

Sarai is livid. Although giving Hagar over to Abram as a second wife was her idea, she is unwilling to own the consequences that follow. She is furious at Abram, and she even invokes God as the judge for her righteous indignation. How quick we are to blame others and even blame God when our synergistic plans don’t turn out like we thought they would.

Abram, predictably, sidesteps any responsibility for Hagar’s contemptuous look and responds in vs. 6: “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Abram’s passivity in this story is disappointing, but not altogether unpredictable. He has participated in sin, but he is inclined to defer all responsibility back to his wife, who then unleashes her wrath upon Hagar. We read at the end of vs. 6: Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

Church, this is not Abram’s finest moment. In fact, this story paints Abram and Sarai in a horrible light. The story is so awkward and painfully embarrassing that it rings true. In fact, most of us can relate better with this version of Abram and Sarai than we can other stories that require tremendous faith, right? Let me remind you: these embarrassing stories about the great heroes of our faith help establish the historical veracity of the scriptures. Myths and legends do not typically include marital squabbles and embarrassing situations like this story. So let us be grateful for the honesty of the scriptures that speak into the mess that is our lives on planet earth.

And let us remember that God doesn’t need our help. God doesn’t need us to improvise around His Word when we are tired of waiting for His promises to be fulfilled. Synergism is a sure path to disaster, and that disaster will often affect more people than we could possibly anticipate. Thankfully, we have a God of infinite mercy and grace who is always at work, even when we’ve made a tremendous mess of things.

That leads us to my third and final subheading...

### **III. The God Who Sees**

The focus of the narrative now shifts away from Abram and Sarai to this young, Egyptian handmaiden named Hagar. Hagar was likely given to Abram as a servant by Pharaoh when they were last in Egypt. By virtue of her character and skillset, she had been elevated to the position

of Sarai's handmaiden, which was essentially Sarai's personal assistant. Hagar's role in the family system was stable and predictable until the day when Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a second wife. Now, given her pregnancy, everything has changed. Her mistress has become insanely jealous. Hagar's contemptuous attitude is now impossible to disguise, and it's not a good situation to say the least.

We learn that Sarai's treatment of Hagar becomes so harsh that handmaiden runs away from the camp and makes an attempt to walk back to Egypt. After some time in the harsh desert, Hagar arrives at a spring on the way to Shur, just east of the Egyptian border, and it is there that we will pick up the narrative beginning with vs. 7: 7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."

Hagar, in the midst of her darkest hour, is found by the angel of the LORD, who calls her by name. Church, don't miss this: God pursues the brokenhearted. There is no record of Hagar crying out to the LORD, yet here we see that God's eye is always upon His image-bearers, even those of low station. God sees us—all of us—always.

Note also that this is the only time in the Old Testament that an angel of the LORD addresses a woman by her name. In fact, OT scholar Bruce Waltke writes: "This is the only known instance in ancient Near Eastern literature where the deity addresses a woman by name."<sup>3</sup> This is a big deal.

Next, note the question asked of the angel. "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" The angel already reveals her appointed role: she is a servant of Sarai by God's providence. Yet Hagar is given the opportunity to define where she is, and she honestly replies, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." Hagar is honest with God, and that is something we should always remember.

We would all do well to hear God ask us, "Where have you come from and where are you going?" In fact, if you have some time this week, I would encourage you to answer that question honestly to God. Where have you come from? How do you understand your story? How do you understand your past? And where are you going? Do you know? I think we will all answer that question differently, but an important part of our prayer life is honestly answering this question: Where have you come from, and where are you going?

Having heard Hagar's answer, the angel of the LORD now gives Hagar direction. In vs. 9-10 the angel states: "Return to your mistress and submit to her. I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." The angel of the LORD calls her to stop and repent...to turn around...to turn back and resume her role as Sarai's servant. It's a hard demand knowing that Sarai has been treating Hagar harshly, but God clearly has a plan that requires her longsuffering for a time. That plan includes a countless number of descendants, but Hagar must return if that plan is to be fulfilled.

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<sup>3</sup> Waltke, 254.

Church, let this confrontation inform your own life. We are often quick to run away from our problems and the difficult assignments that we have been given in life. We are sometimes mistreated or forced to endure a season of injustice or unfair treatment. I have been enduring such a season myself. I've tried very hard to do what is right in holding a certain leader in our city accountable, but my efforts have been interpreted in a way that has led to conflict and accusations. It has been a frustrating and painful situation for me. We all find ourselves in these situations from time to time, and we feel very justified in running away. But remember this story. God pursues Hagar and tells her to turn around, to enter back into the hardship, because God has a plan that will redeem her suffering. Repentance is required, endurance is necessary, but God has a plan for our good...this is a consistent truth in our lives. Even in the midst of affliction, God has not turned away from Hagar...and God has not turned away from you.

As we return to the angel's pronouncement, we encounter a strangely familiar declaration that reminds us of Gabriel's conversation with Elizabeth and Mary in the NT. In vs. 11-12 the angel declares:

"Behold, you are pregnant  
and shall bear a son.  
You shall call his name Ishmael,  
because the Lord has listened to your affliction.  
12 He shall be a wild donkey of a man  
his hand against everyone  
and everyone's hand against him,  
and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

Again, we must note that Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden, is the first woman to receive a birth pronouncement and the first woman to receive a promise from God in the biblical narrative. We truly cannot overestimate the significance of this moment. Hagar is the non-elect wife of Abram. She will give birth to the non-elect son of Abram. And yet, God is faithful to Hagar and her son because of His promises to Abram. Those who bless Abram will be blessed by God. Hagar blessed Abram by bearing him a son. Even though that son was conceived as an act of Sarai's synergism, Hagar had no culpability in that decision. Hagar bears the son of God's chosen servant, Abram; and God will honor His promise to bless Hagar and her son.

Now, that said, the strong-willed obstinance of Hagar will be passed down to her son who is to be named Ishmael. The name Ishmael means, "God hears." The boy's name reveals that God heard the cry of Hagar's affliction in the wilderness, and God responded with grace. But God's graceful response will not keep Ishmael from becoming a man who wreaks havoc. In fact, the angel predicts that "he shall be a wild donkey of a man..." Now, most of us have no concept of a 'wild donkey,' but the ancients would have immediately thought of the ancient onager (show pic). The onager was a wild donkey which roamed the wilderness of the ancient Near East. Waltke writes: The fearless and fleet-footed Syrian onager is a metaphor for an individualistic lifestyle untrammelled by social convention. Ishmael is not a child in whose seed the nations will be blessed; his blessing will be away from the land of promise, living by his own resources.<sup>4</sup>

According to the angel, Ishmael's hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him, and he will dwell over against all his kinsmen. Later in Genesis 25 we will see that

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke, 255.

this prediction comes to pass, and world history even to this day will affirm the words spoken here in Genesis 16. We'll come back to that observation at another time.

Now, as the narrative wraps up, we come to the most intriguing response of Hagar in vs. 13: So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me."

Just so you know, the translation of the Hebrew to English is tricky here. That said, most scholars agree that Hagar names the LORD, "You are a God of seeing" or "You are a God who sees me." Again, note that Hagar is the only person in the entire Bible who confers a name upon God! This woman is extraordinary! And note the profound name that she confers upon God: You are a God who sees me. How significant is that?

Every human soul longs to be seen. We want to count. We want to be appreciated for who we are. We are so desperate for affirmation and significance, and this is particularly true for those of us who feel very small in the world. Yet this is Hagar's confession: God is a God who sees the weak and the afflicted. God sees those who are on the margins, those who are alone, those who are the outcasts. God hears their cries, and God sees them in their affliction.

Church, this is good news for us all, amen?

Hagar is amazed that she has been blessed to see the One who sees her. This encounter will change her life forever, and her experience at the spring near Shur will be remembered in the name of the well in that region—a name meaning, "belonging to the living one, my seeing one."

The story concludes in vss. 15-16: 15 And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

So significant was Hagar's encounter with the LORD that she comes back a changed woman. Her conviction, along with her humility, is noted by Abram. Abram recognizes that Hagar had an encounter with the same LORD who had revealed Himself in the Covenant of the Pieces. So, Abram agrees to name his son, Ishmael. We will come back to Hagar and Ismael later in the narrative, but for now, we have one last question to ask before we close.

What are we to make of this "angel of the LORD" who speaks as God and yet appears to Hagar as an angel? In most angelic appearances, the angel serves as a messenger from God. But in this account in Genesis 16, the angel speaks as God. Remember He states, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." These words sound almost identical to the words God spoke to Abram about his descendants.

Many believe the angel of the LORD here in Genesis 16 is, in fact, the pre-incarnate second person of the trinity—the Son of God, who comes to Hagar in her affliction as One sent from

God who speaks as God. He is One who understands affliction. He is One who draws close to the brokenhearted.

Church, as we enter into Holy Week, let us give thanks that our God draws close to the brokenhearted. As we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem, humble and seated on a donkey, never forget that He did not come to claim His Kingship. He came to give His life as a sacrifice for those exiled and cast out due to the cancer of sin. Our Lord still sees us, and He hears us in our affliction. He is the God who sees, and through His death and resurrection, He will come to us and redeem us...no matter where we find ourselves this morning. Where have you come from? And where are you going? Repent, and turn back to Jesus, that we might receive the blessing of eternal life that Jesus died for us to inherit. Will you pray with me?