

More to the Story: Hagar, the Forgotten One
Rev. Mary Dicken
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Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today. Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.

Genesis 16:1-16

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' But Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

"The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' The angel of the Lord also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.'

"And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and he shall live at odds with all his kin.'

"So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi,' for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

"Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Over the past week, several of you have commented to me that you're really not that enthusiastic about the Hebrew Scriptures, or the "Old Testament" as we often refer to it today. I've heard similar sentiments before, and I get it. There's a lot in these books of our Bible that we struggle

to reconcile with the God we see in the Gospels — too much violence, too many rules, too many strange-to-us customs and beliefs. Plus, there are a lot of names thrown in that are just hard to pronounce. (Sorry, Dan!) I'll confess to you all, though, that I really love this part of our Bible. Some of the most fascinating characters are found in the pages of these early books. So, because I love it, we're spending a little more time in these scriptures — thank you for humoring me. And for those of you are just doing that — humoring me — don't worry. There's only one more Old Testament story I want to dive into, and then I promise we'll hop over into the New.

For me, one of those most-fascinating characters is Hagar. Her story often gets absorbed into that of Abraham and Sarah, making her a footnote of sorts, but it deserves to be heard on its own. That said, to understand Hagar's story, we have to see its intersection with the others. So, we'll start with Sarah.

Sarah was married to Abraham. We don't know much about them until the later years of their lives, starting around age 65. God tells Abraham he will be the father of a great nation, but he and Sarah have no children... and at their age, the time for child-bearing has long passed! Being the good and faithful person she was, Sarah believes God's promise, but she starts to become aware of an uncomfortable possibility: God promised her husband descendants – not her.

This is where some cultural context is important: In the ancient near east, if a couple was unable to have children, the blame was always placed on the woman. She was deemed the “barren” one.¹ To compound matters, the science of conception wasn't yet understood, so children were viewed as divine gifts, not necessarily a direct result of sexual intercourse. It follows then that if a woman was “barren”, she must be a religious failure of sorts since God was withholding children from her.

So it is in that context that we find Sarah fully committed to the covenant God made with Abraham, and she determinedly proposes a solution to make it all happen:

“Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’”²

Wait a minute... that's her solution? “Go to my ‘slave-girl’”? Again, we could use some cultural context here. Laws and customs at this time said that children born to slaves belonged to their enslavers, in this case Abraham and Sarah. So, as horrifying as it sounds to our twenty-first century ears, this seemed a wholly-logical solution to their woes.

¹ see Genesis 11:30

² Genesis 16:1-2

Now we should turn to Hagar, the one Sarah just offered up to her husband. We don't know much about her life up until this moment. We know she was from Egypt but is now living in the wilderness with Sarah and Abraham, so far from her family and loved ones. We know she is Sarah's slave, and we assume she's young as she's been nominated to bear children with Sarah's husband (an octogenarian at this point) – children who ultimately will not be considered Hagar's children. What we don't know is how long it took for her to conceive. Did this happen right away? Or years later? We also don't know how much say she had in all this — my assumption is not much. The story is not clear about Hagar's willingness or unwillingness to sleep with Abraham. Regardless, given the power disparity, we know she could not truly give consent, so her story is, from the beginning, one of great injustice.

The story goes on. Abraham impregnates Hagar, and — not surprisingly — Hagar is not thrilled with Sarah by this point.³ Sarah's not a fan of Hagar either and, as the one with the power in their relationship, she abuses Hagar.⁴ Hagar runs away. This is where the story gets interesting.

We're told an angel of God finds Hagar in the desert. She can't be doing well at this point. She's gone through the trauma of enslavement in a foreign land, a forced pregnancy, abuse, and now assumes she's going to die in the desert — alone. The angel strikes up a conversation with her. He has the nerve to tell her to go back and then makes a promise — one almost identical to the one made to Abraham that started this whole debacle. She's told she'll have so many descendants they “cannot be counted.” And then comes the beautiful part. The angel gives her not-yet-born baby a name: Ishmael, which means “God hears.” God heard Hagar's pain, her misery, her sobbing. God hears.

Then, Hagar decides that if God can name her baby, she can name God. I told you she's fascinating. This moment is what does it for me. Hagar is the only person recorded in the Bible to *name* God. She has the holy spunk, boldness, and audacity to think she has that right, and God seems OK with it! So she tells God their name is *El-roi*, which means “the Living One who sees me.” There's this delightful play on words that follows, where she says, “I've seen the One who sees me!”

God hears me. God sees me. This is Hagar's story.

Since this is a story about names, it's worth pausing for a moment to consider Hagar's name. Her name is often translated as “flight” — rather appropriate since she fled to the desert. But it can be translated other ways too... “other,” “outsider,” “stranger,” or maybe just “who let her in?” In other words, Hagar didn't belong. She was a foreign, single mother with no power or control over her life or body. She was seen as less-than-human property that could be passed around at

³ see Genesis 16:4

⁴ see Genesis 16:6

the whims of her owners. Hagar the person was forgotten, but in this story we are reminded that God never forgot her. God hears her. God sees her.

The story goes on beyond our text for this morning. If we fast-forward fifteen years and five chapters in the book of Genesis, we find Hagar and her now teenage son Ishmael back with Abraham and Sarah. Sarah has her own miracle-baby now, Isaac. Not surprisingly, the dysfunction of their family continues. Sarah is *done* with Hagar at this point. She sees no point in keeping them around and even suspects Ishmael could be a threat to Isaac and his inheritance. This conflict has been simmering for fifteen years, and history repeats itself as Sarah banishes both of them to the desert with a laughably-small supply of bread and water. Hagar is convinced this is the end for them, and she sobs out of love for her soon-to-be dead child. This is the first time in the Bible that we hear of someone openly weeping. I think it's justified in this moment. Teenage Ishmael joins in on the crying, and then God shows up again. We're told God heard the boy crying. God heard Ishmael crying, the boy named "God hears."

An angel of God speaks to Hagar, saying, "What's the matter? Don't be afraid. God hears you." We're told she opens her tear-filled eyes and sees a miracle — a well filled with water. They drink and live. Then, it says God was with them as the boy grew up.

Even all those years later, even after things are settled for Abraham and Sarah (they have their own baby Isaac, after all), even after Hagar and Ishmael's story shouldn't matter to us anymore because they're no longer needed for the grand plan, even still... God sees them. God hears them. And God is with them.

Now, for all of you who are more fans of the New Testament than the Hebrew scriptures — On this side of the resurrection, we're pretty clear that God is a God of love. *Of course* God hears, sees, and sits with us in the joys and challenges of life. The beauty of this story, though, is that it reminds us that God has *always* been that God, from the very beginning. This is why we need these stories. In this moment, we see the eternal God who sees and hears us all, even the most marginalized and forgotten people.

Many of you know that I walked the Camino de Santiago several years ago. The whole experience was life-changing for me, but there were moments that remain especially vivid in my mind. One happened about a week into the pilgrimage but it really starts before I left home. The day before I flew to Spain, I went to the hospital to see a friend. This wasn't a church member. In fact, I'm pretty sure he didn't have much to do with church. This friend was a harpist-friend. He'd been battling cancer for a while and more and more that year I'd been covering for him with concerts he just wasn't up to playing. When I saw him that day, he was so weak and tired. I told him about my trip, and he lit up. He was so excited for me and made me promise to send him pictures along the way.

A week later, our pilgrimage path led us into an artists colony of sorts. I took pictures of it all, knowing my friend would love it. Then, I got the news that he died. I didn't share it with my companions right away, but looking back I'm sure they could tell something was up. That evening, we gathered on the roof of the pilgrim's hostel where we were staying for a little communion and prayer service. One of my friends was leading the prayers, our heads were bowed, and we were otherwise silent. Next thing I know, the woman next me reaches over, grabs me, and envelops me in a big hug. I lost it then, sobbing messily all over her, much to the dismay of those around us. She didn't know my friend had died, but she did *see* me in that moment. She saw my pain I was trying to hide and responded. In that moment, she was bearing the image of the God who sees.

Hagar is more than a footnote. Her humanity was disregarded by those in her lifetime, but it doesn't have to be forgotten by us. We can honor her today by seeing her fully, by hearing her story and what she can teach us about others, about God. Her story of marginalization is one that continues to repeat itself. We may not see enslavement and forced pregnancies practiced openly around us today, though slavery and oppression are still very much realities in the twenty-first century. The diminishment of humanity still persists, despite how much we'd like to believe otherwise.

As a society, consciously or unconsciously, we demean others because of their status, poverty, skin color, religion, immigration status, supposed lack of intelligence, or different political belief. Too often we fall into the trap of dehumanizing those we disagree with or dislike. We turn "the other" into a two-dimensional caricature, laughing at mean-spirited cartoons or jokes, or perhaps just engaging in gossip about them or more subtle ways of dismissing someone as irrelevant. We prefer to avoid eye contact with those sleeping on the streets or begging for spare change. We'd rather not hear about the horrors of life that are the realities for our neighbors without the resources and privileges we have. We'd like to just close our ears and turn our eyes from that which makes us uncomfortable and focus instead on the happier side of life. And yet, when we do so, we fail to see the humanity of all those around us. We fail to see the *image of God* made visible even through those we like the least.

Hagar, Sarah, Abraham — their stories are all intertwined, and God was working in and through all of them. We know that God worked through Sarah to fulfill a covenantal promise and give birth to the nation of Israel. At the same time, God worked through Hagar to bring about redemption in the midst of injustice. And yet, it is only Hagar who is recorded as conversing *twice* with the Divine. I can't help but think that reveals something about where we find God. We see it in her story, and we see it in those "New Testament" Gospels we love to read: God has a heart especially for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. That doesn't mean God doesn't love the rest of us, but it does mean that God is particularly present to the suffering.

I had a seminary professor who once remarked off-the-cuff: "There is a part of God I cannot know if I only interact with people like me." I'm not sure my professor would even remember uttering those words, but they've never left me. As I hear Hagar's story again, I wonder who the

Hagars of today are. I wonder who we are overlooking or forgetting. I wonder how often we've failed to hear the cries of the suffering and oppressed or see the humanity of those around us. I wonder how much we're missing out on, for God is most assuredly with them.

Perhaps that is our invitation today: To open our eyes to fully see the humanity of all those around us. To open our ears to hear their stories — and to believe them, even when their stories don't align with ours or push up against our preconceived notions.

Or perhaps today, you are the one longing to be seen and heard. If so, the invitation is to rest in the assurance that our God is the One who sees, the One who hears. And for the rest of us to bear witness to that God in your life.

Friends, Hagar's story is more than a footnote. Hers is a revelation and an invitation to all those who are forgotten and all of us who have done the forgetting. For our God never forgets any of us, and this is the Good News. Thanks be to God!