



Genesis 21:8-21
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Today we hear the story of one of the Matriarchs, Hagar, a woman whose name means ‘other, stranger, outsider’. Hagar is not traditionally thought of as one of the Matriarchs like Sarah is and she has been the object of scorn by everyone ranging from the Apostle Paul to Martin Luther to Calvin. But my hope is that by the time we finish today, we all have a deeper appreciation for Hagar, for her strength, for her courage, for her relationship with God and for her story.

For her story is remarkable. We only heard a bit of it today in the scripture reading. So, let me hit the highlights of the whole story of Hagar. To begin with, it’s important to know that Hagar was an Egyptian slave girl, someone who was about as low on the social status pyramid as you can get. Abraham and Sarah had traveled through Egypt and when they left, Pharaoh had given them many gifts, sheep, oxen, camels and servants. It’s most likely that Hagar was one of those gifts, numbered and listed along with the livestock.

Hagar’s value to Abraham and Sarah was as a slave and then as a surrogate. We all remember that Abraham’s wife Sarah could not get pregnant, we heard that last week and saw it brought to life by Rev. Michael. Abraham and Sarah had been promised by God that they will have children, but Sarah gets impatient, knowing that Abraham needs an heir, so Sarah makes her Egyptian slave Hagar sleep with her husband. She forces Hagar to get pregnant.

And Hagar gets pregnant and then Sarah decides that she doesn’t like the way Hagar is looking at her and so she tells Abraham. Abraham tells Sarah to do what she wants with Hagar. And so, Sarah deals with Hagar harshly, so harshly in fact that Hagar is faced with a no-win situation.

She can stay and put up with the harsh treatment or she can risk her life and her unborn baby's life and run away.

Hagar runs and flees into the wilderness where her chances of survival are slim to none. Until an angel finds her. In the midst of hopelessness and desperation, Hagar is found and seen by the Divine, the runaway slave, the victim of abuse is seen. This is the very first time in the Bible that a woman is visited by a divine messenger!

The angel tells Hagar to go back to camp because 'behold you are with child, and you shall bear a son and his name shall be Ishmael'. Those words bear a shocking resemblance to what we will hear centuries later in the story of Mary's visitation from the angel Gabriel. A divine messenger coming to a nobody, a young single, female. The angel then goes on to give Hagar the same promises that were made to Abraham, that she will be the mother of a great nation.

As surprising as this all is, an angel appearing to a nobody, promising her that she will be the mother of a great nation, it gets even more jaw dropping shocking. Hagar does something that not even Abraham did, and she does something that no other character in the entire bible will go on to do; she gives God a name. This enslaved woman, alone in the desert, alone in the wilderness, names God. She takes the initiative, and she names God.

Hagar names God, 'The God Who Sees Me'. What a beautiful name. She recognized that God paid attention to her and her plight and drew near to her. She recognized that God has seen her suffering, has found her in the desert and has helped her. God is named by a slave girl, a nobody. Hagar recognizes that someone invisible with no power, has been seen. And so, she does something no one else will do in the entire bible. She names God. The God Who Sees Me.

So, Hagar returns to Abraham's camp and her son is born and she names him Ishmael. Eventually Sarah gets pregnant and gives birth to Isaac, Abraham's true heir. And then, on the day Isaac is weaned, Abraham throws a big party. During the party, Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and decides that Hagar and Ishmael need to go, that they should be sent to the wilderness to die.

This is hard for Abraham, he has grown fond of Hagar and Ishmael, but with God's guidance, he sees Hagar and Ishmael off with some food and a skin of water. And for the second time, Hagar leaves the protection of Abraham's camp and goes into the wilderness. Only this time, she's not alone. Ishmael, her son is with her. Soon the water is gone, and we know that water means life. Hagar puts her dying son under a bush because she can't bear to watch him die and she walks a short distance away to mourn.

And once again, the God who came to her when she was in the wilderness before, sees her and hears her weeping. In the midst of profound despair, when all hope seems lost, God sees Hagar and God responds. God tells Hagar to not be afraid and then suddenly there is water and there is life.

This is not the warrior God or the vengeful God or the distant God. This is the merciful and loving God, the radically present God who hears sobbing and saves Hagar and her child. And Hagar and Ishmael will go on to not only survive the wilderness, but they will thrive. And our passage ends today with these words, 'his mother got a wife for him'. A seemingly minor detail unless we look at it within the context of ancient times. Men find wives for their boys. Hagar's story will not only be the only time in the Bible where someone will give God a name but also is the only time where a woman finds a wife for her son. The only time.

It is a remarkable story, right? This young girl, who was enslaved, this nobody, a woman with no power, who has the audacity to give God a name, whose tears move God to save her child, who God makes a covenant with. This young girl, who is not treated well by Abraham or Sarah, who experienced oppression, violence and homelessness and for whom God provides the resources that are needed to survive and makes a way for when no way seems possible. It's a remarkable story.

Yet for the most part, Christianity has maligned or ignored the story of Hagar. The Apostle Paul made Hagar into an object of scorn. Martin Luther blamed Hagar for the sins of the family. Calvin believed Hagar had 'a wild and intractable temper' and blamed her for not considering her situation, enslavement and rape, to be a 'singular kindness and honor'.

The African American Church, however, has long recognized the critical importance of Hagar's story. African American theologian Delores Williams says, 'For more than a hundred years Hagar-the African slave of the Hebrew woman Sarah-has appeared in the deposits of African-American culture. Sculptures, writers, poets, scholars, preachers and just plain folks have passed along the biblical figure Hagar to generation after generation of black folks. What the white church has missed about this story is that Hagar's heritage was African. She was a Black woman and enslaved, powerless in this story and God enters into conversation with her. God receives Hagar's name for God. God sees Hagar's tears and is moved. God saves Hagar and she goes on to survive and to thrive.

Not just in the African American Church but in Islam is Hagar recognized for all of this. In Islam, Hagar is the mother of Monotheism. Because it is through Ishmael, her son, that the Prophet Mohamed will eventually arrive. When Muslims make their pilgrimage to Mecca, they reenact Hagar's determination to save her son. And Islamic tradition holds that when Abraham leaves Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, he leaves them at the site that will become the Ka'aba, the holiest shrine in Islam. In Islam, Hagar is not forgotten or maligned, Hagar is the Mother, the Matriarch, the one who stands at the beginning of the Islamic story.

I do believe that Hagar's is a story that needs to be told and understood and mined for meaning. Hagar's name means outsider, alien, stranger. Yet when we unpack the whole story of Hagar both in scripture and through the lens of the African American Church and Islam, we find a woman who was anything but a stranger to God. We find the first woman of the Bible to be met by divine messengers. We find a woman with whom God makes a covenant, telling her that her

offspring will be too many to count. We find a woman whose child is named by God and a woman who in turns names God, The God who Sees Me. Hagar is no stranger to God. She has a personal relationship with God. God dwells with her.

And just like last week with Abraham, the kernels in this story are that the truths found within that story live on today, thousands of years later. The truth of relationships and promises. Because like Hagar, we are in relationship with God. Because like Hagar, God dwells with us. Because like Hagar, God sees each of us. Because like Hagar, we are no stranger to God. In our desolation, in our pain, in our lostness, God sees each of us. God hears each of us. Because like Hagar, we each matter to God.

Hagar's story gives us this jaw-dropping sense of God's intimate interest in and care for all people of this world. Because like Hagar, we know that there is a God who sees us amidst the messiness of life, no matter what our situation, ours is a God who refuses to turn a blind eye to our pain and instead shows up and sits with us. Because like Hagar, ours is a God who blesses. Because like Hagar, ours is a God who sees.

That is story worth remembering. That is a story worth honoring. That is a story worth celebrating. The God who Sees.

Praise be the God who Sees!

Thanks be to the God who Sees!

Thanks be indeed!

Amen