Title: The (In)Visible Woman

Text: Genesis 16

Main Idea: No one is invisible to God

Theological Big Idea: God's immanence

Possible Closing Songs: At the Cross - Hillsongs, You Are Awesome in the Place

Preached at: SBC - SOTE chapel on 4th March 14

Introduction – barren Sarah gives Hagar to Abram

I hate my name. They say that names are supposed to tell the world who a person is. Mine means flight or stranger. Why would any parent want that for their child? But I don’t remember them anyway. They were very poor. I’ve been a handmaid, a slave girl, for as long as I can remember. But at least in Pharaoh’s court, I was with my people. Then I was given to Sarai, I was happy to serve such a beautiful mistress. But when she and Abram left for Canaan, they took me along. I missed Egypt and all the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But what say does a slave girl have in where she will go?

When I first entered their household, I heard so much about The Promise. I loved to listen to the stories they told about the God they served and the Promise he made. Sarai would glow whenever she talked about all the children she was going to have – countless as the stars the sky – and her eyes would sparkle like the stars.

But after we had been in Canaan – the Promise Land – for a sometime, she talked less and less about children. In those ten years, from beautiful, she became bitter. But life was still bearable for me, until she told me that I was going to bear her children. It’s a common practice in these parts – the highest role a slave girl can hope for. But what about the Promise? I didn’t understand, but can a slave girl do? She took me and gave me to Abram as his wife. Abram obeyed; I don’t think she even asked him. What more me, her slave? I was like the fruit in their creation story, the woman took it and gave it to the man and he ate it.

The veiling is supposed to be a happy thing – a change from girl to woman. But when the dark veil came over my face I thought: no one would ever see me again.

Rising Action – Pregnancy and Abuse

But then, I got pregnant. I was finally somebody. Having children is the most important thing a woman can do. I was still a slave, a second wife, but I would be a mother, and secure my place in the family. I was pregnant, Sarai wasn't. I was happy, wouldn’t you be? I knew the child would eventually be hers but for a while at least, he was mine.

Sarai was happy; but not for long. Soon she complained to Abram and blamed him for her suffering. Maybe at times I was proud and insensitive. But afflict suffering? That wasn't me.

I trembled when she told Abram, “May the LORD judge between you and me.” It sounded like a curse. I was relieved that she said it to him and not at me, but that was short-lived. I expected that Abram would restore shalom and protect me: the second wife, mother of his unborn child. But he told her, “Do as you please, she is your handmaid.” He didn’t even look at me and went out of the tent.

That’s when life really became unbearable. I was at Sarai’s beck and call every waking moment. She gave me all the hardest chores. I carried water until my whole body ached. I made bread in the fire until my hands burned. I was so tired. The last straw was when she hit me.

There was no reason for me to stay. I would always be the abused slave. My child would be ripped from me. So for once in my life, I made a choice. In the dark of the night, I fled. I set out for Egypt, my home. There, I wouldn’t be a stranger anymore.

I turned to take one last look at the tewould've I had lived for so long. The tent flap moved. Did someone see me? Or was it just the wind? I didn’t stay to find out but ran as fast as my legs could carry me, as fast as my swollen belly would allow. I finally slowed down when I realised no one came after me. No dogs at my heels and no camels in sight. I was home free!

Climax – Spring & theophany

I know what you’re thinking: If you escaped, why come back? I wish I had an easy answer. But I can only tell you what happened next. There’s only so long a pregnant woman can survive in the desert on her own. Sand, as far as the eye can see. Tired, hungry and most of all, thirsty. The my throat was drier than the desert around me. I didn’t care if I died but my baby must live. I couldn’t go back. Then out of nowhere, there was a spring. I lapped up the water even as streams flowed down my face.

In that place, someone called my name, “Hagar.” I froze. No one had call me by name in a very long time. Was it Abram’s men? I looked up: it was a stranger. Was it a dream? I rubbed my eyes, but he was still here. The stranger knew my name but I was not afraid. He continued, “Servant of Sarai.” He knew who I belonged to. Had I seen him before somewhere? Then he asked where I had come from and where I was going. I told the truth; after all, what could I hide from a strange yet familiar man who already knew so much about me? “I am running away from my mistress, Sarai.” Before I could even tell him I was going to Egypt, he told me to return to Sarai and put myself under her hand. The hand that hit me? Submit? After all she’s done to me? But the words could not come out of my mouth, he spoke again, “I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too numerous to count.” Countless descendents…? That sounded familiar. I couldn’t even respond before he gave me even more promises. He said I would have a son. A son! That I was to name him Ishmael, meaning “God hears”. I couldn’t believe my ears! Then he said that my son would be “a wild donkey of a man”! That may seem strange to you, but my heart rejoiced! I knew that I wouldn’t have to sacrifice my son to Abram and Sarai; a donkey is not an animal for sacrifice. And he would be wild and free, not a slave – he could be everything I couldn’t be.

Falling Action – Realisation & Naming

Then suddenly the pieces fell into place and terror gripped me. This man who was making these promises to me, Hagar, a slave girl, was Abram and Sarai’s God. I, their runaway slave, was surely going to die. But then he looked at me with such intensity that all my fear suddenly melted. I don’t think he said the words out loud but they were impressed on my heart. “I see you.”

For the first time in my life someone actually saw me through the veil, all of me. Not just two hands, two feet and a womb. Not just what I could do. But all that I am and all that I could be. All that I’ve done, all that was done to me. My past and my future. My hopes, my dreams, my fears. I wanted that moment to last forever.

But I blinked and he was gone. So I named the man El Roi – God of Seeing – for he looked at me and I at him and I lived.

Resolution – Return & Birth

So for the second time in my life, I made a choice: I returned. I returned, with a heart full of promises. I returned knowing that the God of Abram and Sarai is also my God, God who sees me. I returned knowing that my son would have a better life than me.

They were surprised when I returned. Abram was even more surprised when I told him that I had seen his God and lived, and that he had named our son, Ishmael, God hears. But they were most shocked when I told them that I had named God, El Roi.

Although El Roi never promised relief from the suffering, I serve Sarai willingly now. I know that by serving her, I serve Him. Every time I hear someone call my son’s name, I smile. Even though it probably means that he’s in trouble again, it always reminds me of my encounter with El Roi – the God who sees and hears.

I suppose that’s the best answer I can give for why I chose to come back. I returned because in the moment of my greatest despair, I encountered the Living God who sees me. He sees. He hears. He knows. He cares. What better way to know more about him than to live with His people?

I still hate my name. It doesn’t fit me anymore. I am no longer a stranger. I have no more desire to flee. I am finally home. I am the Lord’s handmaid. May it be to me as He has said.

Conclusion

I love this story. It is so rich with theology. It’s full of surprises. Genesis 16 is a beautiful picture of God’s care for the marginalised and oppressed. In the ancient near east, Hagar's gender, race and social status meant that she was practically invisible. But despite the concern of Genesis with tracing the chosen line, we get an unlikely digression to one woman’s most intimate encounter with God. God meets her at the spring, (a setting repeated when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well). The promise given to Abram of numerous descendents is made to Hagar too. God is in business of meeting with people culture considers nobodies. El Roi, the God who see, the God of hesed – loving-kindness – reaches down to earth to meet someone in desperate need of his love. No one is invisible to God.

Here in Bible College, it’s easy to let theology remain abstract – to just get by in class and do assignments. But Hagar’s story refuses this tendency. Hagar makes theology deeply personal. Before Genesis 16, Yahweh is described in majestic, sweeping terms, the Creator God, judge over all the earth, Elohim, El Shaddai, the covenant maker. His transcendence and omnipotence is emphasised. But Hagar advances theology by revealing his intimacy, his immanence. The omniscience of God is not just that he knows everything, but that He knows me. It is not merely that God is love, but that God loves me. There have been and probably will be times in your life when the twelve inches between your head and your heart seems so far. Going from “God knows” to “God knows me”. From “God is love” to “God loves me”. It is in those moments, remember Hagar.

Hagar’s deeply personal theology echoes through the rest the Bible. I'm sure she would have approved of King David’s Psalm 139. And that is the thought I want to leave you with today: No matter who you are, where you’ve been, what you’ve done, or what your circumstances are. God sees you. He hears you. He cares for you. He knows you. My prayer is that you will keep that in your heart throughout the day and all the days of your life.

Sing Psalm 139 by Rebecca St James