



Central  
Peninsula  
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*The God Who Sees and Hears Me*

Genesis 16:1–16

Rob Hall

May 10, 2015

*Mother's Day*

I have a love-hate relationship with Mother's Day. I love it because I am blessed with a mom and a mother-in-law whom I adore. I'm also fortunate to be happily married to an amazing woman who is one of the best moms I know. But, today can be hard for many women. I know several women who long to be married and to have children. Several struggle with infertility or have lost a child to miscarriage or stillbirth. Some are estranged from their own mother and never speak to them. Others have recently lost their mom and this once joyful day is a painful reminder of that loss. There are moms who struggle with their own issues when it comes to parenting and Mother's Day just makes them feel guilty. Then of course, on the Peninsula there is this idealistic false image of what a mom should be: the smokin' hot, rich, skinny, have-it-all-together, business executive with perfect kids, boundless energy, and the PTA president. Truth is, it's hard being a woman today. It's even more difficult being a mother.

This is one reason why I love the Bible. It's here where we find honest stories of real women's lives. For those of us who find Mother's Day difficult, the Bible offers encouraging stories of hope for women who live in the real world. This morning we are going to look at two real women and their story is found in the book of Genesis. Genesis 16 is like an ancient soap opera and novella with its main characters—Abram, Sarai and Hagar. Abraham, who is still Abram, is the father of the Jewish nation. He is the well known and well loved patriarch who God promised, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing." This was a promise of both land and descendants.

Sarai and Hagar couldn't be more different. Sarai (it's Sarai not Sarah), like some mothers, will experience the pain of not being able to have a child. Hagar, on the other hand, was an Egyptian slave and Sarai's maid servant. And, like many mothers, Hagar will experience pain, loneliness and abandonment. With both women we are going to see conflict and a struggle of faith. More importantly we are going to see a God who meets us where we are at. A God who hears and sees our pain. You are no less important to him than Hagar. If you have ever gotten in the way of God's plan for your life, if you have ever been impatient with his plan, if you have ever waited patiently on the Lord to answer your deepest longing, then this story is for you. Turn to Genesis 16.

### **Sarai's Struggling Faith**

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 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. 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. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 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."

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her (Genesis 16: 1–6).

You've heard of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*? This was the Real Housewives of Canaan! In Genesis 12 and 15 God promised to bless Abram with land and children. There's a few problems with that promise. They've been waiting now for 10 years to get pregnant and Sarai is 75 years old. From a human perspective, they face a serious problem. In ancient culture, barrenness was a tragedy. Because the more kids you had, the more successful and blessed you were believed to be. To have zero children was a sad failure, not to mention the shame of not being able to have a child. All this hit Sarai hard, definitely more so than Abram. She must have thought, "God, I want to trust you, but you promised me children and here we are 10 years later. I am not getting any younger, and I'm still childless." Sarai is not alone; the Bible is full of women who struggled with infertility. In Genesis, Rebekah and Rachel also battled infertility.

For some of you here today you know better than anyone how Sarai feels. All your friends are having children and you can't. You've gone through IVF and you are tired of nurses sticking needles into your body. Some of you are considering the joy of adoption, but the pain is still very real. I want you to know that you are not alone. We are going to see how God responds to women like you. But, we also, as a church, want to care for you. Frank Cutter, one of our elders, and his wife Jeanette are

planning to start a group for those who are facing infertility. If you are interested in it, just email Frank: fcuttercpc@gmail.com.

Getting back to the story, Sarai comes up with her own plan. Isn't that what we all do when things aren't working our way? Haven't you had the joy of trying to help God out? I don't think Sarai was trying to be deliberately disobedient. In her mind she rationalized it all. She thought, "You know, God never said the promised seed would come from me, so why not use Hagar to get pregnant?" In her culture, this would have been a completely normal thing to do. If you can't get pregnant, use your servant, that's what other people do. But, our ways are often not God's ways. In God's eyes this wasn't his plan, it was hers. Sarai even justified this decision with bad theology. In verse 2 she said, *"The Lord has kept me from having children, so go, sleep with my maid."* That might be true, but God also promised to give them children. She just grew impatient and was tired of waiting on God. In her thinking, maybe God wanted to use another woman to accomplish his purposes. In Sarai's mind, she was helping God fulfill his promises. Isn't that a loving thing for a wife to do? She would take care of what God had apparently forgotten about. Just in case you are wondering, God doesn't need your help with his plan.

To all the men here this morning, if you thought you could kick back and watch all the mama drama unfold, sorry, Abram was at fault too. Abram was completely passive the whole time. If this scandal wasn't enough, Abram doesn't push back at all. At no point does he question his wife's plan. We all know how this type of thing happens. Men, has your wife ever tried to talk with you during a Warriors playoff game? And, of course, you turned off the T.V. and gave her your undivided attention! Abram didn't do that. He just nodded along to Sarai's plan and did what most men do—whatever she told him! "Sure babe, great idea honey, oh you want me to sleep with Hagar, cool, I'm down with that." I can't believe he never thought, "Hmm, maybe we should stop and pray about this?" Instead, after the game on ESPN is over, he sleeps with Hagar, and she gets pregnant.

Until now, Hagar has done nothing wrong. But, a funny little thing started to happen. As Hagar's baby bump began to grow, she started to despise Sarai. In the original language, that's a very strong word. Not only was Hagar pregnant, she also became Abram's new wife. She was no longer cleaning up the house as the maid. She's now laying on the couch, eating bon bons, and asking Sarai if she wanted to feel the baby kick. Salt is being rubbed into Sarai's wounds. Years later, King Solomon in all his wisdom warned people about this. In Proverbs 30:21–23 he writes, *"Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a godless fool who gets plenty to eat, a contemptible woman who gets married, and a servant who displaces her mistress."* I wonder if Solomon had this story in mind?

There are always consequences to our actions and Sarai is living it. She's miserable. When we stop trusting God, what often happens is we start blaming others. Sarai blames God and her husband for her problems. The fact is, both Sarai and Abram are at fault! Neither trusted God. And once again, Abram, Mr. Passive, lets Sarai call the shots. He doesn't want to deal with it anymore and tells her to do whatever she wants to Hagar. "She's your problem, just deal with it." This is such a guy thing to do! Sarai makes life for Hagar miserable and demotes her back to maid, "There can only be one Queen in this house honey, and I am it." Hagar can't stand it any longer and runs away, most likely headed back to Egypt. No one seems to go after her. Everything's being swept under the rug. Let's pick up the story again in verse 7.

### **God's Faithful Response**

**The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 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.**

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

**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,**

**for the Lord has heard of your misery.**

**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."**

**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; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.**

**So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael (verses 7–16).**

This is the first mention of an angel of the Lord in the entire Bible. This angel is not Gabriel or Michael. Most likely this is what scholars call a "theophany." There are several types of theophanies, this one is a "pre-incarnation appearance of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ." This is Jesus before he became a man.

What I find so incredible about this story is God's actions toward Hagar. The text says the Angel of the Lord **found** Hagar. Why does God go after Hagar? She's not seeking God; she is running away. Why would God go after a pregnant slave girl from Egypt who is on the run? Why? Because that is the kind of God he is. He cares deeply about people who feel rejected and alone in our world. He seeks people who feel invisible and hurting. He is the God who rescues. He is the God who redeems.

I can think of countless reasons why women in general and mothers in particular might want to run away from their situation. It might be the neglect of a husband. It might be the exhaustion of raising young children alone or one with a special need. It might be that feeling of being a hamster on a wheel, constantly going with an endless amount of activity, none of which you feel has any lasting value. It might be the shame of a child who gets into serious trouble. It might be the feeling that you have let God down by your sin. Some run away physically. Others check out emotionally. The good news is that either way, God loves us and seeks us out in the wilderness of our own making.

What God does next is also intriguing. God questions her, "Where are you coming from and where are you going?" It is really unusual for God to address a woman by name. And it's not because God doesn't know the answer to his question either. So, why does God question us? He seeks to draw us out. Questions force us to look at ourselves and to think through our situation more clearly. When you read the Gospels, what you see in Jesus is a master at the art of asking good questions. That's what great leaders do. They ask great questions. They get people thinking. I want you to notice too, Hagar only answers the first part of the question. She says, I'm running away. But she doesn't answer where she is going. The question forced her to realize the danger of where she was heading. Where is she going? To Egypt. But what do you think will happen to a pregnant slave in Egypt? What kind of life will she really have there?

What God commands her to do must have hit her hard in the stomach with emotions, "Go back and submit to Sarai." After all she has been through, God commands her to go back. For a woman and for a mother, obeying God and going back can be a really hard thing to do. Go back to that marriage that doesn't meet your needs. Go back to those thankless kids that take you for granted. Go back to that job you can't stand. Go back and have that hard conversation. Go back and see that counselor. Go back. Of course, there are abusive situations where you shouldn't go back and you need to run. I'm not talking about those situations here. What this text teaches us all is God often doesn't deliver us from our tough circumstances but meets us right in the middle of them. There are things he wants to do in us and teach us right in those places we desperately want to run from. You may not believe you can go back, but like Hagar, you can go back as a different person with a new perspective on your

situation and with your God. In God's economy he will use whatever comes our way for his good. He will never forsake those who seek him (Psalm 9:10).

God not only tells Hagar to go back, but he promises to bless her with numerous descendants. The first boy will be a "wild donkey of a man." If you are fortunate to raise boys, that's a pretty good description. James Dobson, in his great book *Bringing Up Boys* says, "If you keep your boys alive until they are 18, you've done a pretty decent job of raising them!" Hagar will not be a slave, but a blessed and honored woman. The name God gives to her son, Ishmael, is deeply significant. His name means, "God hears." God heard Hagar's cries in the wilderness and he found her and blessed her. And every time she calls her son by name, she'll remember that God is a God who hears.

God also graciously came through on his promise to Abram and Sarai (Genesis 21:1-20). But, it would be on God's timing. Abram and Sarai already waited 10 years for her to get pregnant. At 86 years old Abram conceived with Hagar. Then at 100 years old he sleeps with Sarai and she gets pregnant. In total, they would have to wait 24 years for God to come through on his promise. God allowed for Abram and Sarai's weak faith and turned it into good. His purposes and his promises are not dependent on our faith but his. He is faithful even when we are faithless.

### **The God Who Sees and Hears**

While we may never face the same problems as Abram, Sarai and Hagar, if you are a follower of Jesus you will face periods of frustration. You will be tempted around every corner to manipulate God's plan and take matters into your own hands. God wants us all to live by faith and not by sight, but that is not easy. The power of this story is found in the name Hagar gave to God. Hagar gives God a new name, El Roi, which means "the God who sees me." She also names the well, "the well of the living One who sees me." Through all her pain and heartache, God was never absent. God has been watching Hagar all along. The God who hears (Ishmael) is also the God who sees.

If you grew up in Sunday School you may be thinking, What's the big deal with a God who sees? Of course God sees everything, that is Bible 101. Theologians call this the "omniscience" of God. God knows all and sees all. What does God's omniscience have to do with a woman who can't have children? How does it help a wife who feels used and abandoned by her husband? How does that help a mother who spends her day wiping noses and changing dirty diapers? How does it help a single mom struggling to make it on the Peninsula? How does it help a young girl whose parents are never around?

I think the key here is how Hagar personalizes God's name. He is not just a God who sees but a God who sees **me**. God doesn't just see generally, he sees **you**. It's like you are the only person left in the world. That is how much God loves and cares for you. It's like

when I get my kid's classroom picture or team picture. Who do I look for first? My kids! Honestly, I don't really care about how the rest look! But, God sees each one of us individually and all at the same time. As I look out in this auditorium, I can only see you generally. Not God. God sees you and knows you better than you know yourself.

God sees you. He sees underneath it all. He saw within Hagar bitterness towards her mistress. He saw her rebellious heart. And yet God still pursued her in the desert. God sees you constantly. God never takes his eyes off you. You may feel alone, but you are never alone. He doesn't just see you when you are being good and following God. He sees you when you are blowing it, and he still pursues you. God even sees what you need, better than you do. Years later, Israel would cry out to God after 400 years of brutal

slavery. How would God respond? In Exodus 2:24–25 we read, ***“God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abram, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.”*** When God hears and sees, he acts. He did that with Hagar and he will do that with you.

So, on this Mother's Day, whether you are suffering or celebrating, remember the God who hears and sees you. You can trust him. Today we honor mothers, as we should, but we also worship the God who hears and the God who sees.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA  
Catalog No. 1411N