



## Seeing and Being Seen: In Everyday Complexity

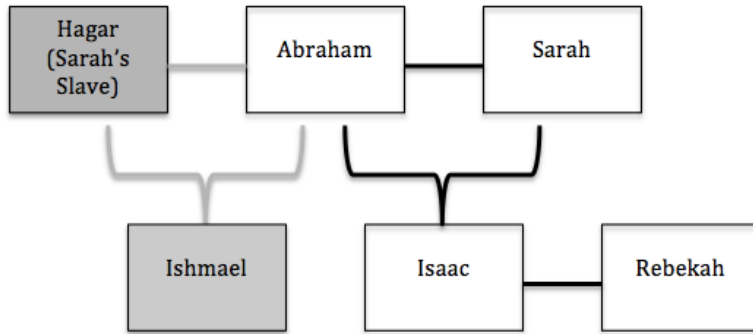
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Genesis 24:34-67; 25:7-11  
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Today we end our three-week series called “Seeing and Being Seen,” in which we’ve studied the story of Abraham and Sarah’s family from Genesis. First we talked about the struggle of Sarah’s slave, Hagar. Last week we talked about when Abraham was going to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Today we’re going to talk about Isaac’s wife Rebekah. We’ll put it all together and see what we can learn about how God sees us through this story.

We’ve got a lot of scripture today, but don’t worry, I’m not going to read it. I think this story is a really good one, and one that should be told by heart. I gave you the reference in your bulletin so you can go back and look at it on your own later. Before we get into this story there are a few things we need to know. First, some of the Bible commentaries I read noted that much of this is not a particularly religious story; that it’s really just practical stuff: cultural practices and daily life, travel, household management, marriage, and child bearing. They call this story non-religious or mundane. By strict definition, sure. That’s true. I understand that religious practice isn’t explicitly named. But there were some commentaries I read that felt almost dismissive to me... they seemed to treat this story and others like it as less sacred than other parts of our sacred text. As if some stories in the Bible tell what happens when God is watching and participating in our lives, and other stories are what happens in the moments when God sits in some heavenly waiting room while we deal with the boring human stuff. As if God only shows up in the “sacred moments.” I happen to LOVE this story, and I happen to find it very sacred. There are so many stories in the Bible that are so fantastical, they’re just harder to relate to, but this is one I can easily find myself in.

### **Dysfunctional Family**

Which brings me to my next note... this is that this is a story of a dysfunctional family, which perfectly explains why I can find myself in it so easily. That also means that you need to know the characters for the story to make sense. There’s a chart in your bulletin that’s like a family tree. Take a look. You can see the main characters and their relationships. You’ll see Abraham and Sarah are married and had a son named Isaac, but before that Abraham had a child with Sarah’s slave whose name was Hagar and that child was named Ishmael. The other important character of the day is Rebekah, who becomes Isaac’s wife.



### What to listen for

Today we're going to hear about (1) how Isaac might have reconnected with Ishmael after his mother's death, (2) how Rebekah ended up as Isaac's wife, and finally (3) how Hagar puts the whole story in perspective. See if you can find yourself in this sacred story...

### Sarah is complicated

Isaac's mother, Sarah, has just died. Isaac is grieving. It's a complicated grief. She was the matriarch of the family and a brave woman who left her homeland in faith and journeyed to a new land with her husband Abraham. She gave birth to her son Isaac in her old age, long after her childbearing years should have ended. She loved her son fiercely. Perhaps too fiercely. Like I said, before she gave birth to Isaac, Sarah made her slave (Hagar) have a child with her husband. The next time someone tries to tell you they believe in "biblical marriage," tell them this story. Abraham and Hagar's child was named Ishmael. As you know, Sarah then became pregnant and soon there were two little boys... Ishmael and Isaac. One day Sarah saw Ishmael and Isaac playing together and she was overcome with jealousy and anger. Ishmael was technically Abraham's first born and that came with benefits in that culture, but she wanted to make sure her biological son Isaac was treated as first born. So, she banished Hagar and Ishmael.

#### *Gesture Left*

Ishmael and Hagar lived in the desert at a place called Beer Lahai Roi (which means, the well of the one who sees). It was a sacred place to Hagar, the place she had felt seen by God, but it disconnected her son Ishmael from his father and brother. It was deeply painful for all of them. All of this pain was at Sarah's hand. Sarah was a complex woman to say the least. Isaac must have felt every emotion when she died. He must have felt the complicated cocktail of emotion one feels when they lose a fiercely loyal, but deeply flawed mother.

### Isaac and Ishmael meet

Now, at this point in the story, we have to fill in some blanks. Sometimes it's fun to think of the Bible like a "choose your own adventure," but sometimes you have to write part of the adventure yourself....

The text says that after Sarah died, Isaac went to Beer Lahai Roi, the well of the one who sees. Why? The text says nothing else about it, but we already know some things about that place. It's where Hagar and Ishmael lived. I've also peeked ahead in the story for you, so I can tell you that in the very next chapter, Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together. So how did these brothers

separated by banishment nearly 40 years ago reconnect? Did Isaac go to try and mend the relationship that his mother had broken? It makes sense to me that he would have. Now in their 40s, these brothers meet at this well. Perhaps they embraced. Maybe there were tears. It's possible that here at the well that meant so much to Hagar, something holy happened yet again... God saw the pain of the dysfunction that plagued this family and guided the conversations that brought two brothers and their father back into right relationship. I imagine the conversation they might have had...

"Ishmael, look at you... you look so much like dad. I don't know if you even remember me. If you do, I might be the last person in the world you want to see... It's your brother, Isaac. I'm here because... well, my mother died... you don't need to say you're sorry... you must hate her, and for good reason. I'm sorry for what she did to you. It broke my heart. My heart has ached for you, and I know our father's heart has ached for you too. He's sorry he ever went along with my mother's plan. I know he would want to see you... to know you're ok. Oh Ishmael, I'm so truly sorry for everything."

### **Rebekah at the Well**

Miles away at another well, there was another relationship in the works. Abraham had sent his servant to their homeland to find a wife for Isaac. In biblical literature, many relationships begin at wells. They are symbols of fertility, and they were the match.com of the ancient world. Young eligible bachelorettes would be sent to gather water and eligible bachelors would wait nearby. Abraham's servant was concerned that he wouldn't be able to find anyone who would be willing to go marry a stranger a million miles away. But, lucky for him, Rebekah showed up at the well that day. She went above and beyond to get water for him and his camels, and struck up a conversation. Rebekah is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. She's courageous and an obvious leader. In such a patriarchal society, it would be normal for the father to tell his daughter she was being married off to a stranger with no choice in the matter; more of an exchange of property than a love story. But this is Rebekah. In this case, everyone turns to Rebekah as if that's a common occurrence, and ask her if she's ok with the arrangement. She's a take-charge woman, obviously; a born matriarch, unafraid of this complicated and unconventional situation. Here at this well, for whatever reason, she was generous and brave and decided to initiate a bold adventure on pure faith. Isaac and Rebekah marry and begin their life together at Beer Lahai Roi.

### **Recap**

So let's recap. We have a grieving son who has been kept away from his older brother his whole life, because of his mother's anger. She dies and the brothers seem to reconnect at Beer Lahai Roi, where Isaac then goes to live with his new bride, a remarkably kind and brave woman of great faith. It seems that without Sarah there, a new matriarch takes her place, and the family finds forgiveness and connection she only could have imagined in her nightmares. So it's a story of complicated grief, healing, forgiveness... But, like some of the biblical commentators said... nothing of a religious nature....

### **When Hagar Ran Away**

The character in this story who might be able to help our commentators, and us, understand the rich sacredness of this text is actually the one we barely considered. Hagar, Sarah's slave. If we go several chapters back in the story, Hagar was being abused by Sarah, and for a brief time, Hagar tried to run away. She ran to Beer Lahai Roi, and there she had an experience of God so real that she is the only woman in the Bible to ever give God a name. She called God El Roi... the God who sees. What did God see Hagar do... God didn't see her come out of a lion's den without a scratch or walk on water. God saw her run away from an abusive home. God saw her coming apart at the seams. God saw her cry. God saw her in the complex realities of her life.

### **Seen in the everyday**

Isn't that what this whole story of a wildly dysfunctional family is all about? It's normal stuff, complicated stuff, real stuff... and God is still there. There are some wonderful, fantastical stories in the Bible, but goodness I'm glad the story of this family, in all its everyday complexity is here. I want to know that I'm seen even in my everyday. I'm so thankful to know that God sees when our family dynamics gets a little out of control and we decide to act on an opportunity for reconciliation, like Isaac. I'm so thankful God sees when we run into a stranger and stop to help while we're out running our errands, like Rebekah. I'm so thankful to know that God sees when we weep like Hagar. I'm so thankful God sees us in our everyday, making the everyday sacred.

### **Library**

When you look at the story of your life, I wonder if you would call it sacred. If you were to place it on a shelf in the library, would you put it with the religious texts? Maybe just hide it among some dusty history books? Or do you worry your life story isn't even worth the read? Nothing to see.

### **Your story matters**

If you're wondering whether your story really matters... I hope you heard the story today. I hope you heard that the gritty details of somebody's dysfunctional family are considered a sacred and holy text. I hope you heard that somebody's dating life made it into "the good book." I hope you heard the kinds of stories God bothers to take notice of aren't so different from your own. To God, *your* life is a holy text. Every moment. To God, *your* dysfunctional family is the one through which the work of healing happens. To God, *your* life, as it is... good, bad, and complicated... is the sacred story that you and God are writing together. God sees you even now, loves you even now, and is working in and through the everyday complexities of your life, even now. So what will the next chapter of your sacred story be? Amen.