



## “Looking for a Well”

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*Genesis 21:8-21*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s (ON-TWAN DE SAWNT EX-YOU-PERRY’S) *The Little Prince* is a beloved, classic children’s book. I must admit that when I first began reading it to my girls, I didn’t really enjoy it. But the girls loved this strange, yet captivating story so I pushed through and slowly began to see beauty and truth in this fable. A pilot crashes his airplane in the Saharan Desert and it is there that he encounters the Little Prince. The pilot knows that if he cannot fix his plane quickly he will die of exposure. At first, like any adult would, he concentrates on repairing the machine and is even slightly annoyed at the Little Prince who appears seemingly out of nowhere and does not share his concern about their impending death under the scorching sun. Instead, the little traveler chatters on about wanting to have a sheep and the extinct volcanoes on his home planet and the special rose safely ensconced under glass that he left behind when he fell to Earth.

The days pass as the pilot attempts to fix his plane and listens to the Little Prince describe his journey to Earth. On the eighth day, the pilot drinks the last of his water and prepares himself for death. But, the Little Prince knows a secret. He knows that out there in the midst of the sun-swept landscape there is a well. In that well is all the water they need. To him, the desert is not about the harsh realities of survival or what the eye can see. He doesn’t fixate on the relentless sun and the endless expanse—he sees the hidden well. The desert is a place of beauty because somewhere, hidden amongst the piles of sand, there is a spring, and this hidden water in turn endows beauty and life and love to the weary travelers.

Listen to this reading from the book:

The well we had come to was not at all like the wells of the Sahara. The wells of the Sahara are no more than holes dug in the sand. This one looked more like a village well. But there was no village here, and I thought I was dreaming.

“It is strange,” I said to the little prince. “Everything is ready: the pulley, the bucket, and the rope...”

He laughed, grasped the rope, and set the pulley working. And the pulley groaned the way an old weather vane groans when the wind has been asleep for a long time.

“Hear that?” said the little prince. “We’ve awakened this well, and it’s singing.”

I didn’t want him to tire himself out. “Let me do that,” I said to him. “It’s too heavy for you.”

Slowly, I hoisted the bucket to the edge of the well. I set it down with great care. The song of the pulley continued in my ears, and I saw the sun glisten on the still-trembling water.

“I’m thirsty for that water,” said the little prince. “Let me drink some...”

And I understood what he’d been looking for!

I raised the bucket to his lips. He drank, eyes closed. It was as sweet as a feast. That water was more than merely a drink. It was born of our walk beneath the stars, of the song of the pulley, of

the effort of my arms. It did the heart good, like a present. When I was a little boy, the Christmas-tree lights, the music of midnight mass, the tenderness of people's smiles made up, in the same way, the whole radiance of the Christmas present I received.

"People where you live," the little prince said, "grow five thousand roses in one garden... yet they don't find what they're looking for..."

"They don't find it," I answered.

"And yet what they're looking for could be found in a single rose, or a little water..."

"Of course," I answered.

And the little prince added, "But eyes are blind. You have to look with the heart."

In last week's Bible reading, Sarah laughed. She laughed in disbelief and in sadness because at ninety-years-old she did not believe that she could bear a child; God heard her laughing and provided for her in the midst of her unbelief. But years before that encounter with the Divine under the oaks at Mamre, Sarah and Abraham, convinced that they would never conceive, took matters into their own hands and Abraham fathered a child with Sarah's slave, Hagar. At the time, this felt like the only way the couple would have a baby and that God's promises would be fulfilled. It felt like a good plan, but Hagar's pregnancy brought up feelings of anger and jealousy and hurt in Sarah and so she banished the pregnant Hagar to the desert. God found Hagar there, alone and afraid. God told Hagar to return to the community, and gave her a promise identical to the promise made to Abraham—that her descendants would be too numerous to count. The child born to her would bear a special name, Ishmael, which in Hebrew means "God hears," because the Lord had heard her misery. In turn, Hagar gave a name to the Lord, El-Roi, "the God who sees me," and in a delightful play on words exclaims, "I have seen the one who sees me."

And now we fast-forward fifteen years to our lectionary text for today. Sarah did indeed conceive and bear a son. Sarah's laughter shifted from disbelief to joy. Isaac's name means laughter. But Isaac's name not only means laughter, it can also mean "to play." We see in the text today that the teenage Ishmael was playing with the newly weaned Isaac. Ishmael was playing with, laughing with, "Isaacing" with Sarah's son. Ishmael could have been teasing Isaac, he could have been too rough, or he could have been playing in a brotherly, peaceful way. We don't know, but whatever was going on, Sarah saw that Ishmael was beginning to claim the role as the eldest son and the heir of the family blessing. Those old wounds and simmering jealousies reopened and once again, Sarah determined to drive Hagar out into the desert, this time with her son, Ishmael. She commanded Abraham, the person with power, to drive them out, just as Adam and Eve were driven from the garden. Ishmael was to be denied of his inheritance and basic resources of the household: shelter, food, water, education, and support. Mother and child were cast out, driven out, of their community and into the wilderness.

Hagar and Ishmael wandered in the desert of Beersheba. They drank their waterskins dry. And Hagar knew this was the end for them. She could not bear to witness the death of her beloved son and so she placed him under a bush and went a bow shot's distance away where she could still see him but could not hear him cry. Mother and son were disoriented and dying in the desert and God seemed distant. They were lost and at a loss. The promises of God made to her years earlier were a faraway memory and God was nowhere to be found. She shook her dusty fists at God and wept.

By distancing herself from her crying son, from the one named “God hears,” Hagar resigned her fate to a deaf God, to a God who was not listening. But God hears. God heard the cries of the child and spoke into Hagar’s spirit. God told her to go and hold the boy. “Go and put your arms around him and hold him tight. Resist the temptation to distance yourself from him. Do not let despair and hopelessness drive a wedge between you and this child. I have plans for him. This isn’t the time to let go.” And then, through her sweat-stained brow and her tear-filled eyes, she saw a well. God did not perform a miracle for Hagar in the usual sense of the word. God did not create new resources that were not already on the scene. Rather God opened her eyes so that she could see a well she had not seen before. When that happened, the same environment, the same desert that had looked hopeless and barren was now seen as a life-sustaining place. The well had been there all along, and the place was not as deserted as she had once felt. God had opened her eyes. Her eyes had been blind; now she could see with her heart.

In this text today, in addition to the play on the name of Ishmael in the element of hearing, we observe an element of seeing. Only this time, it is not God who sees Hagar, but it is God who helps Hagar see the well of water that would be the means of her son’s survival. It is clear that God provided for both mother and child as part of the outworking of God’s commitment to all the children of Abraham. It is interesting that in the very next chapter of Genesis Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and to destroy the joy and laughter in his life. Abraham was called by God to lift up his eyes and see the divine provision, the ram in the bush, the means for which his son would be spared. Abraham then named the place with an emphasis on seeing: Yahweh Yireh, “God will see ahead of me. God will provide for me.”

Together these names of God, a God who sees and hears, reveals the dimension of trust to which God was calling both Hagar and Abraham. God is the God who hears and sees the circumstances of our lives, and in hearing and seeing emerges our trust in a God who works in the world in ways we often cannot see or hear. God sees what we cannot see and knows what we do not know. God sees us, the real us, with all our flaws and failures. God looks at us and chooses to loves us, every single one of us. God sees us and hears us.

God heard the cries of Ishmael in the face of imminent death. God hears. Hagar listened to the divine voice and realized that wherever she might be, she was never beyond the sight of the Lord. God sees. God hears the cries of the outcast, the victim, the one excluded. God sees the refugees as they run from death and destruction. God hears the anguish of people of color who cry out for justice. God sees our Muslim sisters and brothers, descendants of Ishmael and of Abraham when they pray for the protesting to stop and the hate to cease. God hears the sobs of every child in pain. God sees us when we are in the desert places of our lives, when our loved ones are sick, when the bills are too many, and the paychecks are too few. God hears when our prayers seem to hit a ceiling and the landscape is bleak. God hears and God sees.

Ishmael, in the lineage of Abraham, bears a name that reveals a promise to every human being. God’s promise of provision is meant for all people. The promise of God was for the whole world, the world that would be blessed through the both Ishmael and Isaac. Blessed are the Muslims and Jews and Christians. Blessed are the marginalized. Blessed are the outcasts. Blessed are the strangers. Blessed are the powerless. God hears their cries. God is not deaf or

blind. God is not unreachable, unapproachable, unattainable, or inaccessible. God is not an absentee landlord, void of feeling or emotion. No, God sees every painful sob and hears every cry of distress. As the Hebrews learned after four centuries in slavery under Egypt, “God heard their groaning.” Knowing and believing that God heard them was the most important step in their liberation from oppression. The same is true for us today. God sees and God hears!

I know it might seem as if we are traversing an expansive desert. We are often tired, lost, and confused. We feel as if it is a struggle to survive, to see the wells, the water, the places of refreshment and renewal. But when God comes to find us, God appears much as the Little Prince does. God sees us, hears us, and beckons us to look with our hearts for refuge and healing. God dwells with us, dies with us, and through Jesus’s resurrection redeems us. God points us to the hidden wellspring of life and the Living Water makes all things new. Do you see the well?

Amen.