

Pastor Lecia Beck

June 21, 2026

St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

The God Who Sees

Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.

And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

The first time I visited Haiti, I was going through a hard time. I was in my second year of seminary. A difficult marriage had become even harder as I gained a support system outside that relationship and began to see myself as someone with worth. We had tried marriage counseling, but it only seemed to make it clear that the end was near. In the midst of all that, I traveled to Haiti with a group from seminary for a January-term class.

We were not going to Haiti to build houses, dig wells, or preach. We were going to meet our siblings in Christ who were there, hear their stories, and encourage them. I knew our

mission, but somehow I also thought we were going to bring God's presence and blessing to Haiti.

We finally arrived late at night and stayed at Wings of Hope, an orphanage for children with physical and developmental disabilities. In a country with limited resources, children who do not seem to have earning potential are often discarded. The devastating earthquake had struck five years earlier, but the children were still displaced from their group home. They were living in a rented house that was not accessible. Boards had been laid over the stairs to create steep ramps for wheelchairs. The plumbing did not work, so water had to be carried from a tap down the street. Beds were crammed into every room, with barely enough space to walk between them.

When we woke up that first morning, our task seemed clear. We were to spend the day playing with the residents, having fun and sharing God's love with them. We sang songs and played hand-clapping games. We helped haul water and played tag. When the afternoon came to a close, we gathered on the porch for worship, feeling satisfied that we had brought God into this place. We sang "Every Little Thing is Gonna Be Alright" and danced together. Then we settled on the floor for a Bible lesson.

As I sat next to Josephine in her wheelchair, attentive to her needs, she reached over and put her arm around my shoulder. As we sat together, she began to pet my hair and told me, "God loves you so much." Huh. I thought I was here to love Josephine...not for Josephine to love me. I thought I was there to bring good news, not receive it.

In that moment, the part of me that believed I had arrived bearing God's presence and blessing died. And in its place emerged the realization that I also needed God's presence, that I also needed to hear good news. At that time of my life, I needed someone to remind me that God loved me, no matter what, and God did just that through Josephine.

God was already here in Haiti. God was in the piles of rubble that still filled the streets. God was among the children and those with disabilities. God didn't need me to bring God's presence—God was already here.

In our first reading for today, we heard the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was an Egyptian given to Sarah as a slave. When Sarah couldn't conceive a child, she gave Hagar to Abraham so that she might bear a child to be Abraham's heir. While Hagar was pregnant, Sarah treated her so harshly that she ran away. The unknown dangers of the wilderness seemed preferable to the known dangers of remaining in their camp.

Outside of the bounds of the camp, Hagar encountered God. God appeared to this unlikely one whose name means “foreigner.” Hagar, an outsider, is the only one in Scripture to give God a name. She calls God El-Roi, “the God who sees” because God saw her in the wilderness. God promised that her child would become a great nation and named her child Ishmael, which means “God hears”. Then she was told to return to Sarah and Abraham, where she gave birth to her son.

God came to Hagar not in the camp of the people chosen to bear God's blessing to the world, but in the wilderness beyond its boundaries.

God sees. God hears. God provides.

Now that Sarah has borne a child, she no longer sees a place for this stand-in heir and his mother. Though Sarah herself set up the scheme that brought about Ishmael's birth and his place in the household, now she rejects it. This time, Hagar and Ishmael leave the camp, not from choice, but because they are cast out. They are sent away from the very people chosen to bear God's blessing to the world. And once again, beyond the bounds of the camp, God is there.

Sometimes, in our self-centeredness, we assume that we are the center of God's concern. We imagine that God is here with us, and that whenever we leave our church buildings or our familiar routines, we are taking God out there. But God is already there. And God sees. God hears. God provides.

Jesus tells us that, although two sparrows are sold for a penny, “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” As poet and priest Steve Garnass-Holmes writes, they fall “into the hands of God, out of the sky that is God.” *[See Note 1]* They are never beyond the reach of God, not in life, not in death.

As the psalmist reminds us, Where can we flee from God's presence? Whether in the heights of heaven or the depths of despair, God is there. *[See Note 2]*

So if God is already there, perhaps our first task is not to speak, but to listen, not to do, but simply to be. Our task is to look closely so we can bear witness to the ways God is already there and already at work.

The story of Hagar is not simply a story about God's concern for those cast out. It is also a story that prepares us to recognize Jesus. Jesus spent his ministry outside the bounds of the camp with sinners and tax collectors, the poor and unclean. The God who met Hagar in the wilderness is the God in Christ who meets humanity outside the places of power and privilege.

In baptism, Paul writes, we have died and been raised with Christ. That means our old way of seeing the world dies too. We believe we are the heroes of the story, the ones bringing God to others, but being raised with Christ, we discover that God is already at work. We learn humility and begin to recognize Christ in unexpected places and people.

Sitting next to Josephine, I began to experience what Jesus means when he says, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The self that needed to be the helper, the rescuer, that self had to die. What emerged was someone who could receive grace as well as give it.

Soon, we will all go places we have not been before. I will begin a new chapter of ministry. And you will continue the work God has called you to do in this place. We will no longer share the same classrooms, coffee shops, committee meetings, or worship services. We will encounter people the other will never meet. But wherever we go, God will already be there.

God will be present among those who are grieving, among those who are struggling, and among those who have been pushed to the margins. God will be there in the Josephines of the world who have good news to proclaim. God will be there in the people who surprise us, challenge us, and remind us once again that we are not the ones bringing God into a new place.

Over these years together, I have often arrived thinking I had something to give, only to discover that I was the one receiving. Again and again, you have been bearers of God's grace to me. Through your kindness, your faithfulness, your questions, your generosity, and your love, God has spoken good news into my life.

As we prepare to part ways, we know that none of us is stepping into unknown territory alone. The God who met Hagar in the wilderness, the God who spoke through Josephine, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, has already gone ahead of us. God who sees. God who hears. God who provides. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes

Note 1: <https://unfoldinglight.net/> "Sparrow"

Note 2: Psalm 139:7-10