

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" (Hillsong), "You Are Awesome in the Place"

Preached at Singapore Bible College (School of Theology English) chapel on 4 March 2014 by Marianne Wong

### 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?

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

But after we had been in Canaan – the Promise Land – for some time, she talked less and less about children. In those ten years, from beautiful, she became bitter. But life was still bearable until she told me I would 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 what 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 his opinion. 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 crossed 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 and a second wife, but I would be a mother and secure my

place in the family. I was pregnant, but 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 she said it to him and not at me, but that was short-lived. I expected Abram to 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 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 what I had lived in 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 realized no one was coming after me. There were 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. Only so long can a pregnant woman survive in the desert alone. Sand, as far as the eye can see. Tired, hungry, and, most of all, thirsty. 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 called 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 there. 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; 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 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, and he spoke again, "I will

greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too numerous to count.” Countless descendants...? 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 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 – Realization & Naming

Then, suddenly, the pieces fell into place, and terror gripped me. This man 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 so intensely that all my fear suddenly melted. I don’t think he said the words out loud, but they impressed my heart. “I see you.”

For the first time in my life, someone 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 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 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 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 he’s in trouble again, it 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 return. I returned because I encountered the Living God who saw me in my greatest despair. He sees, he hears, he knows, and 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.

(Hagar exits.)

### Conclusion (by Worship Leader or Pastor)

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 marginalized 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 descendants is made to Hagar, too. God is in the business of meeting with people that culture considers nobodies. El Roi, the God who sees, 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.

The more we learn about God, the easier it is to let theology remain abstract – to get by in your Bible study and serve God without thinking who He is. But Hagar's story refuses this tendency. Hagar makes theology deeply personal. Before Genesis 16, Yahweh is described in majestic, sweeping terms as the Creator God, judge over all the earth, Elohim, El Shaddai, the covenant maker. His transcendence and omnipotence are emphasized. 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 when the twelve inches between your head and your heart seem so far. Go from "God knows" to "God knows me." From "God is love" to "God loves me." It is in those moments that I remember Hagar.

Hagar's deeply personal theology echoes through the rest of 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. I pray you will keep that in your heart throughout the day and your life.

Sing Psalm 139 by Rebecca St James