

“Hagar’s Story”
The Very Rev. Tracey Lind
Sunday, June 25, 2023
Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Proper 7A - Genesis 21.8-2, Romans 6.1b-11, Matthew 10.24-39



Tracey Lind - The Wilderness - Israel - 2005

Let us pray in the words of Steven Shakespeare:

God of truth uncovered, you trace the sparrow’s flight, and plumb the secret places of the heart: bring our fear and conflict into the light of your presence; help us to lose our hollow life and find our way to you.¹

This morning’s gospel passage is one of my favorites. I’ve preached on this text so many times; I think I know it by heart. I’ve certainly taken it into my heart, and it has served as a guidepost for my life and my ministry.

Today we listen to Jesus giving his disciples instruction for their first evangelical mission. He knew that they would experience resistance and rejection, so he encouraged them to be brave, faithful and truthful.

We could take this text in so many different directions this week. We could talk about coming out in the LGBTQ community. We could explore risk taking as a “Me Too” or corporate

¹ Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*

whistleblower. We could reflect on the indictment of a former president and what happens when classified documents are hidden and brought into the light. We could discuss family secrets that are eventually revealed and the familial conflict that sometimes follows. But this morning, I want to consider this text as a midrash - that is, commentary, reflection or teaching - on our reading from the Hebrew Bible - the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael.²

Hagar was Sarah's maid. Like Sarah, the Egyptian Hagar - whose name is derived from the Hebrew word for "stranger," was taken from her home to Canaan, but not by her husband, rather as a slave by another woman. However, unlike her "barren" owner Sarah, Hagar was "fertile" and thus able to get pregnant and have a child.

As we learned in last week's story, unable to conceive a child, Sarai conceived a plan to make Hagar a surrogate. The Hebrew text is quite specific: Sarai said to Abram, "Seeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, go into her - have intercourse with my slave; maybe, I will have children through her." (Gen 16.2) Actually, the Hebrew is more ambiguous as Sarai uses a verb that could mean "I will have a child" or "I will be built up" - that is, I will be established. For a woman, in ancient as in modern times, having a child was a way of being "established" in the eyes of society. Abraham happily went along with this strategy to get him a descendant. And, as legend suggests, Hagar was an attractive woman, so it probably wasn't a burden for Abraham to "go into her.". This was not an anomaly for we know from American history that slave owners often had intimate relationships, sex and children with their slave-women.

When Hagar got pregnant, life got complicated for this threesome as polygamy is introduced into the story. The text tells us that, "After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife." (Gen 16.3) There was now tension between Hagar as Sarai's slave-maid and Hagar as Abram's second wife and soon-to-be mother of his first child. The scripture tells us that "When [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, her mistress [Sarai] became slight in her eyes." (Gen 16.4) In becoming Abram's pregnant second wife, Hagar's self-esteem was also nourished. As Hebrew biblical scholar Phyllis Trible wrote: "Hierarchical blinders dropped. The exalted mistress decreased; the lowly slave increased...as a reordering of the relationship [between the two women and their husband] emerged."³

While Hagar saw anew, Sarai held onto the old. Speaking not to Hagar but to Abram, Sarai said: "May the wrong done be upon you. I gave my maid to your embrace, but when she saw that she had conceived, then I was slight in her eyes. May the Lord judge between you and me." (Gen 16.5) And, once again, Abram acquiesced to his wife's power, saying: "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." (Gen 16.6) So Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, and she ran away.

Pregnant Hagar entered the wilderness, which for her was a hospitable place. For there she came upon a spring of water. The Hebrew word for "spring" also means "eye." Just like the new vision of herself and her relationship to Abram and Sarai, Hagar was about to get a new vision of the future. By the spring, a messenger of God found Hagar. The messenger spoke to her, calling her name, and asking: "Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?" (Gen 16.8) This is a powerful question about destiny being addressed to a slave

² I first really heard this Bible story in a memorable lecture by my Hebrew Scripture professor Dr. Phyllis Trible to whom I am deeply indebted for her exegetical teaching. My Hebrew word study for this sermon comes from Dr. Trible as well as several rabbinical colleagues.

³ Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, p. 40

woman by a divine messenger. Hagar was able to answer the first question: "I am fleeing from Sarai, my mistress." (Gen 16.8), but she didn't answer the second question. Maybe she didn't know the answer; after all, destiny is a complicated question when you are an enslaved fugitive.

The messenger's reply was not very consoling. He ordered Hagar to return to Sarai and "suffer affliction under her hand." However, the messenger also made her a promise, "I will greatly multiply your descendants; they shall be too numerous to count." (Gen 16.11) He continued, "Look - you are pregnant and shall bear a son; call him Ishmael for the Lord has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand shall be against all and the hand of all shall be against him; he shall dwell in opposition to all his kin." (Gen 16.12-13) So she called the Lord who had been speaking to her, "You are El-roi"; meaning by this - 'Even here I have seen the back of the One who looks upon me.' (Gen 16.13)

This is a remarkable story rarely proclaimed in Jewish and Christian worship. Hagar, a runaway slave, is the first woman in the Bible to receive an annunciation - the promise of the birth of a son and innumerable descendants. A messenger from God gave her yet-unborn child a name - Ishmael, meaning "God hears." And though God heard her affliction, God's messenger told her to return to enslavement and affliction. And not only that, but the messenger told her that her son, Ishmael, would live in conflict and alienation all the days of his life. Wow! How would you like to receive that message?

Hagar named the God who sent such a message as El-roi, "The God of seeing." As Professor Tribble reminds us, "At a spring on the way to Shur, Hagar the theologian sees God and lives. Uniting the God who sees and the God is seen, Hagar's insights move from life under affliction to life after theophany."⁴ Thus concludes Hagar's first divine-human encounter in the wilderness.

The story continues. Hagar returned to Sarai and Abram and bore them a son. And then, as we learned last week, Sarah, at the ripe old age of ninety, got pregnant and had a son whom they named Isaac, which in Hebrew means "to laugh." But all did not remain well in this complicated extended family.

Once again, in today's reading from the 21st chapter of Genesis, laughter became a problem. When Isaac was about three years old, Sarah watched him "playing" with Ishmael, the son of Hagar, who was probably about fifteen years old. While we're not certain what's actually at issue here, the Hebrew word for "playing" can also mean "mocking," "fooling around," or "toying with him sexually."⁵ Whatever was going on, Ishmael's actions threatened Sarah so she told Abraham to "throw out this slave woman with her son" so that he would not share in Isaac's inheritance. (Gen 21.10)

The call for the expulsion of Hagar raises disturbing issues and questions. As eloquently stated in the Reform Jewish Women's Torah Commentary, "Not only does the story portray the oppression of one woman over another; it also places responsibility for the enmity between two peoples - the descendants of Isaac and those of Ishmael - upon women, especially Sarah."⁶ A story about domestic relations has been used over the millennia to undergird and justify violent tensions between Jews (and by extension Christians) and Muslims.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41

⁵ *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p. 98

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98

For much of my adult life, I have sat in rooms where religious, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities have fought over a small slice of pie while the majority has stood by and passively watched. I think that this biblical episode set the stage for this kind of ongoing drama.

The text tells us that Abraham grieved, on account of his son; yet, it does not clarify which son he was referring to. At that point, God joined in the situation. In apparently supporting Sarah's concern over inheritance, Abraham was instructed "not to grieve but to do what Sarah told him to do." (Gen 21.12) God went on to say that he would "make a nation" out of Ishmael as well. But there's no mention of Hagar's well being, future or even survival. Really? Is this the action of a just, merciful and compassionate God?

Obedient Abraham did as he was told. He got up early in the morning and put some bread, a skin of water, and her fifteen year old son on Hagar's shoulder and "cast" her out. Although a wealthy man, Abraham used none of his wealth to ensure Hagar's future. With a "paltry alimony" of bread and water, Professor Tribble notes that, "As deplorable in motivation and consequence, Abraham's action accords Hagar, along with her child, another distinction."⁷ She is the first recorded woman to be divorced and dismissed.

Hagar trudged away and wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba until the water in the skin was gone. Then, she "cast" her child under a bush, walked away, sat down on the other side of the bush and wept in a loud voice. This scene always reminds me of photos of desperate women with emaciated children along the road in places of war, environmental destruction and famine.

Here where the story gets really interesting. The text tells us that while Hagar wept, "God heard the voice of the boy," (Gen 21.17) and an angel of the Lord called to her and said, "Hagar, what is troubling you? Have no fear, for God has heard the cry of the lad where he is." This divine hearing signals hope and help. The messenger continued, "Get up, lift the boy, and hold him with your hand, for I am going to make of him a great nation." (Gen 21.18) Having lived under the harsh hand of his mistress, Hagar now was told to lift up the hand of her son.

God then "opened her eyes, and [Hagar] saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink." Her tears and cries were transformed into what Jesus would later call "living water." (John 7.37)

Hagar's discovery of water in the wilderness is eloquently described by Syrian-American poet and professor Mohja Kahf in her poem, "The First Thing."

There came to me the revelation
of the water

I left the world of Abraham,
jugs sealed with cork,
cooking-grease jars,
Sarah's careful kitchen fires

I walked across a razor-sharp horizon,
slates of earth, sediment
of ancient seas

⁷ Tribble, p.47

to stand alone at this frontier:
where the shape of the cup of morning is strange
and dome of sky, mat of earth have shifted,
where God does not have a house yet
and the times for prayer have not been appointed,”

where the only water is buried deep
under hard ground and I must find it
or my child will die, my people
remain unborn
The first thing
the founder does
is look for water

I am Hajar, mother
of a people
I stand here straddling the end and the beginning

Each rock cuts into the heel like God
Each step is blood, is risk:

is prayer⁸

Hagar’s story concludes with these words. “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow...and his mother got a wife for him from [her native land] of Egypt.” (Gen 21.20-21)

Abraham’s family tree now had two branches - Isaac and Ishmael. Though they were not close brothers and their descendants would often be in conflict with each other, in the 25th chapter of Genesis, they came together to bury their father. As for Hagar - after becoming the first divorced wife, the first freed slave, and the mother of what would become not only a great nation but also one of the three Abrahamic faiths - she disappeared from the Hebrew Bible.

Yes, Hagar’s story is often silenced and devalued in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but as Jesus reminded his disciples before they were sent off, Hagar learned first-hand from an angel of God: “Have no fear of them for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops...Do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Mt 10.26-27, 31)

⁸ Mohja Kahf, “The First Thing,” *Hagar Poems* (2016)



Tracey Lind - New Beginnings - Phoenix - 2018