

[Genesis 21:8-21](#) • [Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#) • [Romans 6:1b-11](#) • [Matthew 10:24-39](#)

*O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your lovingkindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

### **The God Who Sees; the God Who Calls Us to See**

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures today begins with a party — with a great feast. Sarah, despite being quite old, has become pregnant and had a baby boy — just as the strange visitors who appeared from the desert a few years ago had promised. And Sarah named the little boy “Isaac”, which means “laughter”, because she remembered how she had laughed at the thought of bearing a son at her age. And now the family of Abraham is having a party! The adults are sitting around, eating and drinking, and the children are playing together. Just like any party you or I might go to, today.

I have a very clear memory of my mother preparing for birthday parties when I was growing up. Now, my mom studied food economies in college; she drove a tractor and planted vegetables and followed a chicken from egg to tasty, tasty dinner. And she fed us really healthy food. Brown bread, lots of fruits and veggies, everything from scratch. But for a party she would buy a cake. With frosting. Whipped, white, butter-cream frosting with big, colored roses. Which I loved. Which, to

be honest, I still love! But my sisters and I would argue over who got the most frosting on our slice of cake - a corner, or just an edge? A rose? Or just a rosette? So mom developed a strategy. When she went to the bakery, she would order a ROUND cake, and instructed the bakery to make the roses all the same size. This was her strategy for sharing the riches of the party, and minimizing conflict between us children.

But there is not a cake-sharing strategy unfolding at the feast for Isaac's weaning. Instead, there is an undercurrent of tension. Sarah sees her adopted son, Ishmael, playing with Isaac, the son she carried, and she becomes afraid - afraid that Abraham will not love the younger one the way he loves his firstborn; afraid Abraham will not give Isaac the inheritance she believes he deserves, because he also loves Ishmael.

Sarah sees Ishmael growing older, and instead of seeing a beloved, caring older brother who is part of the family, she sees a threat. She sees someone who will compete with her own child for a good preschool, for a good college, for a good job, for a house in a good neighborhood, for a secure retirement. Sarah, for whatever reason, doesn't think there can be enough for both of them, that there can be enough for everyone, that they can both be safe, that they can live together.

Sarah becomes afraid. And in that fear Sarah forgets her blessing and her belovedness; she loses her trust in God and in her husband. And in response to that fear, she uses her power — she uses her privilege— and insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away.

Sarah is a complicated Biblical figure, as are they all, really. As a woman, she is essentially Abraham's property, and must obey his orders. And she has done so, leaving a comfortable life in a rich family in one of the great cities of the ancient world to travel for years through desert wilderness. She's pretended to be his sister to save their lives; she's been nearly married off to other powerful men. She's also followed her husband's strange beliefs: he says there is only one God and insists that this God is going to make their family a great nation, despite her being unable to have children, which gives her great shame and anxiety.

Conversely, as Abraham's wife, Sarah also has power in their tribal society. She can command the household, and her servants and slaves. Some years ago, Sarah had used her power and resources to get what she wanted, what she thought Abraham would want, what she thought *God* would want. Sarah had seen a way to give Abraham a son, so that God's promise could be fulfilled - and she could help make it happen! This story unfolds in Chapter 16 of Genesis. Sarah had a slave-girl from Egypt, named Hagar, who was young enough to have children. And so Sarah told Abraham to have a child with Hagar: Hagar who could not say "no"; Hagar who herself saw having Abraham's child as a way to be safe and secure.

But after Sarah made this decision, Hagar was excited and proud, and Sarah was jealous and ashamed. And Sarah wanted those feelings to go away. She wanted Hagar to go away! So she was harsh with Hagar, and Hagar fled to the desert. There, in the desert, the angel of God comes to Hagar, and comforts her, promising her a son and many descendants. And in that encounter, something amazing happens, something that

happens nowhere else in the scripture — Hagar gives a name to God. Hagar calls God “El-Ro’i”, which means “the God who sees me.”

Our reading this morning finds Hagar in the desert again, alone again, driven away again. Sarah, out of her fear and distress, has used her privilege to arrange the world in a way that makes sense to her, that keeps her safe, that makes sure that she and her child have everything they need. That centers her story, and erases Hagar from the story of Abraham.

And Hagar, the slave, is apart, and alone again, deprived of home and safety, weeping as she waits for her son to die. This story is achingly, appallingly familiar, if only we, too, would see. Mothers I met in El Salvador, who sent their children north to escape gang violence. Mothers whose children are in jail, and mothers who mourn - like the mothers of Eric Garner and Breonna Taylor and Philando Castile and George Floyd.

It would be easy, right now, to move on quickly to the next part of the story, the part that feels like the happy ending, the part where the angel shows Hagar the spring of water, and she drinks, and the boy drinks, and they live. Wouldn't a happy ending – to anything — feel good right now? An end to the pandemic, and the shelter-in-place, and the fear, and the grief? Even just an end to the inconvenience of masks, and of never touching? Or how about an end to the protests? Or, more deeply, to the need for protest? And end to racism, inequality, injustice, police violence, an end to anger and fear?

But it is not yet time for the happy ending. We are still in the thick of the story, and we cannot know how it will end. We are watching Isaac and Ishmael play, and imagining the future. What do we see? Can we imagine another way forward? Might the brothers, instead, grow up together? Can we create a world that is safe for both of them?

Hagar called the God she met at the spring in the desert “The One Who Sees.” God saw her isolation and despair, and responded. We, too, as a nation, have seen a great deal these past weeks and months. Stuck at home, anxiously checking the news, we’ve somehow been confronted in new ways with stories and struggles that have always been there, if we’d only been willing to see them.

Our country has always had economic inequality; the pandemic just made it more visible. Police have always gotten away with killing people of color; cell phone videos and social media have just made it more visible. What feels overwhelming and new to people like me, who have had the privilege of not seeing — has been the constant, unavoidable, exhausting, grievous reality of far too many people in our communities and in our nation, people who are suddenly “essential” who for so long have gone unseen.

But now is a time for seeing. Now, in the thick of the stories that fills our screens, demanding our vision. Now in our own, particular chapter of an ancient, recurring story — a story about how people with privilege make choices, and how God responds to the cries of the weak and oppressed.

It is time for us to see as God sees, to respond, as God responds. To imagine a future where Isaac and Ishmael do not grow up divided, kept apart by their parents' fear and anger. To imagine a world where there is enough, and God cares for all.

We are all, right now, in the midst of a powerful story, and we cannot know its end. But our children are playing together, and we can shape their future towards the beloved community of God. Here, at the feast — here, wondering what comes next for our families, for our community, and for our nation — what do you see?