

February Word of Life

‘You are the God who sees me.’ (cf. Gen 16:13)

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The verse for this month's Word of Life is taken from the book of Genesis. The words are spoken by Hagar, Sarah's slave who was given in marriage to Abraham because Sarah could not bear children and ensure offspring. When Hagar discovered that she was pregnant, she felt superior to her mistress. The mistreatment she then received from Sarah eventually forced her to flee into the desert. And it is there that she had a unique encounter with God and received the promise of offspring in a way that was similar to the pledge made by God to Abraham. The son to be born was to be called Ishmael, which means ‘God has heard’ because God took upon himself Hagar's anguish and gave her a lineage.

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Hagar's reaction reflects the belief commonly held in the ancient world that human beings could not sustain very close contact with the divine. Hagar was surprised and grateful to have survived what had taken place. She had felt God's love precisely in the desert, the privileged place where we can experience a personal encounter with him. Hagar was aware of his presence and felt loved by a God who had 'seen' her in her painful situation, a God who cares for and surrounds his creatures with love. Chiara Lubich writes; ‘He is not an absent, distant God, indifferent to the fate of humanity or to the fate of each one of us. So many times we experience this. He is here with me, he is always with me, he knows everything about me and shares my every thought, every joy, every desire. He bears with me all my trials and worries.’

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This Word of Life revives a certainty and gives us comfort: we are never alone in our journey through life because God is there and loves us. Sometimes, like Hagar, we feel like ‘strangers’ on this earth, or we look for ways to escape from challenging and painful situations. But we must be certain of God's presence and of our relationship with him: he sets us free, reassures us and always allows us to start again.

This was Paola's experience of living alone during the time of the pandemic. She recounts: ‘Since the start of the total shut down of all activity in our country, I have been alone in my home. There is no one with whom I can have physical contact or who can share this experience with me; therefore, I try to fill the day as best I can. As time goes by, however, I feel more and more discouraged and I find it very hard to fall asleep at night. Sometimes I feel as if I will never escape from this nightmare. However, I feel strongly that I must rely completely on God and believe in his love. I have no doubts about his presence: I am certain that he accompanies and comforts me during these lonely months. I realise that I am not alone because of the little signs

that come to me from my neighbours. An example was the time when I was celebrating a friend's birthday online and, immediately afterwards, my neighbour left a slice of cake by my door.'

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Guarded then by God's presence, we too can be messengers of His love. Indeed, we are called to see the needs of others, to help our neighbours when they feel they are 'alone in the desert' and to share their joys and sorrows. We are immersed in the world and effort is needed on our part to recognise the needs of humanity around us.

We can stop and draw close to those who are searching for meaning and seeking answers to life's many questions: they may be friends, family members, acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues, people in financial difficulty or perhaps people who are socially marginalised.

We can remember and share those precious moments where we encountered God's love and rediscovered the meaning of our lives.

We can face difficulties together and when we feel we must 'cross the desert', we can discover the presence of God in what is happening around us, and this gives us confidence to continue our journey

Patricia Mazzola & the Word of Life team