

“Where have you come from, and where are you going?”

Genesis 15:1-15; 21:8-20

What do you think is said around this place more than anything else?

If you walked around here 7 days a week listening, what do you think you would hear more than anything else?

In the gyms, in the pools, on the sports teams that play and practice on our 116th Street campus and elsewhere, what would we hear more than anything else?

Here’s my guess. I think what we would hear is fundamentally two things:

- “Look at me!”
- “Good job!”

Whether that’s 3 year-olds learning the basics of tumbling, 10 year-olds playing basketball, or adults learning martial arts or playing high-speed badminton in this space an hour from now, I think what you would hear falls along two lines:

- “Watch me!”
- “Atta boy! Great shot! Way to go!”

You and I have been hard-wired by God with a longing to hear and know two things:

- I see you.
- You matter.

I think of those of you who serve in yChurch’s kids’ ministry. As you welcome kids and have fun with them and show them the love of God found in Jesus, this is what they catch:

- That teacher sees me.
- I matter to them.

And through you, they discover that God sees them, and that they matter to God.

Art Blakey did that for me. I was about ten when my Dad introduced me to Mr. Blakey. He was probably in his 70s. I noticed age spots on his hands and his thinning hair. But what stood out about Mr. Blakey is that he paid attention to me. He asked questions and learned that I loved God, that I wanted to serve him. So Mr. Blakey purchased a little pocket devotional book for me, a book of prayers. Inside the front cover he wrote a dedication. All these years later, I still remember how it was signed. He wrote of Jesus, “Son of God, Son of Man, your friend and mine,” and then signed it, “Art Blakey.” Not Mr. Blakey, but Art Blakey. Through that attention and a personalized gift that pointed me to Jesus, I felt two things:

- I was heard.
- And I mattered—not just to a guy I didn’t know well, but more importantly, that I mattered to God.

I posted an article online this week from Britain’s The Guardian. You can find it in my feed. It goes into detail on a nationwide study released last year which reported almost 1 of every 5

British adults feel lonely always or often. The number of adults that represents is so large that if all those who report they're always or often lonely came together in one place, they would fill more than the entire city of London. The report so alarmed the government that they appointed a "minister of loneliness." What a vast job!

People universally yearn to know:

- I am seen.
- I matter.

The people we come to in the Bible today play that out in real time for us. Their stories are found in Genesis chapters 16 & 21. They are a classic example of how the narrative passages in the Bible aren't sugar-coated. They don't portray a pie-in-the-sky fake religion. They often don't even display what God wants, taken one story at a time.

What they do give us is authenticity. And boy, are you about to hear some authenticity. The Bible matches reality—including the reality that sometimes, you aren't seen. Sometimes, you feel like you don't matter because of being treated horribly.

Open your Bibles with me to Genesis chapter 16.

The passage here concerns Abram, the greatest patriarch of Judaism, later renamed Abraham by God.

It shows the nasty competition that comes with polygamy.

It shows the foolishness of trying to solve problems on our own instead of following God's wisdom.

It includes nasty details of the kinds of injustice slaves experienced.

There is zero whitewashing of anything. It just tells it like it was.

Genesis 16:1-15, we read...

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

6 "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

7 The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

9 Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

11 The angel of the Lord also said to her:

*“You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to a son.
You shall name him Ishmael [which means God hears],
for the Lord has heard of your misery.
12 He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone’s hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers.”*

13 She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

*15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.
16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.*

It’s a shocking story! The woman we meet here is an immigrant, a slave, forced into marriage as a second wife merely to bear offspring, and then abused by the very woman who proposed she become the second wife. It’s a series of abuses.

Hagar is in a very real sense...invisible. She has no rights, no freedom, no respect, no affection. When Abram and Sarai refer to Hagar, no name is mentioned. Hagar is merely “my slave,” “her Egyptian slave,” “her slave.” Unseen.

A Polish cultural anthropologist observed interactions in contemporary America and concluded that we tend to treat people one of three ways:

- People people
- Machine people
- Landscape

People people is how you hopefully treat your dearest friend. How you treat your parents, how you treat your spouse if married, your children if you’re a parent. People people: I see you. And you matter. You matter to me.

Then there are what this anthropologist coined machine people. We interact with them only as far as we must, for the function they are there to perform for us.

The disembodied employee coming through the drive-through speaker.

The Kroger cashier or bagger.

Machine people. I don’t know anything about them, and I don’t want to know. Just do your job. Don’t take my time or attention or effort. I don’t really see you. All you matter is for that limited function you perform for me.

That was Hagar to Abram and Sarai. Slave. Surrogate mother with no say in the matter. Other than that, unseen. Didn’t matter.

And then third in the American way of seeing people or not, is what this anthropologist coined as landscape. The custodian who empties trash in your office, waxes the floor, vacuums the carpet. The unseen trash hauler who takes your weekly garbage away. The nobody knows who treats

your lawn a few times a growing season. They just blend into the background. Landscape.

Hagar was treated like a machine person. They definitely didn't treat her as people people, an individual by name, with value as a person. She was there to serve a purpose.

The turning point amidst the dust storm of Hagar's experience comes when God reveals through his angel that he hears her: she is to name her child Ishmael, which means "God hears," because God has heard of her misery.

And in turn Hagar calls him in Hebrew, El Roi, "the God who sees."

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi..

Genesis 16:13-14

The Hebrew Beer Lahai Roi means "well of the Living One who sees me."

Given all that this woman had gone through and was yet to go through, what made the greatest difference; what gave her hope...was discovering that God saw her. God came to her in the remotest, most desolate place, to show and tell this nobody from nowhere, treated like nothing...

- I see you.
- You matter.

He is the God who sees. The Living One who sees you.

Hagar ends up having one of the longest conversations of anyone in the OT with God. And it all centers on God coming to someone who is unseen and doesn't seem to matter, to correct that. To give her a place, and a purpose. A sense of belonging and of value in God's sight. He had seen and heard it all. And he cared.

Someone has made this shrewd observation: "You don't really understand human nature unless you know why a child on a merry-go-round will wave at his parents every time around—and why his parents will always wave back."

Why is that? Because we—all of us—yearn to be seen. To matter. The gospel, the good news of Jesus, is that God sees you, and you matter so much to God, that he became one of us. He talked the talk and walked the walk to show in the flesh what the angel of the Lord spoke here to Hagar. Every interaction of Jesus with everyday people was aimed at convincing us as God of this truth:

- I see you.
- You matter to me.

This is why we started the worship celebration this morning with Psalm 139. It includes lines like these:

"You know me, Lord. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. Where can I flee from your presence? [And then speaking even of you when you were still in your mother's womb, the psalm sings...] Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

The God who saw Hagar, the Living One who saw her, sees you. You matter to him.

Flip ahead with me to Genesis chapter 21. Hagar's son is born, his name "God hears," reminds Hagar every time she calls him that God does hear her. Even while things continue to be horrible, God sees. He hears. And she matters. We pick up her story in Genesis 21:8-20, where we read...

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob.

17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.

18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.

You see that nothing has changed in Hagar's circumstances. She is still, to her owners, machine people: "*that slave woman; that woman.*" But she is also, still to God, seen. Heard. And she matters.

When Hagar is at her absolute lowest—out of water in the vastness of the dry desert, abandoning her child to die alone because she can't bear to see his suffering, sobbing with grief—even there God sees her, hears her, and intervenes for her. He is still the Living One who sees.

And what God was for Hagar and her son, he is still today, for you. Most of the time, like Hagar, you don't sense God seeing you and hearing you. Stuff happens today just as it did to Hagar, all kinds of injustice, unfairness, and outright malice. The calendar has changed, but human experience remains the same.

And so we look not just to this passage in Genesis, but also ahead to Jesus. It was Jesus who clearly declared...

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." John 14:9

It is life-changing to go into each day knowing that the Living God sees you.

- He sees you in whatever you go through.

- And you matter to him.

The disciples went to find food one day while Jesus sat on a well and talked to a Samaritan woman. They must have passed her coming to the well as they went to the town and they missed her. To them she was landscape. Not even machine people. When they got back Jesus said, "Look at the fields. They are ripe to harvest."

What he meant was, "Open your eyes and look right here, at this woman! You saw her, but you didn't really see her. To you she doesn't matter. But she does. Pry your eyes open and look. See as I do, the Living One who sees her. Those you treat like landscape, those you interact with only as machine people, see them as people people."

When you scan through the gospel narratives of how Jesus dealt with people, what you find again and again is that his interactions sent two messages:

- I see you.
- You matter.

Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a glimpse at Jesus coming by. Jesus does better. He stops, looks up, and invites himself to dinner. "I see you, Zacchaeus. You matter."

Traitor Levi sits at his tax collecting table, despised by his countrymen as he rakes in profit at their expense, under Rome's protection. Jesus makes his way straight to Levi's table and calls, "Follow me." In essence saying, "I see you. You matter."

On and on it goes: people who were sick and lame, others who had been rejected or who were seeking God's touch, Jesus leaves them feeling and knowing:

- God sees me.
- I matter to him.

When the final "Amen" is spoken this morning and we start stacking chairs and then enjoy fellowship over coffee;

As you drive home or to lunch from here;

When you lay your head on the pillow tonight and when you get up tomorrow morning;

When you carry out the largely unseen responsibilities of parenting or managing money wisely;

In each interaction, each day, the Living God sees you. You matter.

Moving that to concrete terms here and now, God's message through Christ's Church is that:

- We see you.
- You matter to us.

You really do.

Hagar didn't know what she needed most. All she knew was that she was miserable and in pain. It wasn't until El Roi made himself known to her, that she found what she needed to lock in on. It was what you need, in order to press on through whatever challenges come:

- God sees you.
- And you matter.

If you ever question that, revisit Jesus, and the “angel-of-the-Lord-toward-Hagar” ways he dealt with everyday people just like you. Then if you still wonder whether God sees you or you matter to him, revisit the cross, and the empty tomb. On the cross, God takes away your sin, and says in awesome love, “I see you.” Then through the empty tomb, empty because our final enemy death has been defeated, God declares, “You matter. You matter to me.”

Praise God, he is the Living God who sees you!