

“From Oppression: To Be Seen, To Be Heard”

Sermon from Genesis 16:1-14

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Now Sarai and Abram were childless. However, Sarai had an Egyptian attendant named Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, “Since God has made me childless, go to Hagar. Perhaps I will get children through her.” Abram agreed to Sarai’s suggestion, and so Sarai took Hagar and gave her to Abram as a concubine. Sarai and Abram had been living in the land of Canaan for ten years by this time. Abram had relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant.

Once Hagar became pregnant, she looked with disdain on Sarai. So Sarai said to Abram, “This wrong being done to me is your fault! It was I who put Hagar into your arms, but now that she has conceived, you allow me to count for nothing in her eyes! Let God judge between you and me.”

Abram told Sarai, “She is your attendant. Treat her as you will.” Sarai then treated Hagar so badly that she ran away.

The angel of God found Hagar in the desert near a spring, the spring on the road to Shur. The angel asked Hagar, “Hagar, attendant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I am running away from Sarai,” she replied.

The angel said to her, “Go back to Sarai, and submit to her. I will make your descendants too numerous to count.” Then the angel continued, “You are now pregnant, and you will bear a child; you will name it Ishmael - ‘God hears’ - for God has heard you in your sorrow. He will be like a wild donkey, with his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, living in strife even with his own siblings.”

Recognizing God as the one who spoke to her, Hagar said, “You are the God of Seeing!” adding, “Have I actually gone on seeing - and living - after God has seen me?” That is why the well is called Beerlahai-roi, or “Well of the Living One who Sees Me.” It exists to this day, between Kadesh and Bered.

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We’ve been talking about stories of emergence, change, transition - and often they’re complicated. Sometimes a great notion might overtake a character, an uncommon courage might compel him to step out, a dream or a passion might give her the strength she needs to enter some new world. But sometimes, like in today’s story, leaving is both a terrible option and the best one available.

Translations use words like “attendant” or “servant” but commentators are clearer: Hagar is enslaved by Sarai and Abram. Like them, she is not native to Canaan; she’s not actually even privileged enough to be granted a name: in Biblical Hebrew, Hagar means “the foreign” or “the alien,” which is probably not what her mom and dad called her. We

don't know if she was born into enslavement or was taken in as an adult, but that's where we meet her in this story: as an enslaved woman who is sexually trafficked by another woman, denied and ignored by the man who impregnates her, and then treated so badly by the other woman that she runs away. The word here for Sarai's treatment of Hagar is "afflicted" - it's the same word used to describe how the Hebrew people are treated under Pharoah later, the violent abuse that precipitates the Exodus - the word used for Hagar's escape here, her "fleeing," is the same used to describe how the Israelites escape Pharoah's command.

But it's not the same story. To summarize the differences, commentator Phyllis Tribble puts it like this: Hagar experiences Exodus without liberation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, unmerited exile without return.

Oh, but Sarai and Abram are the ones our tradition claims as ancestors in faith.

Do you hate this story? Not yet?

How about this: God's messenger comes to Hagar; she's pregnant and alone in the wilderness, and she doesn't cry out but God's messenger comes to her. The first communication is complicated: The messenger calls to her, but identifies her as

belonging to Sarai - even having run away, even with no one around, even the one who created all people in the divine image identifies this desperate woman as property. But then there's the question: Where have you come from, and where are you going?

It's a question that's also an invitation. It's a question that acknowledges that there's a story here, that something significant is happening. Where have you come from, and where are you going? It's a question about origin and destiny. Within the same breath that God's messenger identifies Hagar as Sarai's, God makes her story bigger than that.

And she uses her words to distance herself, to try to carve out her own space. "I am running away from Sarai. I am fleeing." She doesn't yet have the words for where she is going. It might be that she does not yet know. But she is making a deliberate choice to get away from the abuse. And that choice has landed her here, at a spring, the one life-giving place in the desert, and it has brought her into contact with a messenger of God. And she's strong enough to say, "You have identified me as someone I can no longer be. I had to get out of there."

And in response, the messenger gives her a terrible command, and a beautiful promise, and an ambivalent prediction.

First, she's told: "go back." And we need to be clear; it's not like this messenger didn't know what Hagar had escaped from. "Go back and submit to her." Go back and continue to suffer under her hand. (I understand if you want to be done with the Bible right here and now. I'd argue it's still worth looking at - for a few reasons we'll get to later - but I understand if you want to be done with it now, if God loses all credibility right here.)

Then, she's told: "Your baby will be born, and you'll name him after this moment right now - you'll call him Ishmael, a reminder that God hears you." Her baby. Sarai had imagined Hagar would bear a child that would increase Sarai's status, but here we learn that Ishmael will be Hagar's baby. She will get to name him. She will get to remember, every time she calls to him, that when she was alone and in need, she was visited by the divine.

Then, she's told: "He's not gonna be an easy kid. And it's not gonna be an easy life." And yeah. Maybe that one could've gone without saying.

And then she realizes that this is no divine messenger - this is the divine. With a nod to Pride month, commentator Wilda Gafney says here we get a story of God in (human) drag. And when Hagar realizes that, she also realizes - this is a big deal. Like, she shouldn't still be standing. She might not live through this. Legend has it, nobody lives through this. She cries out,

“You are the God of Seeing!” and when she does, she becomes the only person in scripture to name God. Other people call on the name of God, there are others to whom a name of God is revealed, but she is the only character in the whole tradition who calls God’s name. You are the God of Seeing. Her name unites the human and the divine encounter: the God who sees, and the God who is seen.

It is extraordinary that this powerless, pregnant woman, fleeing for her life and her dignity and her well-being and her baby, pauses along the way for a drink of water, and meets and names the Holy One.

And it is unthinkable that that one, the God who Sees – if that name is to be believed – it is unthinkable that that one would tell her to go back. That the God who Sees her, who sees where she has come from, even if she doesn’t yet know where she is going, instructs her to go back that way.

And we don’t know, right? We don’t ever want to read too literally, but that makes it easy for us to excuse God from saying these awful things. Maybe it was her new understanding, her deep truth, that told her her best chance of survival was not out here in the desert but back at the hand of the one who had been so cruel. And maybe that’s true. Is it enough, then, that she survives what no one is rumored to

have been able to survive? Is that enough to get her through the return to this kind of life that no one should have to live?

But every story is an invitation to tell another story. Every story is a calling out, a drawing in, a chance to revisit and retell and reimagine.

Commentator Will Green challenges us: If we hate this story, then what new story are we interested in telling in its place? The Bible itself does this all the time. Tells the story one way, keeps some pieces, rearranges, tells it again. Stories can change. We can play with them, be creative. When we open up the bible, we are invited to open up ourselves, we are invited to dream and tell of new worlds. Green instructs us, “Don’t just abolish Sarah from your memory, the way she wanted to abolish Hagar.”

And this is why we return to the Bible. This is why we return to our history. This is why we need critical race theory. This is why Juneteenth ought to be remembered, celebrated. Because there are stories along the way we have gotten so, so wrong. And we have the power to redeem them, or at least to be always on our way toward redemption. Where have we come from, and where are we going?

Green says imagining new stories is an important part of adopting an abolitionist perspective. The death penalty needs

to go? Yep. Policing needs reform? Yep. Hierarchies are rooted in lies and can only serve to divide us? Sure. So what new stories can we tell in their places? What stories can we tell about change, about newness, about emerging into something better for us all, about life and flourishing?

Hagar will leave again. After her son is born, together they will leave again. God will visit them again. It will be hard, again. It's another attempt at the same story - a people on their way to liberation. It's a story we must keep telling, in new ways again and again, until we get it right. May God see us, meet us, and all who work in that way, as we do. Amen.