

Double Vision  
Genesis 16:1-16  
March 3, 2019  
First Baptist Church, Pottstown  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

There are times I am *sure* I am invisible. The other day I was walking across campus and was nearly plowed over by a student intent on their cell phone; they never saw me (or anyone else for that matter). It was like I didn't exist. That happens frequently enough that I am likely to say, "Must be I forgot to take off my invisibility cloak again" or, when I see it coming, to rapidly, with increasing volume, repeat the phrase, "Look up! Look up! Look UP!" (right before they crash into me) Cars turn in my direction, people knock things from my arms, folks recognize others in conversation but don't seem able to see me! It's frustrating! It's demeaning! And sometimes it's downright dangerous!

When it happened again this week it made me think about this Genesis text, about this amazing story of Hagar, one of my favorites. Now there are lots of things to be said when it comes to the whole saga of Abram, Sari and Hagar, but what catches my attention is how, in chapter 16, for perhaps the first time in her life, Hagar is not invisible! In fact, just the opposite is true: Hagar sees and *is seen*...by none other than the living God!

The chapter begins with Sari, frustrated with her own infertility, giving her foreign slave woman, Hagar, to her husband Abram, to conceive a child. The idea here is that any child of Hagar's is rightfully considered to belong to Sari, given that Hagar is her property. As it turns out, Hagar *does* conceive but suddenly, Sari doesn't feel too good about it. Sari, the wealthy power-holder in the story, feels threatened when the *only* thing the slave woman has is the *one*

things Sarai wants, to have a child. So, the text tells us that after beating her, Sari banishes Hagar, sending her---pregnant, out in the desert presumably to die.

It is there, in the desert, frightened and alone, that the seemingly invisible Hagar is truly *seen*. Beside a stream of water she encounters none other than Yahweh, who appears as an angel, calling her by name and asking, "Where have you come from and where are you going?" When Hagar tells the truth that she's been run off by her owner, God instructs her to return to Sari with the promise that God "will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for the multitude," assuring her of a son (the most valuable of children in that time), Ishmael---meaning "God hears," because she has suffered. In response, Hagar proclaims: "You are El-roi!" The God who sees. And she wonders, "have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing?"

What's remarkable to me about this passage is that God SEES Hagar and equally remarkable is the fact that Hagar SEES God! Of all the people in the universe for God to single out, it's Hagar! God *sees* her.... sees her as an individual, a person, a woman in need. God *sees* her, really sees her...in her poverty, her enslavement, her lack of resources and power. God *sees* Hagar, *really* sees her...in her fear as she waits in the desert, her loneliness, her pregnancy, her despair! God sees this one, this ordinary woman of no cultural regard; God sees her desolation in the dessert and God comes to her, comforts her, and in her poverty of spirit, God gives her hope!

But that's not all! Hagar SEES God! The Hebrew scriptures are pretty adamant that those who see God will perish. In Ex. 33:20 God says to Moses, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." In Judges 6:22 a fearful Gideon begs, "Help me, Lord God! For I have

seen the angel of the Lord face to face!” And later in the same book, Judges 13:22, a man by the name of Manoah says to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.” Mortals aren’t supposed to see God; at least, they aren’t, according to Hebrew scriptures, supposed to see God and *survive*. But just as clearly as God see Hagar, Hagar herself sees God! She not only *sees* God, but she is the very first person, male or female in the Hebrew text, to **name** God! El-roi—the God who sees!

Hagar saw God! She recognizes God in the midst of this vast, deserted place. She acknowledges God’s presence in spite of her fear and deep despair. At a moment when she may have thought that her options had run out, her resources depleted, her life at an end, Hagar has the sense to know that it is *God* who is near, God who is speaking, God who is calling her name! And she is *not afraid*! And she does not doubt herself! Nowhere in the text does it suggest that Hagar is uncertain of whom she is conversing with! Hagar speaks to God and as she does, she sees herself as God’s own. She recognizes that she is cared for by God, loved by God, comforted by God, blessed by God. “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” Ishmael, the very son who becomes the progeniture of the twelve tribes of Islam and who’s his direct descendant is none other than the Prophet Mohammad.

What *is* it that makes us seem invisible to others? What is it that makes us feel invisible to God? I suspect that when it seems like no one around us can see us, it many have something to do with the pace we collectively keep in our daily lives, frantically moving from one place, one responsibility, one thought, one idea, to the next. We get so into our own selves, our own stuff

that sometimes we literally fail to see the people around us, to acknowledge them and appreciate their presence.

Sometimes we are invisible because of our skin color or our age or our gender or our race. Studies show that *three* is the critical number of women who need to sit on an executive board before any of the men around the table will take any and all of the women in the room seriously. It's startlingly sad, but true. We make invisible those who disturb us—the poor, the mentally ill, those without homes. I am convinced this happens, not because they are so *different* from us, but because they are *so much like us* that it scares us. Who and what do we not want to see? The Hagar's of the world are troubling to look at. And so, we make them invisible, hoping that they will not hold up the mirror to us so that we must see them and in doing so, see our own true selves.

And what about our vision when it comes to seeing God? I have asked you on a pretty regular basis: where have you seen God this week? Can you name a time and place? Do you ask yourself that regularly? All too often we fail to recognize the very face of God in the people we pass on the street, the ones who share our dinner table, or sit in our classrooms, occupy the next cubicle, or worship by our sides. All too often we miss seeing God in the incredible beauty of the world around us or in the touch of a hand upon our own. Teri Hoffman emailed me Friday to say, "God is showing up. I started making a list of blessings in all of this," referring to the trauma of Lloyd's recent stroke. Hagar possessed a spirit that was undoubtedly on the lookout for God; she was wise enough, like Teri, not only to recognize, but to name the presence of God in her midst.

The story of Hagar reminds us that God does indeed see us; that God reaches out to us and offers us comfort in the desert moments of our lives. In those time when you are sure you are all alone, that no one sees you, that no one cares, remember Hagar: God see us and call us by name, blessing each one of us with promise and hope!

Hagar also reminds us that we can see God—if we are attentive, if we are on the look out, if we share the spiritual wisdom to recognize God’s face in those around us. And more than that, Hagar reminds us that we will not only see God, but we will see God and LIVE! Live with strength and hope! Live with promise and expectation! Live in a way that not only allows us to confront our past but to envision an entirely new future, a future filled with the wonder and grace and mercy of God.

Next time you are feeling invisible to those around you, stop to make sure your own vision is clear. Look carefully at the people around you, at the world in which we live....and with the wise confidence of Hagar, see, really see.... Chances are that you will hear your own name being called, even in the wilderness, and that *you too* will come face to face with God.