

BETTER THAN X-RAY VISION Genesis 16:7-16

I have mentioned that we had a terrific experience of having an aerial tour of some of the islands of Hawaii as our son-in-law, Michael, flew us around. The trip did have a disappointing moment for me though. Not long after we took off, as we were several hundred feet in the air, Michael said, “Oh, look! See the turtles down there in the water?” I didn’t see any turtles. I told myself I must have been looking in the wrong place. Yes, that’s right, I just didn’t know where to look for them, even though he pointed out where they were. I refuse to admit the other possible explanation. I couldn’t see them because my vision is not good enough. Michael has fighter pilot vision. I have near-sighted old man vision. I have vision about which the eye doctor tells me that there are trade-offs I have to deal with along with some realities. The difference is Michael sees turtles swimming under the surface of the ocean and I am happy to be able to see the ocean.

In the comics Superman supposedly had x-ray vision. Never mind that x-rays actually go all the way through an object, they don’t bounce back to the source so they would not send back anything for the eye to see. It’s just a name for the ability to actually see through solid objects. According to a recent article in *Nature* magazine, scientists are actually working on using visible light to pass through solid objects by employing an adjusted version of adaptive optics so they can actually “see through” solid objects. A team in Paris recently was able to use visible light to create an image of the inner ear of a live mouse.

What a powerful tool “x-ray vision” would be. A friend was telling me about a plumbing leak they figured they had at their house but didn’t know exactly where. They had to hire someone to detect the location of the leak. If he had x-ray vision he could just look through walls and floors and find the leak. That would be great. But there is another kind of vision, an ability to see in a different way, which is more powerful and more important. It is a way of seeing that God possesses. We will encounter this in Genesis 16:7-16.

A MESSENGER FOUND HAGAR

When we left our study of Abram last week we saw that Abram and his wife had cooked up a scheme to help God give them a son. Their scheme involved Abram sleeping with Sarai’s servant, Hagar. When the servant became pregnant, friction broke out between her and her former mistress. Sarai made life so difficult for Hagar that she finally ran away.

Laurie asked me what I was going to be preaching about and when I told her it was about Hagar she said, “Oh yeah, like the pants.” Right, the lady that Haggar pants are named after. Since Hagar ran away, does that mean that she was a *slacker*? Did she have to leave because Sarai had been *cuffing* her around? Is it true that she planned that if her child were a boy that she would name him *Levi*, and if it were a girl she would name her *Polly Esther*?

All right, I'm going to stop now. Hagar, in her desperation, had fled out into a wilderness area. She found a spring where she could get some water and it was there that she had an unusual close encounter. Verse 7 tells us an angel of the Lord showed up. Unfortunately, the word “angel” has a lot of connotations today. People picture beings with wings. There's a new TV show out that features as one of its main characters a guardian angel. The Hebrew word used here literally just meant “messenger,” so this was a messenger from the Lord. But it is interesting to note that verse 13 says, “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are the God who sees me.’” It was the Lord himself who spoke to her and she perceived that it was God. It is because of this that many scholars believe that the messenger who confronted her at that spring was, in fact, a pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

Whether it was Christ or not, it clearly was the Lord appearing in some form. This is a remarkable incident. Very few people throughout history have been confronted by the Lord like this. There are a lot who think God talks to them but we put those people in special hospitals. This incident is even more remarkable when we consider the fact that Hagar was an Egyptian. In other words, she probably did not grow up knowing the one true God. She likely was an idolater. So, it is remarkable to find that God chose to find this woman out in a wilderness area and directly communicate with her.

The Lord asks her where she has come from and where she is going. Do you think he didn't know? Did he just happen to stop at the spring for a drink of water and run into Hagar and say to her, “Hey, what are you doing here?” Maybe he opened by asking her, “Do you come here often?” I feel quite confident in asserting that the Lord knew exactly where she had come from and exactly what she was doing. He came there specifically to confront her, already knowing where she came from and why. So, why did he ask this? My best guess is that he wanted her to verbalize what she was doing. She was running away. He wanted her to admit that because he was about to deal with the situation.

THE MESSENGER GAVE HAGAR A PROMISE

The messenger first told her to go back. That was going to be tough duty for Hagar. She ran away in the first place because life had become so unpleasant there in “Camp Abram.” Running away would not have made that situation any better. Perhaps, it would make Abram more aware of how bad things were for Hagar and perhaps cause him to try to protect her a little bit. But it would not make Sarai any more favorably disposed toward her.

Hagar was facing a difficult situation in the wilderness and a very uncertain future there. But she knew going back would only expose her to more mistreatment. Merely sending Hagar back to face more abuse would have seemed a somewhat heartless, unfeeling response to her situation if that was all the Lord said. But it wasn't. The Lord also gave her good news. He promised that she was going to become the mother of many descendants. There would be too many to count he said. And then he gave her a specific promise about her unborn child. She was going to have a son whom she was to name Ishmael. The name means “God hears,” which God gave as the boy's name because God heard her cries. So, the message to Hagar is that God understands her situation and cares about her.

However, what the Lord went on to say about Ishmael doesn't seem all that reassuring to us today. Verse 12 says he will be a wild donkey of a man. What? A wild donkey? Is that supposed to make me feel better? What is behind door number 2? I have to say if Anna were actually pregnant with a boy and God informed us that he would grow up to be a donkey, I don't think I would be all that happy about it. The donkey image doesn't conjure up for us thoughts of an intelligent and successful person. In our culture a donkey is a symbol of being dull-witted or foolish. Call someone a donkey and it's not a compliment. It went downhill after that. He would be a wild donkey, suggesting a lack of control. The end of verse 12 sums up the next couple of lines about Ishmael when it says that he will live in hostility toward all his brothers. Well, that's just great. He's going to be at war with everybody, even his own brothers. In other words, he's not going to play well with others. That really doesn't sound like the sort of thing that would make a future mom thrilled.

However, it's not as bad as it might sound. First, remember that donkeys were valuable in their culture. They did not have the negative connotations that we give to them. It's also clear from the grammar of the text that the messenger was saying Ishmael would be a *wild* donkey. The Hebrew word used here means “untamed.” In this case, what Hagar would have heard is that he was going to be a valuable being who is free and noble, not humbled by being domesticated and forced to

serve the will of others. Did you notice how the Lord addressed her in verse 8? He calls her “Hagar, slave of Sarai.” You typically see people in the Bible called things like “David, son of Jesse” or “Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah.” They drew their identity from their family. But what was Hagar known for? She was a slave. That was the sum description of her identity. For her, whose whole existence was about being a slave, this news about her future son was extremely good news. He wasn’t going to be a slave. He would be wild and free. No one would own him, no one would tell him what he could or could not do. Really, in today’s terms it would be like God said Ishmael would be free like a soaring eagle.

But what about all of this talk of him being hostile toward even his own brothers? What did it mean that his hand would be against others and their hand would be against him? How was that a good thing? There is some prophetic imagery here for Ishmael’s descendants would live in animosity towards the descendants of Isaac, the future son of Abram and Sarai, and that continues to this day. But there is also an aspect to this description that would have been appealing to Hagar. It meant that he would be free to protect his own rights and strike back at those who struck him. Hagar has lived as a slave and has known oppression. She did not have the freedom to choose her own way and to fight back against those who might have mistreated her. Her only options were to either take the abuse or to run away. She couldn’t fight back or protect herself. But that would not be the case with her son Ishmael. While these descriptions might seem less than appealing to us, to her they would have been good news.

HAGAR REJOICED

We can see how Hagar felt about this message in verses 13 and 14. She was happy about it. She thought this was good news. She did something that no other woman in the Old Testament does. She gave a name to God. She called him, “The God who sees me.” God has a number of names in the Bible. He is Yahweh, the great I am, Elohim, Yahweh Yireh, the God who provides, El Shaddai and the Almighty, to list a few. But for Hagar he was El Roi, meaning, “The God who sees me.” She was nothing more than a runaway Egyptian slave. She was a nobody, an insignificant person on the run all alone out in a desolate wilderness area. There was no reason whatsoever for God to ever take any notice of her at all. And yet God saw her. He heard her cries. He understood her situation and he cared about her.

God did not ignore her nor did he abandon her. He communicated to her that she mattered to him and he pictured for her a future of hope. It was such a dramatic and hopeful encounter that the spring where it occurred was renamed. It was

called *Beer Lahai Roi*, which means, “Well of the living one who sees me.” God is real, he is alive and he even cares about an insignificant runaway slave.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD SEES US

At the end of verse 2 Sarai told her husband Abram, “Go sleep with my maidservant.” Then in verse 5 she says to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms.” Then in verse 6 Abram says to her, “Your servant is in your hands.” Do you notice anything missing in those verses? What I notice is they never refer to Hagar by her name. She is just a servant. She is Hagar the servant.

The message to Hagar was that she was nameless and unimportant. She was merely a servant. She didn't matter in this world. She was not some great person. No one asked whether she would like to sleep with Abram. What she thought didn't matter. When she had a son that baby would be considered the child of her mistress. In effect, they would take her own child from her. That's how little she mattered. Yet, she found out that she mattered to God. The world didn't see her. She was not worthy of any particular notice, especially to people of influence in importance. She was just a servant. Why should God see her? And yet he did. And that holds a great message for us. We long to be seen. Being seen means you matter. Being seen means that you have significance. Being invisible means you don't matter at all, and we hate that.

A couple of weeks ago, one Sunday afternoon when it was really hot at the end of the day, Laurie and I went up to the swimming pool in our neighborhood. We thought we might have the pool to ourselves because late in the day on Sunday many people would be getting ready for Monday and a new week. But as it turned out a couple of our neighbors were there with their kids. One couple have a three year old boy and a young daughter who is nine months old. The boy already knows how to swim. He was excited about showing off his prowess in the pool. His parents, of course, kept a close eye on him. But it wasn't always close enough for him. He would repeatedly interrupt as his mother was talking to one of us, saying, “Mommy, Mommy, look at me! Mommy, look.”

My reaction was that this little boy obviously has a problem of narcissism. Clearly he thinks everyone ought to look at him all the time. No, I didn't think that. That's typical for kids, isn't it? Mommy look at me. They all say it and they say it a lot. It's as if they feel that what they're doing is only validated if Mommy or

Daddy sees. When Mommy or Daddy sees, then it becomes significant, but not until then.

Hillary Price is an internationally-known Christian speaker and author. She tells the story of something that happened at her child's preschool. She was there working in the classroom helping out so that she could be with her child. This particular day she noticed a friend's son whose name was Joshua. Joshua is normally a very active little boy. He can hardly sit still. But this day, for most of the time she was there, he sat quietly, totally focused on the task before him. He was building a rocket out of toilet paper tubes. That task totally consumed him. His mom finally showed up at the preschool to pick him up. She was very late, and she was obviously in a hurry. As soon as she came in Joshua said, "Mommy, look at my rocket!" He said it repeatedly. She didn't even glance at it. She just said, "Hurry up, Joshua, we need to go. I am in a hurry so please stop dawdling." As the mother headed for the door Hillary watched as Joshua's shoulders slumped, the rocket went down and he sadly trudged along behind her. Joshua wanted his mother to see what he had done and enthusiastically proclaim, "That's fantastic, Joshua!" But she didn't see.

Being seen gives us significance and affirms that we are loved and accepted. It says that we matter. Hillary Price goes on to say that when she was 10 years old, one day she went into her room alone and snapped her fingers and said, "Did anyone see that?" She grew up in a home where God was never mentioned. No one ever knew God. And yet she desperately wanted someone to be there, she wanted someone to see. She wanted to know that there is someone who saw her. That day she was disappointed, and from that time on she did not believe that God existed. She says she lived with a terrible feeling of aloneness and insignificance. It wasn't until she came to know God that she finally experienced freedom from that sense of aloneness, emptiness and meaninglessness. She finally found that her life mattered.

One time I was at the meat counter at the grocery store when it was quite busy. There were a lot of people needing help and there was only one guy behind the counter working. The problem at the meat counter is they don't have a line to stand in or a "take a number" system. You just stand there waiting for the employee to help you. Naturally, in that situation I looked around to see who was there before me so I'd know when it was my turn. So, the worker served the three people who preceded me and now it was my turn. Only he didn't help me. He helped someone who got there after me. All right, he's under pressure. He's doing the best he can. Mistakes happen. But after that he helped another person who got there after me.

Now, I'm a little annoyed. When it happened yet again I was more than annoyed. Can't you see me, dude? Or is this intentional? Either way it's bad. Either he has something against me or I'm so unremarkable he can't even see me. What if I stood there and the guy never acknowledged me or helped me? How would that feel? I eventually did get help but it was only because when he went to help yet another person that gracious woman pointed at me and said, "I believe this gentleman was here first." I decided I didn't like that meat counter guy. Being invisible is a painful thing.

But here's the unfortunate truth: I don't matter. I am one of 7 billion people on the planet. Out of that number basically 7 billion have no idea who I am and they don't care who I am. When my life comes to an end they will take absolutely no notice whatsoever. I watched a football game on television recently. Yes, I know you're shocked. It was a college game with 70,000 people at the stadium. They showed an aerial shot of the stadium packed with all those people and it hit me. They're just a mass of human beings. I don't know any of them. They have no significance for me as individuals. Imagine billions of them. They're faceless, just a mass of humanity. And I am just as faceless. No one is going to see me out of thousands, millions, billions of people. Yet God does. God sees us, each one of us. What an amazing truth. It is something only God can do. It's astounding but God sees us, each one of us individually.

There is an old joke about a burglar who breaks into a house one night. He watched this house for some time until he saw the family that lived in it leave for a camping trip. He was confident that the house was empty. That night he broke in to the house through a window and began quietly making his way through the dark home looking for any valuables. Suddenly, he was shocked when he heard a voice say, "I see you and Jesus sees you." He had thought for sure that no one was in that house, but now he was frozen and unsure what to do. Then the voice said again, "I see you and Jesus sees you." Though he was unarmed he thought maybe he could bluff his way out of this situation. He said, "I've got a gun so you'd better back off because I can take care of you, and Jesus can't do a thing about it." But the only response was, "I see you and Jesus sees you." He began to think that was strange. Something was wrong. He turned on his flashlight and shined it in the direction of the voice. The light landed on a bird cage in which there was a parrot. The bird piped up again and said, "I see you and Jesus sees you." The burglar breathed a huge sigh of relief and said, "I don't care what you see, you dumb bird." He then turned to resume his search of the house only to have his flashlight reveal a large Doberman pinscher standing right in his path. The dog bared its teeth as it snarled, then the parrot said, "Sic 'em, Jesus!"

Clearly, being seen by Jesus was not a good thing for that burglar. If God sees us in the sense of “Big Brother is watching,” no one would take comfort in that. It would be horrible if God were closely monitoring every moment, every thought and action of our lives with the goal of forcing compliance on us and punishing every slight misdeed. In fact, that thought is why many people want so desperately for there not to be a God. They hate the idea that he’s always looking over their shoulder because there is a lot in their lives they would like to hide from him. However, God is not like Big Brother watching. For us having him see us is a terrific thing. Jeremiah 24:6 says that God’s eyes watch over his people for good. In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.” The point is that he cares about you. You matter to him. He sees you and watches over you in the sense of caring for you.

Have you ever had a conversation with a parent of a toddler after church? The toddler is running around the room doing whatever toddlers do. You notice that the parent carries on a conversation with you, but his or her eye is always following the child. There is a never-wavering concern for the child’s well-being. That’s how God’s eye is on us.

Perhaps you feel like you don’t matter very much in this world. There may be times when you feel like no one knows what is happening in your life. But God sees you. Think for just a moment about Hagar. She was not God’s chosen instrument in his great plan to rescue the human race. That was Sarai’s role. Hagar was actually a detour. She was in a way just a distraction from the real plan. And yet, God saw her. Her life mattered to him. You may think that you are, at best, a detour or a distraction in God’s plan, but that’s not true. God sees you, and to him, you matter. How much does that wandering toddler matter to the parent you are talking to? More than anything in the world. Just let them lose track of the toddler for a few moments and fear the child is gone. The world comes to an abrupt halt. Nothing matters but finding the child. God cares infinitely more about you than that parent cares about the child.

This should be a huge encouragement for each and every one of us. There is never a moment in our lives when God does not see us. He is not watching us with a critical eye to spot every mistake and failure. He has known since before the foundation of the world about every blemish in our lives. He doesn’t watch us to make sure that we don’t do anything wrong. Jeremiah says he watches us for our

good. We are a little child who says, “Daddy, look! Watch me.” We know our lives have significance because our Daddy watches even before we ask.

GOD WORKS FOR OUR GOOD

God not only sees us, he understands us. He hears the cries of our hearts. God did not merely look at Hagar as she was running away out in the wilderness and tell her what she was doing wrong. He didn't merely chide her for her bad attitude toward her former mistress. He didn't rebuke her for the pride she displayed. He did tell her to go back, but he gave her some great encouragement that would help her do that. God had compassion for her and understood the pain that she experienced. He knew that while she was far from perfect, she had also gone through the dehumanizing hardship of slavery. He saw that hurt of being treated as though she were merely an object.

Jesus, at one point in his life, was going through towns and villages teaching and preaching the good news of the kingdom. Matthew 9:35 says that as he was doing so he was also healing their injuries and their sicknesses. People were flocking to him. But these people did not truly believe in him. Nevertheless, in verse 36 Matthew wrote when he saw the crowds, “He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” How well that describes us. We are harassed and helpless. Flawed, lacking faith, too often not believing and caught up in the pursuit of just taking care of ourselves. And God looks on us with compassion.

His compassion did not stop with just feeling sympathy for Hagar. God gave Hagar a promise of something that gave her strength and hope. Her son would not be a slave. He would be a great man. He would be a free man. He would not be the child of a slave who could be thrown out at any whim of the master or mistress. He would live on his own freely and he would be a strong and would be a leader. What hope that gave her.

One of the most familiar verses in the Old Testament is Jeremiah 29:11. In that verse God tells his people, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” That verse is at times misinterpreted to mean that God will give us something great always, and especially give it to us whenever we want. And that's not what it means. In its historical context it was delivered to people who were suffering in exile and feeling like God had abandoned them. They had been defeated and devastated by the Babylonians. God had not come to the rescue. The prophet told them they were going to spend years in exile. That was a sad and disappointing message for them.

But it was in that context that he then told them that God has plans not to harm them, but to give them hope in the future. The exile would be hard, but there was a point to it that was good, so they could have hope.

So he says the same to us. He is always working to bring about our good. Romans 8:28, a most familiar verse, reminds us that even in our most difficult moments God is working to bring some good out of it for us. The good he brings may not be obvious to us immediately. For the ancient Jewish people it was hard to see the good in being conquered and banished to a foreign land after seeing many of their loved ones killed in the battle. And yet God was working to bring about his good plan. We can see him doing the same thing in the life of that young Egyptian servant girl out in the wilderness.

At every moment of our lives he is working for our good whether we see it or not. This is why Paul told us we walk by faith, not by sight. There have been a number of occasions in my life when things happened that were painful, but now I can look back and see that somehow God was there and has somehow brought good out of it, even in those hard things.

APPLICATION

DON'T LOSE HEART, YOU MATTER TO GOD!

At every moment of your life God sees, he hears, he understands, he cares and he is working for your good. There is never a moment in your life when you are not significant to him. And that is where our real significance comes from.

Laurie and I were talking recently to one of our neighbors who had just returned from a vacation in Europe. He mentioned that one of their favorite parts of their trip was touring the Tuscany region of Italy. One day while they were visiting one particular little village that was especially picturesque they came across a well-known actor. He was by himself except for a guide who was showing him the area. Our neighbor had a brief interaction with him but basically left him alone. They did not tell him they knew who he was or ask to have a picture taken with him. They said they just wanted to respect his privacy. That little story caused me to reflect on the odd nature of us humans. People so often want to be noticed, even to be famous. They go into show business because they have a great desire to perform before an audience. They want to be seen. And yet, once they become famous they want to become invisible. They would like not to be seen.

That is a manifestation of what happens when we try to ground our significance in fame or the recognition or approval from other people. Our efforts do not provide the fulfillment, peace and satisfaction that we thought they would. In fact, they have a negative effect, bringing with them results that we do not like.

But what peace we can find when we know that we are never abandoned by God, that we matter to him so much that he always sees us. If you ever feel like your life amounts to almost nothing, remember that God sees you and that you matter to him. If you ever find yourself out in the wilderness feeling alone and hopeless, remember that God knows what you feel. He understands it. One big message of the cross is that Jesus knows the worst pain, the worst rejection life can ever dish out. He has lived it. He knows from personal experience how awful it is. And he will never ever abandon you. At every moment of your life, even the lowest ones, he is working for your good, even if you can't see it.

WE MUST SEE OTHERS

The world is full of people who can relate to Hagar. They feel unnoticed, insignificant and hopeless. They don't feel that anyone really sees them. I noticed a commercial for Domino's that features a young woman talking about responses she got from various people when she texted them an emoji of a slice of pizza. All were disappointing except Domino's, who sent her a pizza. She says, "They're the only ones who get me." There are people everywhere who deep down inside feel like no one really "gets" them. In other words, other people don't really see them. In fact, I suspect all of us have felt like that at some point in our lives. Only God can give a sense of being seen that we all desperately need. However, it is surprising to learn that God actually wants to use us in other people's lives. Sometimes he helps them feel seen by using us to see them.

One evening last year when we were on vacation we wandered into a shop that sold women's clothing and jewelry. As soon as we walked in, the shop owner, a vivacious woman, connected with Laurie. She couldn't stop talking about how amazing she thought Laurie is. I had to agree. Though the encounter was brief she seemed to just love Laurie. A few days later we dropped back into that shop again. When we walked in you'd have thought a long-lost loved one had come into the shop. The owner just gushed over Laurie once again and seemed so happy to see her. We learned that she was expecting her first child. After we had been home a few months, Laurie felt she should send a gift for that woman's new child. So she bought a small hat for the baby and mailed it along with a brief note. She told the lady that she prayed for her and her child, and wanted to give the baby a small gift. Last month we went back to that shop. The shop owner was again so very pleased

to see Laurie. In the course of conversation Laurie asked if she received the gift that she had sent her. The woman stopped for just a moment and it was almost like you could see the wheels turning in her head. Then she said, “That gift was from you?” She had received the gift but did not know who was from. When she realized it was from Laurie she started crying. She said she had kept the note that came with the gift because it so touched her. She was overwhelmed that Laurie would do something like that for her. It was a bit unusual. We’re in this store along with other customers and the owner is weeping and saying, “I can’t believe you would do something like this for me.” She said something revealing and sad. She said, “Even my best friend didn’t give me a gift.” Inside that successful woman who has a thriving business and a good and growing family, is a longing to be seen, but even her good friends didn’t see her. She said, “I have to give you something.” Laurie insisted that was not necessary but she was not to be denied. She finally gave Laurie a rather ostentatious ring. Honestly, I was taken aback by the reaction. This woman, who is gregarious in the extreme, was deeply touched because someone thought of her. Laurie saw her, and that had a profound effect on her.

We can’t “see” everyone. Only God can do that. Laurie doesn’t send gifts to everyone she buys something from, which is a relief because otherwise we’d be completely broke. But she listens to the Spirit of God and she “sees” the people he puts on her heart. We can have a big impact in this world by listening to the Spirit of Jesus, and be God's instruments by seeing the people he brings into our lives.