

“Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat ... Loneliness is the most terrible poverty.” Mother Teresa said those words. Certainly she had seen the effects of loneliness in her work with those who were cast aside: touching them, giving them connection and dignity, and reminding them of God’s love for them.

Being alone is one of our biggest fears. Some of us have experienced it more than others - maybe because of the death of a loved one, moving to a new community, estrangement from others, or simply feeling lonely. We don’t want the people we love to be alone either. We worry about how they’ll do without us - how they’ll manage.

Loneliness and helplessness are at the center of this part of our faith story and Abraham’s family’s story. And let’s be honest: this has all the makings of a good reality TV show. We’re drawn to stories of family conflict, the other woman or man, the intense emotional pain – they get our attention. Do we find comfort in seeing others’ problems? Are they bigger and more serious than our own? And what about the pain of this situation?

Last week, we learned that faith involves looking for God, being ready to serve God, waiting on God’s promises. God can do anything, and we can put our faith in God who blesses our present and our future.

Today we read about loneliness brought on by jealousy. We experience jealousy, too – in marriages, between siblings, in friendships. Jealousy is messy. In Othello, Shakespeare coined the popular term for jealousy - “the green-eyed monster.” Iago tells Othello, "O! beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on..."

Scripture is clear that jealousy is a destructive power in our lives. Proverbs 27:4 says, "Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, but who can stand before jealousy?" In James 3:16 it says, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing."

Hagar is a woman we don’t talk about very much. She was a servant of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, and she bore Abraham’s first child, Ishmael. This all happened before Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the son that God promised to Abraham and Sarah.

Look back in chapter 16, Hagar has a powerful encounter with God. After she becomes pregnant by Abraham, there’s tension in the house. Sarah treats her harshly. Hagar runs away from Sarah, but God gives Hagar a promise of many descendants and tells her to name her son Ishmael because God has heard her.

(SHOW SLIDE: *Ishmael = The God Who Hears*)

Hagar says to God, “You are the God who sees me.”

(SHOW SLIDE: *El Roi = The God Who Sees Me*)

God’s promise is a blessing and gives her hope, but the issues between she and Sarah aren’t worked out.

When Isaac is weaned, probably when he’s 3 years old, and Ishmael is at least 14 years old, jealousy rears its head again. Now that Isaac is growing up, Sarah feels that Hagar and Ishmael are a threat to Isaac’s inheritance and future. So, Sarah tries to get rid of the problem by sending them away.

And God works through Sarah's plan, as unfair as it may be, to bring about God's plan. Someone puts it bluntly, “If you like things to be neat, don't touch this story.” But perhaps it's when we're the most uncomfortable that we can relate the best to what's going on. I felt that discomfort when I watched the interaction between Sarah and Hagar in the video.

God tells Abraham to go along, which has always puzzled me. How could God allow that? Even though God assures Abraham of Ishmael's bright future, it's just plain unfair. Hagar gets kicked out, and the children are caught in the middle.

Sarah uses God's promise to exclude, even as she knows that she played a part in creating this desperate situation. And yet, I can feel her desperation in wanting to insure a future for her family. I can only imagine how far I might go, especially when children were a sign of God's presence and blessing.

Jealousy is connected to our insecurity and our attempt to hide our faults. Jealousy is about fear: fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of losing power or control in a relationship, fear of scarcity and of loss, and fear of abandonment. Jealousy comes when we feel threatened. *And the greater the threat, the more intense the jealousy.* Perhaps that offers insight into the gravity of Sarah's situation.

I'm willing to bet that this family is more familiar than most of us would like to admit. Just like Sarah, we get jealous. Just like Abraham, we are caught in the middle of family feuds and forced to pick sides. Just like Isaac and Ishmael, people fight over us rather than talking to one another and working out their problems. And just like Hagar, we're blamed for all that's wrong, even when we didn't have much of a choice.

I picture Sarah thinking all this will take care of the problem. But the idea of having personal privilege isn't part of God's covenant. The promise is a gift of God to be used as a blessing – not something to be used against the world.

Jealousy can easily become self-righteousness. “I'm better than you...I've got it all together...You don't deserve anything from God...” Maybe you've heard someone say, “God is on my side.” Perhaps it's meant as a way to praise God, but think of what really says!

Does that mean that God is against others? That's a slippery slope to start from. When we get into who is “chosen” and who's not – who's in and who's out – then we've stepped outside of the Good News.

Thinking about Hagar wandering in the wilderness is heart-breaking. She's with Ishmael, but feels all alone. She's done all that she was told to do. She's been mistreated and used, and now her child is suffering, too. Picture her without water to sustain her or her son, without hope or help, feeling like no one cares at all.

I picture present-day mothers caring for children in the midst of famine or war, refugee mothers fleeing difficult circumstances, or mothers who are trying to keep their children fed, clothed, and safe. I can only imagine what it would feel like to watch your child suffer.

In our own wilderness moments, where is God? When we feel pushed aside, hated, forgotten, helpless, and all alone, where is God? I want answers for myself and for those who suffer. Where is God's grace in those moments of despair?

Hagar is powerless on her own. She is only Sarah's slave. She has no legal protection. She is only the mother of Abraham's son. She has no official tie to him. And Abraham must have known how difficult it would be for her to make it alone – without his support. Yet when God intervenes, Hagar finds strength.

Against hope, we believe that God's grace never leaves us. God is with us. I think of all the psalmists who share their torment and ask, “Where is God?” Yet, even in the midst of pain that rips us apart, God is there. And yet, I wonder why God asks the question. (**SHOW SLIDE: "Hagar, why are you worried?"**)

Why wouldn't Hagar be worried? But the good news is that God hears Hagar and Ishmael. They are not alone. They were cast out by Abraham and Sarah, but never cast out by God. They were never forsaken by God. In fact, Ishmael is promised a blessing. And it's important to hear that as we consider that Jews, Muslims, and Christians share a faith history beginning with Abraham.

God says, “Lift up the boy and hold him tight.” Just when God seems completely absent, when the water is gone, when death seems imminent, God is present to bring water and new life.

We hear God's promise for Hagar and Ishmael. God works in the midst of imperfect people and circumstances to fulfill promises of hope and a future. God calls Hagar by name and tells her not to be afraid. God still sees her as before and hears her and Ishmael. God is there. God makes a way where there seems to be no way. God gives a well of water in the wilderness when the canteen is empty.

There's a clear message here. No one is God-forsaken. No one is outside of God's reach. No one is ignored by God. Friends, we're people whose story is not perfect. Our families aren't perfect. Our lives aren't perfect. We're people who've been in places where all we could do was cry out because that was all we had left in us. But our God sees and hears us.

Remember that term “functional deists” from last week? That idea that we believe in God's existence, but we never expect God to meddle? Here we're reminded of who God is. God isn't an absentee landlord, or a creator who creates and then simply lets the world go on. God sees us. God hear our cries. God knows our needs, even when we're at the tough places in the wilderness.

I realize that doesn't answer all of our questions of “why?” but there's hope in this for us. And there's challenge for us to see all people - even those we've rejected or cast aside - as people for whom God cares.

Our faith in God who sees and hears isn't just for us. We may know how it feels to be alone and scared, but so many times we turn around and treat others as undeserving of God's grace. We assume things about people before we get to know them. We don't care what they've been through. They're “those people” - different from us and somehow undeserving of God's care.

The faith that we claim isn't something we store away and get out when it's convenient or self-serving. We must share our faith openly and honestly, claiming the struggles and joys altogether. Faith isn't an easy way to go, but a way that we're always being transformed by grace.

“God Who Sees and Hears”

July 9, 2017

In the Beginning: (God's) Family Drama series

We're never alone, even though we feel like we're on the outside looking in. God's promise is that we are not alone, and we're called to offer that to others, too.

Hagar was shown a well of water that saved her and Ishmael from death. How has God worked to save you in the midst of despair? When you've cried out, how has God been there? That's a powerful witness to our God who sees and hears you.

We give thanks that God works in us and in spite of us to bring about God's promises. I've heard it said, “God uses inconsistent people because that's the only kind there are.” So true! But, even in our inconsistency and imperfection, we're called to be open to God's leading and receptive to God's love.

God is always consistent in grace. God who sees and hears – God who rescued Hagar and Ishmael is the same God of the psalmists and the same God who comes in Jesus Christ to be with us.

We are not alone - God sees and hears us. And we're called to help others feel less alone - God sees and hears them, too.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!