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Genesis 16

A Messy, True-To-Real-Life-Kind-of-Book

– *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller

I. What the Story is Not Saying

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- Jesus teaches us to treat others the way we would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12). How could abusive behavior or slavery continue if we take that seriously?
- Paul's words about Philemon receiving his runaway slave, Onesimus, back as a brother was essentially revealing the incompatibility of slavery with the gospel (Philippians 1:16).
- Paul lists "slave traders" among those who are lawbreakers and rebels in 1 Timothy 1:9.
- The early church father, Gregory of Nyssa, a pastor/theologian in the 4th century, forcefully argues that slavery is theologically absurd; because slaveholding involves buying and selling human beings – those who are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27).

So Gregory asks what price could possibly be placed on a person made in God's image. "How many coins did you pay for the image of God? How much money did you count out for the nature formed by God?"

– Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, Homily 4, on Ecclesiastes 2:7, c. 380s AD.

That question exposes the absurdity of the slave market. A slave sale pretends that a human life can be priced. No amount of money can equal that.

- When Jesus talks about marriage, he points back to Genesis 2, where God's design is one man and one woman, in an exclusive relationship (Matthew 19). Not polygamy; not multiple wives as we see with Abram taking Hagar as a surrogate.

Reading the Bible isn't like reading Aesop's Fables, where every story has a clear moral lesson.

Abram and Sarai are, if anything, an example of what not to do. The characters in the Bible, even those noted for their faith in other places, are deeply flawed, and get things horribly wrong at times. Which is one of the reasons we can relate to this book. It is true to life.

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There is only one true “Hero” in this whole story – the God who is revealed through the pages and seen most clearly when he comes to the world, to bring healing, salvation and life. We see the one true God most clearly in the face of Jesus.

II. God of the “Outsider”

Abram and Sarai using “othering” language, only referring to Hagar, not by her name but only by her status as “my slave” and “your slave.”

Yet the narrator consistently calls her by name – calls her Hagar.

And the angel of the Lord – a way of speaking of how the Lord God himself shows up to people in the Old Testament – consistently refers to her by her name. This signals that she is to be seen as fully human. Dignified. Worthy of respect.

As a great article from the Bible Project Scholarship team notes:

“Hagar is an *other*—even her name suggests as much. It’s a wordplay on the Hebrew word *hagger*, which means “the foreigner.” However, Hagar is no foreigner to God, and God blesses her in the wilderness twice!God sees in Hagar what Abraham and Sarah never could. And not only does God help Hagar and Ishmael survive, but he also promises them a beautiful future.

Hagar’s story is one of many in Scripture that show God blessing both “us” and “them,” dissolving our human categories and suggesting that we are one humanity, mutually loved by God.”

– Bible Project Scholarship team, What Hagar and Ishmael’s Story Reveals About God’s Purposes

Luke’s Gospel pays close attention to Jesus’ heart for those who are on the margins – for women, for outsiders, for those that the buttoned-down religious types might feel superiority over.

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The central verse of Luke's Gospel: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." – Luke 19:10

Jesus' mission is to "seek and to save the lost." This is what he does in Hagar's story. And in Zaccheaus' story. And in yours and mine.

III. The God Who Sees Me

"She gave this name to the Lord [Yahweh] who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," [El-Roi] for she said, "I have seen the One who sees me." – Genesis 16:13

In Jewish understanding, no one can "see God" and live. And yet, somehow, she survives this interaction.

The fact that the Lord seeks out Hagar, in her distress; finds her. Blesses her. Provides for her, even if it doesn't look ideal – directing her to return and submit to Sarai as her master – all of it demonstrates God's compassion toward someone who was utterly vulnerable and helpless in her situation.

"This story is not a blueprint for how to counsel survivors or a command to endure abuse "for the greater good." It's ancient meditation literature that refuses to sanitize the brokenness of human systems or the harm that God's chosen people create."

– The Bible Project scholarship team

- Hagar being sent back to Sarai to "submit" to her, is more of a reprimand on Sarai and Abram than anything else. The angel of the LORD is seeing to it that she cared for and undoing the damage that Abram and Sarai have done. Being seen by God means Hagar is cared for.
- The very existence of this story is itself a testament that Hagar is seen. God's hand has seen to it that we too see Hagar in the pages of scripture, standing shoulder to shoulder with the heroes and prophets.
- God taking on the name she gives, *El-Roi*, means that anyone who feels like an outsider; is rejected, alone, we too are seen.

1. We Are All Seen by God

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Psalm 139 reflects this so helpfully.

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.

²You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.

⁵You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

If you feel unseen; feel like your life isn't
"acknowledged", or that no one is looking out for you,
caring for you – God sees it all. Like, Hagar, our God –
Yahweh – most perfectly revealed to us in Jesus – God
the Son – he is the one who seeks you out, finds you,
sees you, knows you, cares for you.

African Americans who were enslaved in America in the
1800's could sing; "*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen;
nobody knows but Jesus. Glory, hallelujah.*" Why praise
God – why "Hallelujah"? Because to be seen by Jesus is
to know you are loved by the God who calls the stars
out by name; is to know that God will take care of us.

2. Our Need to Be Seen Can Send Us Searching

God's nature as *El-Roi*, the God who sees me, means we
don't need to seek validation in unhealthy ways – to go
fishing for people to pump me up, on social media, or
anywhere.

The God who meets Hagar, the One she names as *El-
Roi*, we discover is the same God who has loved me all
the way to the grave and back. He sees me, and knows
me, and loves me through and through; in both my
successes and failures.

3. “Seeing Others” and Our Mission

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The church, all those who’ve trusting in Jesus’ saving work – we are sent on mission with God. Now, we too, in the power of the Spirit, are to seek out, and see, and welcome those who are excluded, the vulnerable, those often left out in our world. To be a community of welcome and hope. A home.

We are called to show hospitality, beyond simply our friends (see Luke 14:14).

In Hebrews 13 we read: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” – Hebrews 13:2

The word used in the New Testament for hospitality is *philoxenia*.

Xeno means “stranger”, someone who is unknown. The “other”. The Hagar’s of this world. And *philia*, it means love. “Love of the stranger.”

Unlike Abram and Sarai who don’t see the image of God in Hagar, and don’t treat her as such, we are to look at each person and really “see them” as God sees them.

Hospitality isn’t just about invites into our home. It’s a whole way of being in the world. It’s about adopting a rich generosity of spirit toward others.

When we know God as *El-Roi*, know that we’re loved, that we’re seen, we can get on with loving others in ways that just isn’t about us – that is rooted in the deep security of knowing we are loved.

- We don’t have to worry about being validated because in Jesus, we are already seen and loved. In the community of God, we already are.
- We show hospitality to each other, starts as simple as making eye contact and saying “Hi”. This recognition, literally just “seeing” another, and saying so, is an important first step in recognizing the humanity in another.

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- “Seeing someone,” also means offering real encouragement. This is not based on complimenting someone on their external qualities – their looks, their intelligence and the like – but on their choices and efforts, especially when things don’t work out. “I noticed, I saw, how much effort you put into that science project you just handed in. I know you weren’t super happy with how the poster turned out, but you worked hard and you learned a lot in the process. You were developing and demonstrating tenacity, that “stick-to-it” attitude. I’m really proud of you for that.”
- With our spouse it might be as simple as, “I noticed you did the dishes, or tidied that bit of the house, or made an extra effort to listen to one of our kids – thank you. I saw your efforts.”

As the Psalmist says of God: “*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb...*” and “*Your eyes saw my unformed body;*” – Psalm 139:13; 16a.

The God who formed you, sees you. All of you, all your life. Not a moment when he hasn’t. And being “seen” isn’t just being “observed,” but being acknowledged; valued; cared for. And that is most perfectly expressed in Jesus, who came to “seek and to save what was lost.” Like Hagar. Like me. Like you.

the name



Personal Reflection

1. Consider Hagar. She had many reasons to feel rejected, alone, afraid. How do you think her interaction with the God who “sees” her change her experience?
2. Read through and consider the Psalmist’s reflections in **Psalm 139**.
 - The God who formed you, sees you. All of you, all your life. Not a moment when he hasn’t. Being “seen” isn’t just being “observed,” but being acknowledged; valued; cared for. And that is most perfectly expressed in Jesus, who came to “seek and to save what was lost.” How would relating to God like the Psalmist, or using Hagar’s name *El-Roi*, how might that give you courage in the areas God has called you to this week?
3. Consider a time when you felt “seen” by someone? What was it like? Where can you offer that same kind of encouragement or acknowledgement to someone this week?

Prayer

Take some time to give thanks to God that he sees. Ask that you would become more and more aware of that in your daily life. Ask God for help to “see” and acknowledge others.

REFLECTION