

My theological wake-up call at Walmart

We're too often blind to what God sees.

by [D. L. Mayfield](#) in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue



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I was at Walmart looking for something, like everyone else. I wandered the aisles, keeping one eye on my loud and demanding child sitting in the cart and the other on the aisles around me, watching for a deal that would make my life simpler and easier and more affordable. I went down the row filled with detergents. So many choices. I didn't have a preferred brand, but I was drawn to the bottles and boxes that looked higher-end, like they were nontoxic, natural, organic. Like they would actually be bringing forth goodness into my life, that my children would smell fresh and clean and chemical-free as they wandered through the earth. The sprigs of lavender pictured on these types of bottles, the sense that I was making the correct purchase in a world full of lurking evils and carcinogens—this all flashed through my mind in a few seconds. The mental load of consumerism is a hell of a burden, one we all take on willingly.

I looked at the prices and decided that I didn't need to buy anything that day. I still had half a jug of detergent at home, and we could wait just a bit longer. At the end of the aisle, as I turned to head off toward another section, I saw a screen. It was a monitor showing me and my cart and my child as we wandered through the aisle. Filming in Progress, said the monitor. Shoplifters Will Be Prosecuted.

I looked around and then back at the little image of myself on the screen. It was as if I were a little god, watching those made in my own image prowl the aisles of Walmart. What else could such a god see? In an instant, I knew: God could see all the people, day after day after day, who didn't have enough money for soap and who took it quietly when they thought no one was watching.

"The God who sees" is one of my favorite descriptors in the Old Testament. It is the first time in the Bible that a human gives God a name—and not just any human but a woman who has been used and abused, enslaved, and is now an outcast, a woman who will go on to become the mother of Ishmael, the patriarch of Islam.

Hagar is fleeing to the desert because she has been so abused by Sarah and Abraham, the supposed heroes of the faith. Alone, vulnerable, pregnant, she has no way to survive on her own. She is going to die. And then the angel of the Lord comes to her. He tells her that she will go back, she will have a son, and her offspring will be multitudes. The angel says that the Lord has listened to her afflictions. Hagar then names the Lord El Roi, the God who sees. "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me," she says (Gen. 16:13). For her, the Lord is the opposite of everyone who has abandoned her—everyone who wishes that she would just vanish into thin air, that the wilderness would swallow up both her and her son.

The God who sees. This first name bestowed on God means something, especially for the forgotten of the world. Especially those who have suffered at the hands of patriarchy, misogyny, violence, selfishness, economic exploitation. To know that you are not alone, to know that you are seen—sometimes this is all that is needed for the strength to keep carrying on. Even, especially, if you find yourself living in a wilderness, surrounded by people of plenty who would rather you didn't exist.

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Exodus 16 tells a story of people needing something and God providing. The people of Israel are wandering in the wilderness, and God sends them manna from heaven. Manna—as a child I imagined that it was like flavorless communion wafers,

dissolving easily on the tongue. Manna, this sign of how God works in the world, this food that comes out of nothing, undeserving, to everyone. In the churches I grew up in, this story was told a bit as if it were a tragedy. The people sin and then have to live in a wilderness—a refugee camp of their own making—and eat the same food every day for 40 years. It was presented as a punishment, a test from a God who wants to prove something, to force obedience.

The Mennonites taught me to see different nuances in the text, how it shows a God who gives the chosen people decades to practice what it looks like to value equality, to live in true righteousness/justice. Manna, bread given new every morning, is sent with strict instructions: no hoarding is allowed, and no one is allowed to stockpile, to sell, or to incur debts against their neighbors. If people try to set up a black market manna system, they awake to see their stockpiles stinking and melted, covered with maggots. Those years in the wilderness with that sweet, ethereal bread are a 40-year relearning process, a reset on what the world is supposed to look like, how societies are supposed to be ordered. How to live together equally, no one taking more than their fair share.

Melissa Florer-Bixler, a Mennonite pastor, told me, “One of my favorite stories from the Talmud comes from a wondering by the rabbis—why did the manna come once a day instead of once a year? They tell a parable about a king and his son. When the king provided his son sustenance once a year, the son returned only once a year to thank his father. But when the son was given a small, daily provision each day, the child returned daily to thank his father. Daily thanksgiving, daily provision, daily a chance to receive love from a God who provides.”

But long ago that type of manna stopped falling from the sky, and it stopped being seen as miraculous by those who wanted more than a day’s worth of food—who wanted to be able to hoard it without feeling guilty. Florer-Bixler says, “For one unique moment in God’s history among people, food was pure gift, a pure act of love. And as it was then, and as it shall be while people are on the earth, this arrangement became a place of discontent and faithlessness.” In Exodus the Israelites grumble; they want variety, they are tired of the grace given every day, they want more control over their own destiny. This is the kind of culture I was born into as well. These were the values I absorbed with every meal, every trip to the grocery store, every time I rummaged around our well-stocked pantry. Affluence, even when it meant having more than others, became a virtue. It became a way of life, something to pursue: it became godly.

God understands the pull toward Pharaoh and his predatory economy, the backbone of which is the hoarding of resources by the privileged. This is why the scriptures give us the metaphor of manna, the threads connecting us all the way to Jesus and his body freely given to us. But how do those of us who were not raised on the ways of manna, of asking God for daily bread and being blessed by the miraculous ways this prayer is answered, learn to untangle our desires?

In the scriptures the ultimate check on the relentless desire for more is the reality of our neighbor. Especially the vulnerable ones, the widows, the orphans, the foreigners: those who benefit the least in a society built around power and hierarchy and patriarchy, around ethnic and religious supremacy. Living and being in community with vulnerable neighbors will change us. And, as always, the opposite is also true. The farther we are away from those in need, either geographically or through power differentials, the more we can judge them and congratulate ourselves on our wisdom and prudence.

I think about this as I walk around Walmart, as I notice the boxes of Little Debbie Snack Cakes displayed prominently on end caps, the prices surrounded by smiling yellow logos (Low, Low Prices—I change it in my mind to Low, Low Wages). I notice the woman who maybe forgot to pay for something being questioned by a checker, their voices rising. I notice the man speaking sharply to his son, who's asking for some candy. I notice the knives and guns and spray paint and toys being sold, all very close together. The last thing I notice is the security camera on the laundry aisle, and suddenly every family around me becomes a walking beacon of stories unknown, of a world where clean clothes are a privilege and a luxury that we do not afford to everyone. I know how affluence works, how different it is from a God who provides manna, who gives enough for everyone as long as some people don't hoard. How affluence needs segregation and amnesia to thrive, how it convinces us to forget God and instead take pride in our own choices and abilities. I know how affluence works because I see it in myself. I am forever trying very hard not to notice a world as unkind as the one I actually live in.

God does not dream of a world where banks foreclose on up to 10,000 homes a day (as happens in some communities in the United States). God is not pleased that half of all American children will at some point live in a household that uses food stamps to survive, or that two-thirds of all minimum-wage workers are women. God doesn't accept as normal the fact that in 2013 four out of five Americans lived in danger of falling into joblessness and poverty while nearly half of Americans were considered

poor or low-income. This is not how God wants the world to work. These are the statistics that keep God up at night, ever watchful of the vulnerable. Are we keeping watch with God? Or do we prefer to slumber on?

Just as poverty is on the rise in the United States, so too is a world in which luxury is continually venerated and normalized, even as it is reserved for fewer and fewer people. The United States is more unequal than at any time since 1928, right before the Great Depression. We are edging back toward a world where a small concentration of people contain vast amounts of power, influence, and wealth. The richest 1 percent of Americans own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. It is far less likely that a poor American will rise from poverty to riches than a poor Canadian, German, or French person. Even China has now surpassed the United States in terms of sheer numbers of people rising out of poverty in their lifetime.

In 2008 the CEO of Walmart made as much in one hour as many of his full-time employees made in a year. Are some people really worth that much more than others? We would most likely say no, but our economy says otherwise. We talk about the immorality of the poor but never the wealthy, and this is very much on purpose. While these statistics are sobering, so too is the response many of us have to them—the shrug of the shoulders, accepting extreme inequality as a by-product of the supposedly free market. We accept inequality, and we even contribute to it. We penalize shoplifters but never the business owners making 30 times as much as their employees. We only have eyes for certain kinds of wrongdoing, it would seem. And in the end it props up the world to continue to reward those at the very top while making life ever harder for those struggling to survive.

I went home from Walmart and did a quick Google search: What are the most commonly shoplifted items in the United States? Each item contains a Hemingwayesque short story within itself: pregnancy tests, diabetic test strips, baby formula, cigarettes, energy drinks, pain medication. These real-life necessities are interspersed with more predictable items like cell phones and televisions—items that can easily be resold for profit. Cheese and raw meat are two of the most common food items stolen, and the Bible has the distinction of being the most stolen book in the world. Part of me can't help but think that God is pleased with this—all of those scriptures passing like contraband to those who most need them.

These lists are interesting, heartbreaking, and infuriating all at the same time. They were also news to me, as was the Filming in Progress notification at Walmart. It was a sign pointing to inequality, to the fact that my reality is different from that of so many of my neighbors. A clear, devastating sign that our society is failing to love our neighbors experiencing poverty. But I almost missed it, almost lost myself in the dreams of buying up a better world—lavender-scented, chemical-free clothes for my own precious family.

William Cavanaugh believes that desire in a consumerist society keeps us distracted from the desires of those who are truly hungry. It numbs us not only by encouraging us to want more and more but also by negating our God-given desire to work toward the common good. Consumerist societies, like the one I live in, only exist by making the individual supreme. Everywhere we look there are people who are seen by God in an empire that despises and devalues them, even as it exploits them for profit. Learning not just to see them but to learn from them is the only solution I know for finding our way out of the never-ending maze of the American dream.

These teachers—these Hagars—will continue to find ways to reach those of us who are privileged. They'll set up their tents under freeway overpasses, forcing us to remember that not everyone can find safe and affordable housing. They'll keep undertaking the dangerous journey into our country, working jobs that most people will not and accepting the risks of living in the shadow economy because it's better than the violence and poverty they came from. Or they'll risk the fines and the jail time, the possible prosecution, for taking a box of soap when they have no money. They will confront us in the places we least expect; they will burst the walls of consumerism and apathy we build up. They will force us to see, even if we don't want to. Because it is in their nature. They are made in the image of the One Who Sees, the one who will never turn his eyes away.

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