

June 21, 2020
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Genesis 21:8-21 Creating Promise Out of Pain
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 21:8-21 Common English Bible

The boy grew and stopped nursing. On the day he stopped nursing, Abraham prepared a huge banquet. Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. So she said to Abraham, "Send this servant away with her son! This servant's son won't share the inheritance with my son Isaac."

This upset Abraham terribly because the boy was his son. God said to Abraham, "Don't be upset about the boy and your servant. Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. But I will make of your servant's son a great nation too, because he is also your descendant." Abraham got up early in the morning, took some bread and a flask of water, and gave it to Hagar. He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away.

She left and wandered through the desert near Beer-sheba. Finally the water in the flask ran out, and she put the boy down under one of the desert shrubs. She walked away from him about as far as a bow shot and sat down, telling herself, I can't bear to see the boy die. She sat at a distance, cried out in grief, and wept.

God heard the boy's cries, and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "Hagar! What's wrong? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries over there. Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. She went over, filled the water flask, and gave the boy a drink. God remained with the boy; he grew up, lived in the desert, and became an expert archer. He lived in the Paran desert, and his mother found him an Egyptian wife.

There are a lot of things that are in the Bible that I don't like. Some of my least favorite are: let women be silent in church, slaves obey your masters, and Bible verses that people say condemn homosexuality. This story about Hagar and Ishmael being cast out is a text of terror¹. Hagar is a slave woman who is used, abused, and rejected. In Genesis 16 we first meet Hagar. Abraham and Sarah wanted a child, God had told them they would be the parents of a great nation and yet nothing happened. Time passed and more time passed and Abraham and Sarah put plans into motion with Hagar as the solution. Hagar was a slave and she was commanded by Sarah to assist Abraham and Sarah in their quest to have children.

We see in this story Sarah believing that Hagar's body is merely a tool at her disposal. Sarah dehumanized Hagar and exploited her. Sarah was Hebrew, married, rich and free. Hagar was Egyptian, single, poor, and enslaved. Sarah was older and unable to have children. Hagar was younger and able to have children. These differences played themselves out as the relationship between the two was broken by issues of threat and power, abuse and mistrust.

Abraham did as he was told and Hagar became pregnant. It might have been Sarah's idea, but that doesn't mean she liked it and she resented Hagar. Hagar flees into the wilderness to escape the abuse from Sarah. It is in the wilderness that God visits Hagar. Hagar is the first woman to be visited by God, the first and only woman to see God and live. Hagar names God and is the first person in the Bible to do so. She calls God El-roi which means the God who sees. It is the promise of God's presence with us. Hagar, a slave woman who is abused and ridiculed, becomes the first one in our faith heritage to give God a name. In the midst of abuse, pain and suffering, God is present. God sees us and is with us.

Hagar returns to Sarah and Abraham's house and gives birth to Ishmael, whose name means God heard. Around the same time, Sarah's gets pregnant and has Isaac. Ishmael and Isaac are growing up as brothers and friends. Sarah feels threatened by Ishmael's presence. She doesn't want that boy to take away from her son's future. Sarah decides that the two brothers can't grow up together. Sarah casts Hagar out and orders Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with no food, no water, no family, and no hope. It is a death sentence for

¹ Phyllis Trible's book Texts of Terror talks about Hagar.

Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham follows along, but he isn't happy about it, not because he is worried about Hagar but because of Ishmael.

So far our story isn't too bad, I mean it is bad because people are sinful and hateful and horrible, but we can understand it. But, now the storyteller tells us that God backs Sarah up and tells Abraham to do as Sarah wants because of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah. So, Hagar and Ishmael being left in the desert to die is okay with God. That is a terror text. It isn't the God that we see in the majority of Scripture. It isn't the God we see who frees people from oppression, who lifts up the lowly, who gives life to the hurting, who is born and lives among us as love with human flesh, who willingly dies on a cross. It is not the God who Hagar found in the wilderness before, the one who she named the God who sees.

But, that is how this story is told. I can't change it, I can't fix it, but I can wrestle with it and disagree with it. Just like I wrestle and disagree with women being silent in church, slaves obeying their masters, and Bible verses that people say condemn homosexuality. The story reads that God told Abraham to do as Sarah said and Abraham did. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the wilderness to wander and to die. I can't even imagine Hagar's hopelessness. When Hagar runs out of water, she prepares for the death of her child. She places her son under a bush and goes away so that she does not have to see him die.

We may be so threatened by the presence of another person that we cast them out. We may be so entangled in the sinful web of power and abuse that we deny that God has a part in another person's life too. We may be so sure that we are right and they are wrong. We may be so sure in thinking that we are chosen and they are not. We may be so sure in our thinking, believing we are better than they are.

Rev. Dr. Ella MacDonald died this week. Ella was an AME pastor. AME stands for African Methodist Episcopal and was the first independent Protestant denomination to be founded by Black people. It also has its roots in Methodist racism. Ella was a dynamic, hilarious, down-to-earth preacher. She preached each summer at First Methodist Mabank where my friend was pastor. Towards the end of one of her sermons, she asked the congregation if they wouldn't help her out. She asked everyone to stand. Everyone did. She asked them to find their way to the aisle that is nearest to them. She thanked them for doing that. She told them she was going to go back to her church and tell them that she had an all-White congregation standing in the aisles!

Ella didn't look suspicious, she didn't look dangerous, but she knew that racial discrimination, racial injustice, profiling, was a real thing. Ella once had the police called on her because someone had reported a black woman sitting in her car taking pictures of kids who were at the park. Do you want to know what really happened? Ella was going through chemotherapy and it was wrecking havoc on her body. She was so sick and so weak that she had not been out of her house for days. She lived by herself. She mustered up the energy to get in her car and drive to the park so she could get a little fresh air. She wasn't taking pictures, she was just sitting in her car and someone called the police. I don't have a clue what it is like to be Black. I still have a lot to learn.

In our story, God hears the boy's cries and hears Hagar's pain. In the middle of that wilderness when it seemed that all hope was lost, God is there. It is the promise of God's presence with us. There is no promise that we won't get hurt. It is the promise that we won't be defined by our suffering. It is the promise that God meets us in the wilderness and provides a future and care in the present.

We wonder why there is suffering in the world, why God allows people to use and abuse other people. God is ever present with those who suffer. Friday was Juneteenth, the oldest

national commemoration of the ending of slavery in United States history. June 19, 1865 Union general Gordon Granger read federal orders in Galveston, Texas proclaiming that all previously enslaved people in Texas were free. The Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in the United States had been signed into law two and a half years earlier, but Texas was still openly practicing slavery. It took a military invasion of the state to finally allow Black people, who were being used for their labor, to simply be released from this system. In an email this week, Rev. Edwin Robinson from Faith in Action said, “We celebrate because we are still here. We celebrate because no matter what this society has thrown at us we have found a way to not just survive but thrive.” He said, “Juneteenth is a celebration of perseverance in the face of wickedness. It is a celebration of making a way out of no way. It is a celebration of remembrance; remembering that words and proclamations, and policies mean nothing unless they are followed by actions.”

God provides a way for all those cast out and put down in our society. To the immigrant, to the incarcerated, to those injured by racism, to those who wonder if their lives matter, to the poor and destitute, God will show up as creative love and power, even and especially to the least among us.

God opens Hagar’s eyes. She sees water, and Ishmael drank too. God was with Ishmael and God was with Hagar. They lived in a new land with a new beginning and a new purpose as claimed children of God. Hagar’s abuse came to an end and God’s love rose in that wilderness. And so did Hagar. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.