

Title: The God Who Sees
9/6 Sermon - The Twenty-Third Sunday In Ordinary Time (Year A)
Rev. Lindsey Odom
First Reading: Psalm 139:1-12
Second Reading: Genesis 16:1-16

In *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. I am especially drawn to the character of Celie and to the novel's themes of resilience, healing, faith, and the power of relationships and community for women in the midst of tremendous pain, oppression, and gender inequality. Written largely in the form of letters, the novel allows us as readers to hear Celie's voice with remarkable honesty.

What has always stayed with me from this book is the way Celie's understanding of God changes and grows as her understanding of herself becomes clearer and more defined. Early in the novel, God is portrayed as distant and enmeshed with the oppressive images of power and inequality that have shaped her life. But as Celie begins to find her own voice and recognize her self-worth and value, her understanding of God also begins to change. God becomes less like the powerful figures who have controlled and harmed her and more like a liberating presence who helps her discover love, freedom, and beauty in the world around her. Celie begins to understand that neither God nor her own identity has to be defined by the people who have tried to control her and write her story for her.

Perhaps this is the reason I thought about Celie when I arrived at the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. Their stories are obviously separated by very different times, cultures, and circumstances, but both stories introduce us to women living in worlds where other people possess power and control over their bodies, choices, and futures. Both force us to listen to the painful experiences of women who have been overlooked and mistreated. And in very different ways, these stories invite us to consider what it means for a woman who has been oppressed to

discover something profound about God and in the process, something profound about themselves.

This coming fall, our theme comes from Isaiah 43:19, when God declares, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” Throughout this fall season, we are going to ask what it means to perceive the new things God may already be doing in us and around us, including in our lives, in our church, in our community, in our schools, in our homes, in our workplaces, and in our world, particularly when we cannot yet see where God is leading.

Through the story of Hagar in Genesis chapter 16, we discover that one of the ways we begin to perceive God's “new thing” is by first recognizing that God sees us. Just as Hagar encountered *El Roi* - “the God who sees,” we are reminded that God sees, knows, values, and loves each of us, especially those whom the world too often overlooks.

Hagar's story seems like an appropriate place for us to begin because, if we put ourselves in Hagar's shoes for just a moment, it would be nearly impossible for her to perceive anything new on the horizon. This is one of the more difficult and uncomfortable stories in Scripture, confronting us with abuse of power, injustice, slavery, gender inequality, and the mistreatment of a woman who has very little control over the circumstances of her own life. It also raises difficult theological and ethical questions that cannot be neatly resolved in the course of one sermon.

To understand Hagar's story, we first need to enter the world in which it takes place. By the time we arrive at Genesis 16, Abram and Sarai have already been living with God's promise for years. God has promised Abram descendants, even telling him in the previous chapter (chapter 15) to look toward the heavens and count the stars, and if he is able to count them, his descendants will be just as numerous. Yet the chapter begins with the painful reality that Sarai

has been unable to have a child. Ten years have passed since Abram and Sarai arrived in Canaan, and the future God promised still seems nowhere in sight.

Sarai therefore develops a plan. She gives Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant and slave, to Abram to conceive a child. In the ancient Near Eastern world, legal and marriage traditions provide examples in which an enslaved woman could be given to a husband for the purpose of bearing children when his wife was unable to conceive. Yet understanding the historical context does not erase the profound imbalance of power and authority within this arrangement. Sarai takes Hagar and gives her to Abram, while Abram complies. Hagar, however, is never consulted about a decision that will profoundly affect her own body and future.

Then Genesis tells us that Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar. That phrase matters. The Hebrew verb used here is “‘anah,” a word that means to afflict, oppress, humiliate, or mistreat. There is something deeply unsettling about that word within the larger story of the Old Testament because the same Hebrew word will later be used to describe the affliction of the Israelites when they are enslaved in Egypt. Here, however, it is Hagar, an Egyptian woman, who experiences affliction within the household of Abram and Sarai.

After being treated so harshly, Hagar flees from Sarai with her unborn child and enters the wilderness. It is there, beside a spring of water, that God finds her. In the place where Hagar may have felt most alone and most uncertain about her future, God moves toward her and calls her by name. This is significant because God sees the woman everyone else has learned not to see. God’s seeing is different from the way Hagar has been regarded by those around her. God does not see Hagar according to her usefulness or reduce her to her status as a slave. God recognizes her suffering, calls her by name, listens to her story, and sees a future that Hagar herself cannot yet see. God asks, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where

are you going?” These questions are not requests for information because God already knows the answers. Instead, God creates space for Hagar to speak for herself. After so much of her life has been determined by the voices of others, Hagar is invited to tell her own story. She answers truthfully, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” Yet she never answers the second question. Hagar knows where she has come from, but she does not know where she is going. Her past is painfully clear, while her future remains uncertain.

God does tell Hagar to return to Sarai, and we should acknowledge that this is one of the most difficult parts of the story. Yet within Hagar’s ancient world, the story continues with God making a promise about a future she cannot yet imagine. This is where Hagar’s story connects so beautifully with the words from Isaiah that will accompany us throughout this fall: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). Hagar cannot perceive what lies ahead. She does not know what will happen to the child she carries, but God sees Hagar, and God sees beyond the wilderness experience in which she presently finds herself.

God promises Hagar that she will have a son and instructs her to name him Ishmael, a name meaning “God hears,” because “the Lord has given heed to her affliction (verse 11)”. His very name will become a reminder that Hagar’s suffering did not go unheard. The God who found her in the wilderness near the spring has heard what happened to her and has not forgotten her. Hagar then responds to this encounter by doing something extraordinary. She gives God the name El Roi, “the God who sees me.” This is a unique moment in the Old Testament, because Hagar is the only human person recorded as giving God a name. The woman who has possessed so little authority over her own life becomes the person who speaks with remarkable theological authority about who God is. Hagar does not allow Abram or Sarai to deem what this encounter means. She names what she has experienced for herself, which is that: God saw me.

Perhaps this is the truth Hagar still speaks to us today. God sees us, and being seen by God should change the way we see one another. If we worship *El Roi*, the God who sees, then we cannot continue looking past the people whom God sees, knows, and values. Seeing as God sees requires more than simply noticing that someone is there. It presents us with opportunities to participate in the new thing God is already doing among us as God works toward a world where all of God's people are seen, valued, and able to thrive and flourish together.

Perhaps perceiving God's new thing begins when God opens our eyes to see the people and places, we have too easily overlooked. Maybe God's new thing is not always something we are waiting to see. Maybe it begins when God teaches us to see differently. Maybe seeing as God sees looks like learning someone's story. Maybe it means noticing someone who is struggling to figure out where they belong. Maybe it means supporting and coming alongside someone carrying more than we realize.

Hagar reminds us that seeing another person does not require us to completely understand their experience; rather, it begins by believing that their experience is worth hearing. Hagar entered the wilderness unable to answer the question, "where are you going?" Yet she left that encounter knowing something she had not known before. She left knowing that even when she could not see what was ahead of her, she was seen and known by God. Maybe this is where perceiving God's new thing begins for us as well. We may not always know where God is leading. We may not be able to see what is springing forth. We may find ourselves somewhere between where we have been and where we are going. But our wilderness experiences, like Hagar's, are not beyond the sight of God. Hagar affirmed that truth by giving God a name: *El Roi*, the God who sees me.

Hagar also reminds us that our inability to see what comes next does not mean that God has lost sight of us. Before Hagar could perceive her future, God perceived her. Before she knew where she was going, God knew her name, her story, and what came next. May we, like Hagar, trust that God sees us, especially when we cannot see the way ahead. May we become God's people who have our eyes wide open to those whom the world so easily overlooks. May we listen to the voice that we may have dismissed. May we make room for stories different from our own. May we remember that no human being is just a problem to solve, a label to assign, or a role or function to fulfill. This is because every person we encounter is already fully seen, deeply valued, and loved by God. And this allows us to become part of God's new thing among us. Amen.