

Topic	The God Who Sees
Reference	Genesis 16
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Speaker	Pastor Leon Lim

Greetings to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have been gathered to worship today and part of the worship routine we have that has become important to FBC is in the hearing of the word. Let us prepare ourselves to let the Spirit reveal the truth to us today and help us respond in a way that is truly what He desires of us today. Let us pray.

Father help us hear and see who you are demonstrated through your word. We confess that we have not been exemplary in our hearing and doing of Your Word, but we come now asking you to let Your Spirit illuminate Your word in our hearts and minds today so that we may respond by giving You our hearts, mind, soul and strength. In Jesus' name we pray, amen

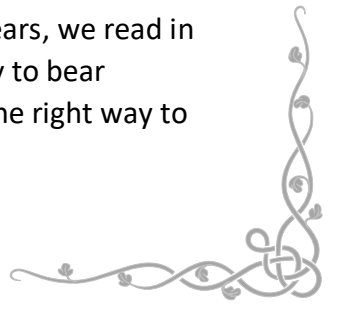
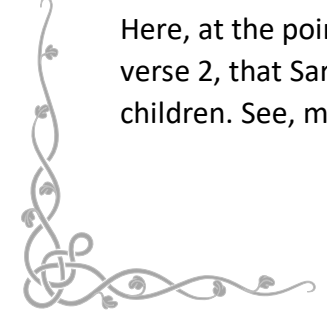
In every biblical narrative, the story is intended to be something that reveals to the intended audience who God is. We are rather far removed from the actual event talked about in Genesis. Have you wondered how we are going to ever know the truth? What I know is that the amazing tradition that has been given to us of the preaching of the word is the work of the Holy Spirit in faithfully helping us hear, see, learn, understand, apply and live the word since the birth of us as God's creation.

Today the message is entitled, The God Who Sees. In Gen 16, this passage has a remarkable semblance to the passage I last preached on. There are allusions to the story of Eden and the story of enslavement in Egypt which I will explain later. Through the study of Abram, Sarai and Hagar's response we will glean what this narrative teaches us about God. I've heard many sermons using stories to teach you how to think or act, but I believe **more important** than teaching us how to think or act is that we see and understand what **God was revealing about Himself**. Only when we see Him can we appropriately respond in the way He desires.

With this in mind, keep your lenses focused, thinking caps on and hearing sharp. What is a God saying about himself in Gen 16 to the Israelites? What is God trying to say through His Spirit that will help us live purposefully in the here and now?

Let's start with Sarai. Let me suggest to you that like many of us, Sarai was an ACHIEVER. A very beautiful woman. Definitely, one who gets a lot of attention. I mean how much more attention can you get than that of a Pharaoh, a leader of a nation taking a great liking to you. I mean she has that sort of attention for over 60 years. **Now to get the only one who seems to like my attention is my daughter. Trying to get my wife's attention also so difficult liao. But this lady seems to be in the center of attention.**

Here, at the point that they were in the land that God asked them to go to. After 10 years, we read in verse 2, that Sarah talks to Abraham about a difficult topic - her barrenness or inability to bear children. See, many times we try to understand it through our own observation. Not the right way to



interpret. Why 10 years? Why is something brewing after 10 years? In my past sermon, I talked about how in my own marriage, talking about our inability to have children was such a painful thing to do. It is even more difficult in the ancient context. Because your 'worth' as a woman is tied to your ability to bear children. You carry the families' shame. So in order to not bring shame to the family where no offspring is there to carry on the family line, there are written accounts where we find that after 10 years, the husband is allowed to divorce his wife to find one suitable.

You see in the ancient worldview; they have no idea that it is both egg and sperm that form the child. It is the man's seed that goes into a woman and becomes a child. Hence, if you are not able to bear the man's seed, then it is only possible to do so by finding someone else who can.

So, for a woman such as Sarah to approach the subject on her own accord shows that she is very bold, forward thinking and a problem solver. She knows that God has promised Abraham descendants. And how Abraham lamented the fact that he had no offspring to carry on the family. And whether motivated by fear of divorce or whether out of goodwill, she begins to carry out her plan. She was an achiever; she is not going to let circumstances control her life. She was a strong woman; she is not going to let anything take away what is hers. Sounds familiar to the feminist message of today? Here, she is trying to achieve the good for the family. Who can fault her?

The whole problem lies not with her strong character or her ability to find solutions or her proactiveness. In fact, by all measures of living today, I wish we had more people who was like her. Finding solutions, creating opportunities, planning ahead.

The issue was really found in verse 3. She takes Hagar and gives her to Abraham to be his WIFE. The way scripture uses the original language brings the picture to the story of creation. God took Eve and gave her to Adam to be his wife. What was wrong then in this picture was clear to the readers. By her own solution, Sarai was not imitating God. Instead, she took matters into her own hands and became the God of her situation. She was the one given by God to be Abram's wife. The standards of her world say her actions are ok and not wrong. But in God's eyes, marriage is to be constituted by Him and it is one man, one woman. No one gives another to be a wife. Hagar in that context was meant only to be a concubine by status. But God wrote the words down that when you lie with another woman, that is not just an act of culture, opinion, or sex. It is what He constitutes as an act that is kept within the bounds of marriage. Sarah took what God meant to be Holy and made it her own choice.

Until today one of the greatest struggles is to tell people that you should never take matters into your own hands. Especially in areas of marriage. God ordains marriages. It is God who takes someone and gifts them to us so that we together may be one in our journey to be like Him. Marriage is between one man and one woman. Only death brings this union to a close. A Christian cannot be one with a non-Christian. Divorce was never allowed in the bible. There were practical reasons for divorce in the bible, but there were never biblical reasons for divorce.

In the past chapters we see the same result of sin, Caleb took matters into his own hands. Ham not imitating God's ways. The people building towers to prove their ways. Today as a pastor let me plead with you. Do not do anything if it is not what God asked you to do.

The consequence becomes apparent because Sarai later regrets this action when Hagar wronged her. I do not have the time to unpack this but if you really study verse 11-12 the consequences of those sins are felt even to this very day. And history repeats itself like in the garden; the blame game begins. Worse still, she uses God as her judge. Saying Abram did not do anything about it.

This leads to Sarai mistreating Hagar. Other possible translations mean to afflict suffering, deal with harshly, or even act badly toward. To what extent was this happening? It was not revealed but many scholars agree to this pointing towards the mistreatment of the Egyptians towards the Israelite. Showing them that they did it too to others. This eventually led to Hagar fleeing. One thing led to another, but this was Sarai's doing.

Then there is Hagar. Let's call her the Bystander. She is introduced as Sarai's Egyptian slave. Now interestingly enough this implies a lot for the readers after coming out of slavery in Egypt. This contrast is huge. In their minds, how did we as God's covenant people who are the blessed ones and chosen ones who started off as having the Egyptians as our slaves end up being their slaves? Interestingly enough, this passage was meant to talk a little about that. Scholars believe that the intentional repeat in identifying her as Egyptian and the conflict between Sarai and Hagar was intentional to point out the struggle between the actual struggle of the two nations which mirrors the struggle of good vs evil.

Slaves in their context have little ways of coming out of their situation. She was probably a slave all her life and her family members probably all slaves as well. On one level you can think that she was blessed to be given the opportunity to come out of her slave status, now a wife of an influential man. On another I see her as a victim and bystander who was drawn into something that was way beyond her control. Sarai's decision for her was not something she could not refuse.

I think the despise came from the fact that she suddenly found that she was superior to Sarai with the added disdain of never really given the choice in the first place to be or not be Abram's wife/concubine. And we know better, sin begets sin. And so we see a remarkable allusion to another sin by Eve in Gen 3:6, she began to despise her mistress in her eyes (this is missing in the NIV translation). This connotating that she did not see things as God sees. It was not right in God's eyes.

Hagar, the foreigner among them, was supposed to receive the blessings of the covenant through the household of Abram. Instead she was made a slave again. Try understanding her struggle, the slavery she has almost no opportunity to come out of. To hear herself being called the SLAVE GIRL again. DO ANYTHING YOU LIKE WITH HER like she has no value. She did for a moment now lose it all to some silly mistake she made. How about the struggle and fear for her child's future?

What Hagar suffered at the hands of Sarai was told in a way that is really bad because by the way it was written, it was comparable to the sufferings of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians. So it is more than understandable why she ran.

If we would just pause to think about those less fortunate than us rather than our petty problems, we would see a genuine person loved by God who needs Him as much as we do. Part of the cry of millions

today and the problem that there is rioting now around the world is because we have reduced people to be less than they are. To be profiles by race, social-economic status, culture, skin color, gender, age. This is the reality we live in right at our doorstep. And don't we dare for a moment think we are not involved. Don't employ Malay la, lazy one. Those Indian fellas don't rent to them they are filthy. I'm not justifying the crimes done to George Floyd but neither am I going to justify the crimes he committed. But I'm asking us if we are the ones casting the stone at people like Hagar. How they are bystanders in the situation that has befallen them. The poor, marginalized, refugees, widows, prostitutes, and more are often the people that are helpless to do anything about their situation.

And by the actions of Abram and Sarai, they were given the opportunity to make a change. Instead, sin causes us to do things at the cost of others. Is that what God wants in His kingdom? I was watching an interview with a 21-year-old prostitute who started at 13. Not having much of a choice. Doing so, so that she could raise her two sisters to have a better life. Do we view these people as precious in God's eyes? Do we consider her worthy of God's salvation? Do we run to them bringing the Father's love to them? I watched that video with so much pain inside. Have we systematically victimized those who are not able to help themselves?

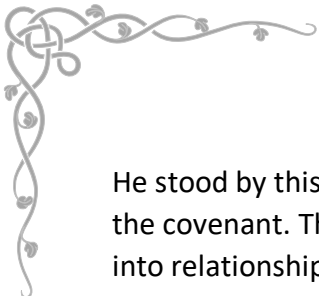
Then there is Abraham I'll call Him the Pretender) Here is the supposedly main character. Again, showing that he was no more different from Adam. I can imagine in some sense he had rationalized, or he needed to convince himself that the scenario that Sarai proposed was not wrong. I mean just imagine your wife appearing to you. Eh Dear, "You think I beautiful or not?". Abraham replies with suspicion, "beautiful, of course beautiful". You want baby right? God says He will give you children right? I can't give you baby right? So now how? You want new wife?

If Abraham says yes, is he not trusting what God said. If he says no, then how is the baby to come? I mean having another wife is not wrong right? Everybody does it. Some more my wife suggested one. I just am going along with it. God was not specific about how I was going to have children right?

Did Abram pretend not to know? Was he unable to seek God about this? This is an obvious repeat of Eden where Adam convinced himself that because his wife handed him the fruit, it was not his fault. I think in both cases they knew what was right but pretended to 'not quite get it'.

Then when Sarai brings up the issue of Hagar. He passed it off to her to choose as she is. The responsibility of him in the household to uphold and do what is right was passed off to Sarai. The responsibility as a man to spiritually lead the family was given away. As such, Hagar was made a slave again. And Abram pretended and ignored the mistreating.

The remarkable thing about God's covenant with Abram was that it was not meant to be an exclusive covenant. Through the covenant, Abraham will be the father of many nations. But somehow exclusivity was assumed. What's clear in the other books of the Pentateuch were instructions to love their neighbor as themselves. Israel was meant to be the firstborn that would welcome the prodigals into the kingdom of God. Instead, in scripture, we see many stories in which **Israel**, is told by Jesus, as being a jealous older brother for example in the story of the prodigal son.



He stood by this whole thing pretending he was a bystander. And ignored his primary responsibility to the covenant. The mission of God through the covenant was that all nations will be welcomed back into relationship with God. Through Abram, the nations will be welcomed into the faith. He would be the father of faith. God's mission was not just that he becomes a father. More important than being a father himself, through Him all the world would be united again as the family of God. He had the opportunity to welcome the Egyptian girl, treat this foreigner the way God would have wanted instead, he stood at the side letting Sarai choose to mistreat Hagar instead of being God's agent of redemption

The world is desperately shaking because of the inequality, oppression, and darkness. But are we like Abram and Sarai blind to the plight of those around us? The irony is that Abram himself was a nobody at first but God entered into covenant with him. We as inheritors of this covenant still fail till this very day to see anyone else or have we simply and deliberately closed our eyes and hearts?

The problem is worse because like Abram and Sarai we pretend not only we simply don't see people but we see only the ones we want to see, see things the way we want to see, and in our lives today see the ones who are worthy of our attention. Positive thinkers will tell you it's wisdom to remove negative people from your lives.

You could be starving, alone or sick. The color of your skin may be different from mine. You are misfortunate for being born in a different country....I cannot see you. You could be out of a job, speak a different language, stay right next to me as my neighbor but I CANNNOT SEE YOU.

I believe we have systematically removed people from our eyes, the poor, the sick the needy, and so much more for reasons that are honestly selfish. I cannot see you, let me be even more direct ~~tougher~~ to say...we are honestly saying I don't want to see you relegating them to bystanders and victims not deserving of what we have freely received.

If Abraham only saw Hagar as someone worthy to be seen, worthy to be loved. Would he pretend to pass her by and hand her off to Sarai to do as she pleases? Can we hand anyone off just because they are not valuable to us?

But this story is NOT about Abram, Sarai or even Hagar. This story is about God. That is why it is comforting. It is not a story to tell you how to live your lives although we can glean some good lessons from it. It is about a God who sees. And there are three things we can observe about what God is trying to say about himself.

God sees it all. He is Achieved

Unlike Sarah who felt the need to achieve things through her own means and think for her own Good. God knows what is good for us. Jesus was God's good plan for us. The Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost was good for us. The family of God and gathering to worship God is good for us.

Could God not see that when He created us we would sin? No, certainly not. He saw that we would stray away from His good will. Yet in seeing that, He chose to look past our weakness because of what Christ has done for us. He does so because He is Achieved. It is done, He says. It is finished. Nothing we

can do will hinder Him from achieving His purpose. To demonstrate who He is and draw His creation back to Him.

Sarah's perceived strength became her weakness when she tried to do things her own way rather than achieve it God's way. She may have thought God had forgotten or could not see her struggles or God's delay indicated a change of His mind....

Such we like Sarai think that we can achieve God's purposes and plans for ourselves. I don't know about you, but I often find myself having this messianic complex thinking if I don't do something about it, things will collapse. I must do something about the corruption and injustice in my government! I must stop this evil from happening! Sign this petition. Do this! Do that! I feel like a Sarai often, trying to fulfill God's plan but according to my own will.

Perhaps characters like this, if we are only willing to see that God is in control and sees, and nothing will stop Him from achieving His purposes. Then we would take a step back and not try to achieve all this by our own wisdom. I'm not asking us to do nothing with what we see. Instead we would take a step back and say, God you see what I'm seeing. You know much more than I do. WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?

In this MCO, I have been very burdened because instead of taking a step back and asking the God who sees what we should do. The church globally has rushed into many practices or things without taking a step back and praying, listening or asking the God who sees it all. In all reality none of us really knows what this new normal is going to be like. History shows our tendency to react like Sarai when finding solutions. Perhaps this season, God has given us the time to wait? Let us know what He has called us to do.

The second facet we can see is that...

God sees our needs He is not a bystander

In reality many in the world today are not in control of their futures or circumstances. They are really bystanders. They are victims of injustice, corruption, and so much more. Like Hagar, they have no way to get out of it. Just like the Israelites who cried out to God through their sufferings in Egypt. God does not stand by and watch His people suffer from afar. He came close to be one of us. Suffered just like we did, so that we may have salvation.

Arnold reminded us last week. That we as sinners constantly pretend not to see what is around us. How many refugees do you know? How many prostitutes do you know? How many orphans do you know? How many homosexuals do you know?

But God cares about how His creation is treated. In fact, I could do a whole sermon showing you that scripture is full of references that they are at the center of God's heartbeat. There is a correlation on how Abraham and Sarai's treatment of a foreigner and Sin results in the enslavement first the offspring in Egypt. That's why God is so clear about how we must treat those around us with dignity. (Lev 19:33-34, Exo 22:21; 23:9, Heb 13:2)

Leviticus 19:33-34 ESV

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

The language of God seeking for Hagar is interesting. When Adam and Eve were hiding, did God really need to seek for them? The interesting thing is the depiction of God finding us should remind us of the Father who comes running to the prodigal son to welcome Him back. The God who sees us in times of need is not far away or distant. He is often running towards us. Finding us when we are at our worst.

God did not stay afar. God reached out to Hagar and showed her that He sees her and feels her pain. There are hundreds of scriptures that talk about how God welcomes the foreigners. The Israelites were not meant to be an exclusive chosen people. They were supposed to be a HOLY PEOPLE, a royal priesthood, a people who welcome people into the kingdom of God. We the church are the new Israel. Are we repeating the same cycle of exclusiveness or are we actively involved in God’s mission who will not stand by at the mistreatment of the poor, needy, sick, marginalized, and more?

In fact the people of that time would think, come on, Hagar deserves this. She is an Egyptian, she is a slave, she despised her master. She does not deserve the blessings of God. She and Ishmael born of sin should not deserve any part in the goodness of God. BUT GOD sought her out, found her. And gave her a way to be part of His plan. God did not say, ah you’re just a side character. You’re unimportant. He said, she was to be always part of His plan.

We the church are the hands and feet of the God who sees. The one who is sent to run after the Hagar’s. By being recipients of the blessing of Abraham’s covenant, we are now given the mandate to become a holy nation, a royal priesthood, ambassadors of Christ. Why do I emphasize this again? Because this is our missions year and it is no coincidence that there is a cry outside that is desperate. Just like Hagar’s cry or the Israelites cry while they are mistreated by their enemies.

And we have the solution. It’s not money, it’s not some brilliant idea. It’s Christ!

God finds Hagar, tells her what she needs to do, and promises her a way out of what she saw as no way out. She responds by submitting to Sarai who probably didn’t do much to treat her better. But she knew it would be alright because God sees her and she has seen God.

While the Israelites refused to see this as God’s calling. I am happy to say that FBC has not adopted a bystander attitude in this COVID19 situation. That we have actively sought to help those in need. One challenge though that I feel the Spirit putting up for us is have we reached the point of loving them as ourselves? Do we realize that we were once like them too? But God saw us, took us out. God did not stand by, He reached out, called us, blessed us. And so we too are called to do that to others. But not just to the ones we love, but to our enemies themselves. This was the point in naming Hagar as the Egyptian. The most hated people of Israel at this point. This was to tell Israel, that if sin continues, it results in slavery which they recently experienced. But if you become My people, who redeems the least, you will be My blessed people.

God sees through our façade He is not a pretender

Last but not least, God sees all. We can pretend to see or not see what is around. But God misses nothing. He will not pretend that He doesn't see what is going on and He is actively at work to make it good again. The key word here is ACTIVE. God is not passively sitting out there watching us from a distance. He is not going to let injustice go by. He is not going to let any wrong get by.

And he has called His people to be His hands and feet. That means we, the redeemed are agents to let the world know that God sees. God sees their struggles and we are there to make the difference. We are the demonstration of God to the world showing them that He is not blind to the plight of the poor, needy, sick marginalized and more.

We are also God's demonstration that He is at work in redeeming the goodness back. The kingdom of God is here and is coming into fruition through us. So we are not to be achievers, pretenders or bystanders in the world. We are to be ACTIVELY obedient to the call God has for us. Do we all know what that call is for our life?

In closing let me summarize these points by using the analogy of a game.

In a game of maybe basketball or football, you have the Coach, the main team players and you have the substitutes/benches/reserves. Each has an important role in the game. From the perspective of the substitute, I'm only a bystander in most games. In fact, most of them train as hard as the main team players but may never get a chance to play. If they get a chance its only to give the main player a 'break'. It is a horrible position to be in. Most stay there hoping for a chance to make it to be on the main team/ starting lineup. Then in most teams there are the achievers. The superstars. The Lionel Messi's. The Michael Jordan's. And from their perspective or even many people's perspective, they are the ones the team depends on to win the game. Ultimately, I think the Coach is the most important and responsible because if their strategy is bad. If he fails to lead, pretends not to see the problems on the team. If he does not see the game and plan well, the team is bound to fail. Players must trust in his vision for the team. Otherwise they will not be a great team or win the game.

Let me propose that in the game of life. We have people that all play different roles in this team sport. But the most important thing in this game. Is that the one who Achieved it all is Jesus Christ. There is no other way to achieve. He achieved for us what we could not achieve for ourselves.

The one who sees the whole story and is someone we can trust to always lead us, see it all and will win the game is God the Father, our true Coach. And we are not just bystanders in this game. We are all called and activated as God's starting lineup through His Holy Spirit. If we rely on the God who sees instead of trying to do things our way, we are on His team. God's team will ultimately win. How should we respond if we knew we are on a team where the Coach sees it all and cannot lose?

The mighty problem is we only see in part and we don't trust in God who sees it all. **We look around and it doesn't seem like we are on the winning team. We see around and we pretend like those things don't matter to God. We look around and** are comfortable to stand by and be bystanders in our comfort zones.

So in conclusion, let me encourage you by saying these things. For those who are struggling. Let me assure you God sees. He does not stand by and pretend to not see. We can cry out to Him. Lament our struggles and I assure you. He sees, He listens, and He will not let your hope in Him be in vain. I don't know if this is any comfort to you, but if you are in Christ, you can be assured it will turn out for good.

If you're feeling you're going through this alone. Reach out to us. We admit, often times we can't see. Sometimes the Holy Spirit does help us see your needs. In reality though we fall short in seeing many things, you need to reach out so that we can actively help you and bring God's goodness into your life. You're not unimportant. No struggle is too small. We may not be perfect in showing God's love. But we sincerely want to. Let us reflect to you a God who sees.

I chose the closing song because I think this demonstrates artistically how much God is a God who sees. The song Above All is a beautiful depiction of how God saw us in our brokenness and even to His death, saw us. I know there are theological arguments about whether God thought about us above all. I don't think He did. But if you argue that way you're missing the beauty of who God is revealing himself to be through the song. He is saying, I see you, I think about you and will not let you pass by as just something unimportant. I see you as precious. You're the apple of my eye.

I hope that whatever you're going through. No matter what. You will like Hagar, realize that God sees. We like Hagar deserved nothing, but God gave us everything in Jesus Christ His son. But you have to turn to God. Submit humbly like Hagar to God's ways. Hagar turned to God's way even though it seemed unfavorable to her. This put her back in God's goodness. She did what God wanted that is to turn to Him. What is important in this story is that it was teaching us that even the most unlikely, if they turn to God, they are welcomed into His covenant. This was not pleasing to the readers of that day. But it is an assurance to us today, no one is meant to be an outsider to God's covenant.

And for us who try to achieve by our own strength, or stand by and do nothing, or neglect the bystanders, or even fail to see what God see. It is time for us to reflect a God who sees. Not only that, we need to ask God to show us what He sees and reach out like God did. Praying that God will strengthen us to be His frontliners for His kingdom sake. Not just substitutes, reserves, volunteers, or back benchers.

Let me also pastorally say this. Get your act right. What we do where no one is watching, God sees. It should not matter to me if you're participating in the church worship online or still giving or still reading God's word. You can pretend to be who you want the world to see you to be. But God sees and knows and He will judge. There is no running away from it like Adam or Abram who pretended not to see. Israel was judged because of Abram and Sarai's sin. But God also showed them that if they were to respond to His way, Jesus Christ, they too will be part of God's blessings and covenant.

So brothers and sisters, as you sing this song, remember, God is a God who sees. Take comfort for those of you who are struggling and no once sees. God sees. Those of us who are not struggling, remember once again how God saw you, called you and brought you out into being recipients of His grace and blessings. Be truly thankful for His grace so free. Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to help you respond like Jesus did in all situations.

