

God who sees and hears (Genesis 21:8-21)

Hagar recognizes God's presence where others might only see abandonment.

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June 19, 2026

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The slave Hagar and Ishmael, the son she bore with Abraham, receive a surprising amount of attention amid the story of Abraham and Sarah. Why? Perhaps it is because they can teach important lessons both about the nature of God and about the courage and faith of those who endure marginalization.

Hagar leaves Abraham's camp not once but twice. This week's reading focuses on the second time, when she is forced from the camp by Sarah, who does not want her son Isaac to face any competition. The first time, a pregnant Hagar departed voluntarily to escape Sarah's jealous torment. While she was in the wilderness, God's messenger instructed her to return to Abraham and to name her son Ishmael, meaning "God hears." In response, Hagar names God *El-roi*, "God who sees." So, God sees and God hears.

Hagar is not merely a passive recipient of God's divine care. She is a model of courage and spirituality. She recognizes God's presence where others might only see abandonment. Her faith is born of suffering and grows through survival. She even has the audacity to name God.

When Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, following God's instruction to do as Sarah wishes, Hagar finds herself and her son in the wilderness without enough water. When God hears Ishmael's cries of thirst, God provides a well of water. God sees, God hears, and God acts. Although Ishmael is not the one through whom God will fulfill the covenant with Abraham, and although Hagar would be considered a lowly slave by ancient society, God still hears them, sees them, and provides for them. This is both an important and comforting lesson on the nature of God and a challenge to us to engage in active listening, observing, and acting on behalf of those marginalized and oppressed in our own times, in our own society.

We're reflecting on these lessons provided by an enslaved woman and her son in a time when the Trump administration and others are attempting to rewrite or erase our nation's history of chattel slavery. The National Park Service's recent removal of a Philadelphia exhibit depicting the lives of people enslaved by George Washington is just one of many examples of government officials complying with Trump's executive order aimed at restoring "truth and sanity to American history." Although the Philadelphia exhibit was restored a month after it was removed, this required a lawsuit against the federal government.

Such suppression of history denies us and future generations the opportunity to learn about the horrific injustices committed against God's beloved at the hands of fellow humans. It deprives us of the fullness of knowing our ancestors in faith, and it softens the cry for repentance and reconciliation. It also denies us the opportunity to see,

to hear, and eventually to act in ways modeled by God in the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The systemic injustices that remain—based on the foundation laid by slavery and attempts to erase or rewrite history—should make us quake, given Jesus’ warning about the judgement of the nations in Matthew 25.

Hagar and Ishmael show us a God who sees, hears, and provides. God is particularly attuned to those we are often tempted to ignore. Will we follow God’s model? In this time when we are being encouraged to look away, Hagar and Ishmael help call us back to a more faithful, honest way—a way that doesn’t just imitate God but encourages us to join in God’s ongoing work of justice and mercy.