

Reflections on the annual watchword 2023

„You are a God, who sees me.“

Genesis 16,13

January 2023



For heaven's sake, I thought at first when I heard about the decision for the 2023 annual watchword. "You are a God who sees me." Why on earth was I actually frightened at first?

Without the context of the verse from the first book of Moses, the words of the sentence reminded me of my childhood, more precisely of the time of Sunday school, in which we quite often, quite enthusiastically sang a song about God seeing me: "Watch out little hand what you do," the song is called, and it continues with the words: "for the Father in heaven looks down on you, therefore watch out little hand what you do."

Coupled with the children's prayer, "Dear God make me fear you, that I may go to heaven," the song and the idea that God, as the over-educator so to speak, will watch all my action and reward or punish me accordingly, even guard my entrance into heaven with it, has created fear of God. Big brother is watching you.

The idea of a loving, protecting and life accompanying God was not encouraged in this way.

But it is exactly this God that the year's watchword is about. Therefore it is important for me to consider the context in which the verse is written: "You are a God who sees me. (Genesis 16:13)

The Bible verse of the 2023 annual watchword refers to a dramatic story.

It is about the married couple Abraham and Sarah. Sarah is barren and therefore asks her husband to have a child with the maid Hagar. It was hardly to be expected otherwise, the pregnancy leads then nevertheless to a violent conflict between the women. They humiliate each other and despise each other deeply, although initially it was planned together.

For Hagar, the situation seems increasingly hopeless. Finally it becomes too much for Hagar and she flees. In a completely desperate situation, pregnant, alone, homeless and without perspective, Hagar is saved from nowhere. Homeless and lonely, she runs to a water source in the desert. There she meets an angel who advises her to return to Abraham and Sarah. The angel predicts that Hagar will have so many descendants that "they cannot be counted because of the great multitude."

Hagar prays to God at the water source and states, "You are a God who sees me."

A very different context in which Hagar speaks of seeing God than was taught to me in childhood. For Hagar, it is a saving seeing. In her distress she experiences that God does not leave her alone, that God protects her and accompanies her in her life.

It is not a matter of a scrutinizing observation in the sense of Big Brother is watching you, but of being seen in a positive sense. This is what Hagar experiences there: that she is seen as a woman in her completely threatened existence. And is saved.

The 2023 annual watchword thus addresses a situation with which we are confronted every day: Flight and expulsion.

With the story of Hagar at the spring, the misery of flight and expulsion and the subsequent divine salvation in the desert is shown to us memorably and uniquely in the Bible in an individual fate. Behind the hundreds of thousands of refugees in the Congo, from the Ukraine and those who try to flee across the Mediterranean Sea, there is a single person, a single individual like Hagar, a desperate human being whom God sees, perceives in all his distress and wants to save.

The desert experiences of Hagar, the feelings of emptiness, exhaustion, discouragement, disappointment are central experiences of human life. Hagar experiences encouragement, recognition and support. With her recognition of God as a God who sees her, there is a change of view and a change of behavior. Hagar is strengthened, becomes strong and, with her son Ishmael, eventually becomes a great nation.

In the context of the story from the Bible, the annual watchword invites us to make this change of view with Hagar and to act. Each individual refugee has their own story of need and calls for help. What and who do I see? What can I do?

Like Hagar, I will first pray and trust that God will awaken my spirit and show me what I can do concretely, whether to take action myself or to support others in their work.

In the context of the story from the Bible, the annual watchword invites us to make this change of perspective with Hagar and to trust in God in our life.

My personal hardship, my problems at work, my worries about the family, my fear of the future, God sees all this. He will encourage me and will help me to act as He helped Hagar.

For "You are a God who sees me."

With this confidence we go into the year 2023.