

“See You at the Parade”
June 9, 2024

Genesis 21:8-21
II Corinthians 4:13-18

“God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw...”

What is seen?

What is missed?

How do we in the church block the sight of others?

And how might we be an aid to seeing?

This coming Saturday, we will have a booth on the Ped Mall during the Pride Fest. This, of course, is nothing new. We’ve been a presence at the Pride Fest at least twenty years now—often the *only* church presence there. And because we had such a great time during our first appearance in the Pride Parade last year, we’ve unrolled our banner and we’ll be in the lineup once more when the parade kicks off.

We do all of this in part because, as I said, we have a great time, meeting new people and talking with them throughout the day.

And we also do this so that we can let people know about our welcoming, open and affirming congregation.

What we affirm is this: Everyone—*everyone*—is included in the love of God. Everyone—*everyone*—is accepted by God and is a recipient of that love. We speak this message especially to those who have been wounded by the world, or wounded by the church, so that they might sense the reality of the radical inclusion of God’s love.

We do and say what we can to make the accepting and welcoming love of God evident to others. We act and speak as part of Something far greater, more powerful, and filled with love and compassion for the whole creation. We seek to be clear about what we believe and why we do the things we do.

You know, however, that sometimes, even with our red doors and tall steeple, this church and those of us inside can go unnoticed. And yes, sometimes, we seem to hide our light under a bushel even though Jesus suggested we should do otherwise.

Pride Fest is one of those times when we do what Jesus tells us and let our light shine. There on the Ped Mall we hand out beads and church brochures and tell people who we are.

And every year, church members at our booth hear the same thing: “I didn’t know churches like yours even existed.”

Word is not getting out—at least not enough.

Maybe that’s just the nature of things.

One of Andy Warhol’s last paintings was titled “Camouflage Last Supper.” In Warhol’s famous way, he took a familiar image—in this case, the “Last Supper” of Leonardo da Vinci—and transformed it—in this case, by covering the painting with a camouflage pattern. The pattern covers and partially veils the features of both Jesus and his disciples. In this painting we get a glimpse of Warhol’s own Christian faith, that even in obscurity, the Christ is there.¹

There are times, there are certainly times when God—and the people of God—are obscured, camouflaged.

As the fox in *The Little Prince* says: “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Paul put it this way: “What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Sounding almost like Hagar, the old hymn prays: “Open my eyes, that I may see.”

“I didn't know churches like yours even existed.”

I was thinking about this in the past week when I learned of the death of an old friend from high school, whose name was Ken. While he lived just a few blocks from me when we were growing up, he attended a parochial school and I didn’t know him until high school. We weren’t close friends, but we hung out together at times and both of us went to Southern Illinois University where we’d see each other occasionally.

Then we lost track of each other until—as happens quite often—we reconnected through Facebook.

It was then that I found out Ken was gay. And he did the things gay people do—he married the person he loved, he volunteered each with an organization that helped the homeless and the hungry. And he joined and worshipped at a large and welcoming United Methodist congregation in Atlanta.

His faith was like that of many of us here: questioning, tentative, uncertain. We can imagine that the messages he heard from churches when he was growing up and even as an adult were anything but affirming of who Ken was. But somehow, somewhere, he learned that he was included in God’s love. Somehow, somewhere, his eyes were opened and Ken was able to see that churches like ours do exist.

Churches like this one do indeed exist. But they—we—aren’t always obvious, even when we raise our banners and march in parades and hand out beads.

The story of Hagar—a name that means “Forsaken”—is a story of what we see and what we miss. Indeed, at one time Hagar herself gave a name to God, saying: “You are El-roi,” which means the “God of Seeing.”

Like many stories in the Bible, this morning's lesson from Genesis is a horrible tale. Sarah has protected her own child at what looks to be the expense of the life of another. Abraham has been passive. And the death of a forsaken mother and son seem certain.

Life is filled with desperate situations, occasions in which it seems like there is no way out, nothing that can be done.

Life is filled with situations in which either weak passivity or aggressive revenge appear to be the only option.

Those rejected by the world—and all too often by the church—seem on their own, bereft of resources.

The theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, says that “often enough, the actual direction of the world and its history offer little evidence that a God of love and mercy, or even justice, controls it. The extent and absurdity of what seems to be meaningless suffering, the triumph and good fortune of the unjust, and the presence of sheer evil gnaw at the souls of those who believe in God's good care.”²

Affirming God's providential care does not mean things will go our way. They will, in some sense, however, go God's way. Bad things happen. Evil is present. Still, with good reason we speak of God's merciful presence in the world and in our lives.

Because we trust God's care with eyes wide open to all the signs against it, we can avoid both the aggressive assertion that God is with us and the passive acceptance of all that is wrong in the world. We discover instead the gospel challenge to see opportunities for increasing life and joy in each situation. We find the courage to choose what is right in difficult situations and the faith to continue with our choices in the face of opposition.

Affirming God's providential care is an act of faith. We trust in God's care by faith. We do not know it with certainty. We cannot know it with certainty. When Hagar lifts up her voice and weeps, there are no guarantees. The outcome is not certain.

What starts to become clear, however, is that God is on the side of life for all.

The God of Abraham does not forget the promise of a great nation. And that nation will trace its lineage back to Abraham through his son Isaac.

But at the same time, God protects Ishmael, and remembers the promise to make a great nation of Hagar's son as well. In time, Islam will trace its descent from Abraham through Ishmael.

The God we discover in the Bible is one who gives abundantly to all and still has more to give.

Providence—the Christian faith that God is in control of creation—confronts the apparent reign of death. God cares.

How does God care?

How is this divine care shown?

Genesis puts it this way. “God opened Hagar’s eyes.”

Perhaps this is the best expression of God’s care for us. How quickly we fall into going through life with our eyes closed, blind to all that is around us. We look at the things that are seen, and miss what is unseen or even camouflaged.

Again, it is a matter of seeing. Routine has a dulling effect on us and we see things only in their immediate context. Religious perception, however, sees the deeper nature of everyday events, experiencing them as miraculous, as an expression of the providence of God.³

Life is still filled with desperate situations, occasions in which it seems like there is no way out, nothing that can be done.

Life is still filled with situations in which either weak passivity or aggressive revenge appears to be the only option.

God is the one who, in loving mercy, opens our eyes—gives us a fuller vision.

Remember how the author of Genesis puts it: “God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well full of water; she went to it, filled her water skin and gave the child a drink.”

Affirming and experiencing the care of God moves us to offer that care to others.

Experiencing the welcome and affirmation of this congregation moves us to extend that welcome to others—and there are still so many who have no idea that a church like this exists, so many who wait to have our actions and our welcome bring new vision to their eyes and hearts.

Defeat and death are not the only options.

Apathy and selfish indifference are not the only options.

We always have a choice.

We can always do something.

God opens our eyes to new possibilities.

No doubt, some who are here today are face extreme situations, you are not sure what you should do, not sure what you can do.

No doubt, some who are here are discouraged by what you see in the world or in your lives.

The good news is that there is a well of life nearby. There is a well of refreshing, renewing water, inviting you to drink from it and to share that water with others.

May the One whom Hagar named the “God of Seeing” open our eyes. May we see the constant care of God and to live joyfully trusting in God’s goodness.

Then may we help others see the well, to invite them to drink.

We do this, don’t we? With all our failings, we do this.

Each week, we worship together as a way of announcing God’s love for all people.

We keep looking with open eyes to find more ways to be a visible presence, the church that people are looking for.

We go to the Ped Mall.

And look! Once again, we’ll see you at the parade.

¹ Jane Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, pg. 109 ff.

² Pannenberg, vol. 2 pg. 54.

³ Pannenberg, vol. 2 pg. 46.