

1

This week I almost missed seeing a Blue Heron on the pond behind my house, for it blended into the greenish-blue water where it stood.

Suddenly, the bird took a step forward, revealing its location and prompting me to grab my camera to snap a few pictures before it flew off. Without taking time to look, I may have missed this beautiful sight.

Sometimes we may miss seeing what's right in front of us, or we may not appreciate what we see when we look at something, as was the case with

a Colorado native [who] moved to Texas and built a house with a large picture window from which he could view hundreds of miles of rangeland. "The only problem is," he said, "there's nothing to see."

About the same time, a Texan moved to Colorado and built a house with a large picture window overlooking the Rocky Mountains. "The only problem is I can't see anything," he said. "The mountains are in the way."¹

What beauty might you miss seeing? What gets in your way of seeing what's right in front of you? We don't have mountains here in Indiana to obscure our vision, but sometimes the bright lights and glitz of the city may obscure our vision of those living on the streets without homes, or our losses may prevent us from seeing the pain in a friend's eyes.

Our struggles may cloud our view. When the doctor tells us a prognosis, we may miss seeing what options for life are possible. When the economy forces prices to increase, we may miss seeing what is essential for our lives as our eyes focus on the luxuries we desire but cannot afford.

Even in our own families, we may focus on the conflicts and miss opportunities for harmony, as seemed to be the case in the story in Genesis. When Abraham and Sarah could not at first have a child, Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child with their servant, Hagar. When Hagar became pregnant, the family tension increased, prompting Sarah to mistreat Hagar, who then ran away into the wilderness to escape Sarah's cruelty.

Near a spring of water, Hagar encountered an angel, a messenger from God, who said, "God has heard your struggle, and you will have a son and many descendants." In response, she named God. Do you know what she called God? Look in your Bible to Genesis 16:13. ... She named God El-roi, which in Hebrew means "the one who sees." God had seen her affliction, her mistreatment, and God responded by offering her a promise and reassurance through the birth of a son.

This runaway woman Hagar, scorned by the main character Sarah, turns out to be the only person in the Bible who names God, and she is the first person to be spoken to by an angel. Only three other women in the Bible receive such an angelic visit. Do you recall any of the others? ...

- The mother of Samson
- Mary (the mother of Jesus)
- and a group of women at the tomb after Jesus died, including Mary Magdelene.

Just imagine what life would be like without these women recognizing the presence of God. What if they had not taken time to notice? If the women at the tomb had remained silent, the news of Jesus may have remained unknown.

Hagar also played a significant role in the spread of faith, for Muslims today trace their lineage back to Abraham and Hagar.

God hears us when we cry out. God sees us when we struggle. In these moments, it's tempting to be preoccupied in our conflicts and trials, but God invites us to take time to see what God is doing.

Even with Hagar's unique experience of sensing God's presence, her struggles did not end, for several

chapters later, we find her exiled with her son, Ishmael. Some type of conflict arose between Sarah's son Isaac and Hagar's son, so Abraham sent Hagar and her son into the wilderness.

Notice in the painting of the scene in Rembrandt's *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* (1640) who is portrayed in the light. Only Hagar, the one being sent into the wilderness, has light upon her face, while Abraham remains in the shadows.

In the hot, arid desert, Hagar and her son ran out of water, so she placed her son under a bush for a little shade, and she began to weep. Once again an angel appeared to Hagar, saying that God heard the cries of her son, Ishmael, a name in Hebrew that means "God hears." Hagar's eyes were then opened to see a well of water.

Throughout the story of Hagar, God heard and saw her struggles. One commentary noted about Hagar: "That the first woman to whom God talks is an outsider, a slave, and a foreigner is telling, and hints of God's regard for those in similar positions."²

I wonder if we have the same regard for such people. Do we hear the voices that cry out? Do we see the agony of those around us as God sees them? If so, how do we respond?

3

Last weekend while visiting Washington D.C. to sing at the Kennedy Center with a group of 148 voices from across our nation, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

As part of our time there, we visited the African-American History Museum. One room recalled the sit-in by African-American college students in Greensboro, NC, at a Woolworth’s segregated lunch counter. When the young people were denied any service, they refused to leave the lunch counter, which led to a nonviolent movement that quickly spread throughout the South.

The display contained an electronic interactive lunch counter, where I could sit and enter the story and become one of those who lived through the trauma. At various points along the story, the display offered me choices of how I would respond. When the last situation arose, I had to decide whether I would leave the lunch counter or

remain seated and face the violence of those who wanted to forcibly remove me.

Although I knew the decision of those college students was to stay seated and face the consequences, I wondered if I could have actually faced the consequences. As I entered their story and heard their cries for respect and equality, I found myself lamenting that such events happened in my lifetime, in the month I was born, February 1960. How many of you remember those events? How did you hear their cries? Did you see their suffering?

God hears the cries of those who face injustice and sees possibilities for hope. God saw the struggles of Hagar thousands of years ago and saw those who sat at lunch counters sixty-three years ago. The one Hagar named El-roi, “God sees,” continues to see you as well, and God hears today those who cry out, so no matter what comes your way, cry out, for God hears.

¹ Hodgins, Michael. 1001 *More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (p. 735). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #684.

² Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A, Volume 3: Season after Pentecost.