

Hagar: The clue between the text and the world. (Gen 21:8-21)

Today I want to speak to you about a woman who is often overlooked throughout history and even in the Biblical text, and one that, much more recently than I care to admit, has become a sort of a heroine of mine: Hagar, and by extension her son Ishmael.

This morning I hope to help you reinterpret her story a little bit, and tell the story from her perspective, and in doing so, I hope for you to see just how many Hagar's there are in our world today. And yet, I also to show you how this story is as much about us and who we are, as it is a woman who lived a long time ago.

The common lectionary, a third year cycle of liturgical texts set to help us revisit important narratives, sets before us this morning the story of Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. Most of us have only a cursory understanding of who Hagar is... Perhaps you remember that Sarah and Abram, later Abraham, couldn't have children. And that Hagar is Sarah's handmaid, yes her slave. Sarah since she thinks she is unable persuades her husband, Abram to have a child with her handmaid Hagar instead, and soon a child is on the way.

As one might imagine, there are certain problems inherent in this arrangement that are not solved by the addition of her child. As Sarah saw it, Hagar no longer walked around the house, but in the words of the dynamic writer Frederick Buechner, "*she flounced, and whenever she had a craving for things like bagels and lox, naturally Abraham went out and got them for her. In no time at all Sarah was livid with jealousy.*" (*Peculiar Treasures*).

So Abraham, as the male coward in this circumstance, said to Sarah to go ahead and "fire" Hagar then if she didn't like it, and soon as done, Hagar is out for the first time, still carrying her unborn child.

Yet, there an angel of the Lord who intercedes telling Hagar to go back and that she is to name her baby Ishmael and to know that Ishmael would be the first of a multitude of descendants, a divine promise. Not having anything better, she returns, having to return through the servants' entrance where after much baiting, she is eventually reaccepted. A few months later, Ishmael is born, just as the Lord said.

Yet, from our text this morning, we know her troubles aren't over. Due to another twist of divine fate, it wasn't long before Sarah herself, gave birth to a son named Isaac, who God promised would be the father of a great nation. This is far beyond Sarah's wildest expectations, not to mention everyone else's, and that for a while creates peace which rules over the tribe.

But then we get our text this morning, where during a celebration for Isaac, Sarah discovers Isaac and Ishmael, the beloved son and now teenager, playing with her toddler, and once again the fat was in the fire.

Convinced of his treachery, and that her “upstairs son” would have to split his inheritance with Hagar’s “downstairs brat,” she once again nagged Abraham into driving them out, this time permanently. Ishmael is given not his promised inheritance, but a loaf of bread and skin of water. When they got as far as Beersheba, they ran out of water, and Hagar gives up, walking away from her dying son to sit down and weep.

I wonder how often we hear this story and feel such pity and sorrow for Hagar. I wonder how often we read this story as one about the rejection and disowning of family. Do we just see Hagar’s back and listen to her weeping as she leaves?

Or if we read it from her perspective where could there be a tired smile, determination, or at least relief, on her face as she leaves?

To assist with this perspective, I want to draw a comparison to someone else from Scripture, Moses. Like Moses, Hagar is from Egypt. Like Moses, Hagar existed in a fraught state of the oppressed, including and adjacent to the inner circle of power, which affords her a certain status, but leaves one as an outsider whose fate is never in one’s own hands. Like Moses, Hagar fled her enslavers and sought refuge in the desert. Like Moses, she is sent back to the place of her enslavement by God on the basis of a promise of freedom. Like Moses, she endures oppression because of the place of her birth, and perhaps the color of her skin.

Like Moses, it is an even the birth of a first-son of the oppressors that finally lead to her being free. Like Moses, she experiences an exodus that takes her into the desert unprotected save for God. Like Moses, when she and her son is starving and about to die of thirst, they are given food and water by God. Like Moses, there is a promised land of freedom.

Yet unlike Moses, she never commits acts of revenge or violence, but rather is the victim of violence and revenge. Unlike Moses, she liberates herself rather than escape the consequences of a crime committed. Unlike Moses, she is not returned to the scene of her crime, but the scene of crimes committed against her. Unlike Moses, she never picks up arms or commits violence. Unlike Moses, she even names God! Unlike Moses, she becomes the founding ancestor of a great nation.

Hagar finally leaves the place of her enslavement and oppression, some 17-ish years after she initially tries to leave. It is not the great triumph of the Exodus, dramatic, bombastic, and full of plagues. It is discreet, complicated, and maybe even a little ambiguous. She isn't even remember liturgically, really. She is cut out of the story of salvation we habitually retell and we only glimpse her story from the perspective of her slavers.

Yet, at the end of the day, there is still an exodus. A slave woman is free. A refugee finds a home. God is with her in the desert and comes to her aid. God feeds her with miraculous food and shows her a well of water where there was none. She becomes the matriarch of an entire people.

So again, I wonder how often we read this story and feel only pity and sorrow for Hagar. Is it that we only see here weeping as she leaves? Or if we read it from her perspective could there be a tired smile, determination, or at least some kind of relief, on her face?

Certainly, I don't want to wipe away the tragic elements in this story, but perhaps with the help of theologians like Dr. Phyllis Trible, we can see this as the complicated experience of a liberated slave who made sacrifices for survival, who endured much for her son's well-being, and who finally relied solely on God because no man and no woman of faith could be trusted to do the righteous thing.

After all, Ishmael's inheritance as Abraham's first-born is nothing but a skin of water that soon runs dry and the text indicates he would spend his life as a raider with a bow in the desert slowly building back what was rightfully his.

As Rev. David Henson posted on Facebook this week, "*Liberation is rarely as tidy as we want to imagine it to be. Rarely is it as ethically unsullied as we extol it in our memories. Because liberation and survival must coexist and overlap, and as a result, frequently present no good choices, no ethically perfect solution, no action without a tragic cost. From the view of privilege, we must be careful of demanding some sense of moral purity when looking upon stories of liberation and we must be especially wary of needing stories of liberation that uplift rather than confound, pain, or wound us.*"

In Hagar, we see one of the 65-million refugees of 2016 fleeing their war torn country, risking all she has to board an unsafe boat to get across the Mediterranean, putting her son into a yellow life-vest that has printed on it "Warning: Will not protect against drowning" to try to reach safety in Europe...even though the life jacket he is wearing will not save him if he falls out of the boat that is taking him there.

In Hagar, we see the mother in Central America who sets her child atop a roaring train, taking her chances with the unknown life in a hostile nation to the north and resigning the child to a life of death and brutality at home.

In Hagar, we see the countless enslaved mothers who, like Harriet Jacobs, sought liberation and survival faced impossible, heart-rending choices. For years, she would watch them, see them, hear about them as they grew from the silence of the tiny attic crawl space in which she hid.

In Hagar, we see all the women for whom liberation and survival were at times at odds, all the women who had to choose, for a time, between their liberation and the life of a child who they did not consent to bear and who could not be accepted by father, but loved as fully their own anyway.

In Hagar, we see the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of a ruling class, the unwilling surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, someone from Burma fleeing affliction, the pregnant woman too scared to visit a planned parenthood due to the angry protesters, the expelled wife, the indigenous person relying on handouts from the power structures.

We must admit to ourselves, that despite what we read in scripture, and despite her divine rescue, maybe we have to admit that, for the most part, Hagar's story doesn't end well most of the time.

Yet in Hagar, we see all the women for whom life gave no good options and yet God heard and saw them, and somehow they thrived, flourished, and became matriarchs of power and greatness anyway. There are many Hagar's in the world today, in many countries, all women of many ages, and not just women but men and children; also of many social strata. Women like 17 year old Maryam who walked by foot from Iraq to Serbia whose story I heard through #morethanarefugee.

And it is good news to know that wherever we end up, God has divinely promised to be with Hagar. That no matter where we go, or what becomes of our story, we are part of Christ's divine story, that lifts every head, that nourishes every soul. And in that grand story, God invites us into agency, to be free, and to inherit a better life, where Hagar goes with Ishmael to be the beginning of a great nation.

Through the story of Hagar and Ishmael, we know that no matter how we are treated by others, no matter how uncertain our future may look, no matter how hopeless things

may seem- God hears...and that the God who hears is also the God who sees... God is not just watching from a distance... but the God of resurrection sees us from the inside... understands us... is fully present with us...

Remember it is God who opens her eyes, showing her water. Showing her the water diminishes the pain and suffering that Hagar experienced because this water is ahead, beyond the past. It is an indication that she is now free to leave the past behind and seek her own way of living. It is a sign of hope that her life does not have to be mired in the past and that the only way to escape the past is to take responsibility of her life and become her own master; which she does by bringing water to her son.

And yet if these places and faces are where we might find Hagar, and find God, it might well be worth wondering where we find the petty and vindictive, uncaring and oppressive Sarah and Abraham in today's world, too.

It is dangerous because if I read this story from Hagar's perspective, I might not like where I wind up.