

Sunday, September 25, 9&11am

The Woman Who Named God



Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 2022

“The Woman Who Named God” | Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jo Wiersema | Genesis 16:7-13

As many of you might know or have heard, I love to read. I read a wide range of books from cheesy romance books to non-fiction, to the classics. When I mention to people how I love to read, I inevitably get asked the question of “what is my favorite book?”. As any dedicated booklover will tell you, it’s impossible to pick a single book. I’m more likely to hear from my book-loving friends of their favorite characters: Jane Eyre, Hermione Granger, Elizabeth Bennet.

Personally, Matilda still holds the number one spot in my favorite character lists.

When I think of Scripture and my favorite characters, I think so much of the women of Genesis. This series is full of complex relationships, maternal figures, women who struggle with barrenness, and enslaved women.

Hagar is my favorite character in the Hebrew Bible. I’m not sure I’m in the majority here, but Hagar tells a story of an enslaved woman, abused, assaulted, and somehow through it all, she is faithful to God. A woman so bold in her pain as to give a name to the one who was previously unnamed.

The scripture reading today comes from the Book of Genesis, chapter 16, verses 7 - 13:

The Lord’s messenger found Hagar at a spring in the desert, the spring on the road to Shur, and said, “Hagar! Sarai’s servant! Where did you come from and where are you going?” She said, “From Sarai my mistress. I’m running away.” The Lord’s messenger said to her, “Go back to your mistress. Put up with her harsh treatment of you.” The Lord’s messenger also said to her, “I

will give you many children, so many they can't be counted!" The Lord's messenger said to her, "You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You will name him Ishmael because the Lord has heard about your harsh treatment. He will be a wild mule of a man; he will fight everyone, and they will fight him. He will live at odds with all his relatives." Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El Roi" because she said, "Can I still see after he saw me?"

In Charlie's initial sermon on this series, when talking about Sarah, he used this slide.

The plight of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar isn't a pretty one. Abraham, or Abram as he is called at the beginning of this narrative, is promised descendants greater than the number of stars. Through Sarai's barrenness, she makes the decision to *give* Hagar to Abram. Sarai, in this act of desperation, sends Hagar to be impregnated by Abram. Sarai hopes that Hagar's fertility will be able to provide an heir, an heir that God promised Abram.

In this time, this "giving" of slaves to act as surrogate mothers wasn't uncommon. We see this a few other places in the Bible with Rachel and her barrenness in addition to Sarai. In her barrenness, Sarai is at a loss for what to do with God's call, viewing her barrenness as her own body's failure, and searching for any way to redeem her failure. Sarai uses her power as a slave owner, to give Hagar to Abram with the intent to take the child who will hopefully be conceived and raise it as her own.

This narrative tradition revolves around the matriarch and patriarch of God's people: Sarai and Abram. In the story we will tell in Kaleidoscope about this narrative in a couple weeks, it's called *The Great Family*. Conveniently, this children's lesson leaves out Hagar and the associated pain and hardship of Hagar's story. The story of Hagar is one relegated to the back shelf, a shelf where we leave the messy parts of the Bible for other people to think about.

The family tree goes through Sarah and Abraham's son, Isaac, down to Jacob, and so on and so forth. When we climb back up the family tree to see where we started, we start with the pregnancy and eventual birth of Ishmael by Hagar. In this simplified family tree, we lose the prolific abundance that is found in Ishmael's line. God's promises are fulfilled through Hagar and Ishmael and how God's promise not

only to Abram, but to Hagar herself.

We don't have much background on Hagar, other than she is Sarai's slave. Hagar is female, is foreign, and is enslaved. The control she has in this society is isolated to her fertility. Hagar is considered other, and that *otherness* is at the center of this story. Hagar, as a slave, with no Biblical backstory, has no bodily autonomy, and as the story shows, no power. In a power dynamic such as that between Sarai and Hagar, and then Abram and Hagar, Hagar has no status and no power. The power she held with her fertility is taken away.

The world of Genesis, after the fall, is full of sin. This is more than the patterns of individual sin. The sins of selfishness, greed, or even murder. The fallen world is full of corporate sin, sins that impact beyond the individual, but permeate the entire society: sins such as racism and sexism. Sarai is under the rule of her husband, and as Charlie said a few weeks ago, is silenced and forced to live under the sexism and oppression of Abram.

Sarai's small voice, a voice that can't stand up to Abram, uses her voice to oppress Hagar. Sarai sustains Abram and the local society's patriarchal oppression and racism to oppress Hagar. In Genesis 16:6, right before the start of our passage it says: Abram said to Sarai, "Since she's your servant, do whatever you wish to her."

So Sarai *treated her harshly*, and she ran away from Sarai.

There is a Womanist Scholar Wil Gafney who talks about Hagar in her book *Womanist Midrash*. Womanism is a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of Black women, like feminism, womanism emphasizes the female experience, but womanism puts the emphasis on the black woman's experience. Gafney takes time in this book to look at women of the Hebrew Bible and through her experiences in Womanism, we see the sexism and racism that is used to oppress and control Hagar in our Biblical story.

Gafney says:

When Abram removes himself from the fray, Sarai takes her anger out on Hagar. Sarai brutalizes Hagar. The standard translations do not capture the physical violence that is represented in this verb, עָנָה (a.nah). In fact, Sarai's

oppression of Hagar in Genesis 16:6 is the same as Egypt's oppression of Israel in Exodus 1:11.

Hagar walks away from slavery.

I want to say this once more: *Hagar walks away from slavery.*

In what was probably the hardest decision of her life, she risked everything to walk away from her abusers and liberate herself from the hands of slavery. It's in this time of potential freedom, where the end is in sight, that Hagar is addressed by the Lord's messenger.

God could have ended Hagar's story here: Hagar runs away and is no longer subject to the abuse of Sarai and Abram. The story of Hagar could have been one of liberation, but *that's not how it's written*. God asks Hagar *to return to Sarai*, into slavery, into abuse, and in that God makes her a promise. Hagar will have many children, so many that can't be counted.

This is not to say that a prolific line is worth going back into slavery, but it is a promise made by God to fulfill the larger will of God. Hagar is pregnant, and by going back to the house of Abram, Ishmael can be given the rights of the first born. Ishmael can be cared for and nourished in a stable home and given a promise of being able to carry on the line of God's chosen people.

God does not always liberate. It's easy to remember the times of liberation in the Bible, where God brings the Israelites out of Egypt and redeems and restores the people of God, but it's not always like that in a fallen world. God liberates, but God also does not liberate all the oppressed.

I feel like this is the best place to make a note that slavery in all forms is abhorrent. Although something is in the Bible, it does not make it full proper or right to the current time. The Bible has been used at the hands of oppressors for generation after generation and for the modern reader, it is jarring to have scripture that tells a liberated person to go back to enslavement. This is our reminder that the Bible is complex and nuanced and written by human hands.

But we do have this text, we have scripture that we have to wrestle with and understand how the word of God plays into our life today.

In the New Testament, Christ calls us to love and care for the least of them. Although these are the words of Christ, we see this care for the least of us through the words and actions of God, the Creator. God reaches out to Hagar, as a slave, as a woman, and as a foreigner.

God outstretches their hand and makes promises *directly* to Hagar about her future and her descendants to come. God asks Hagar to be faithful in her actions, to trust in God and return to Sarai's home. Hagar is faithful to God and that faith is recognized by God, though not necessarily by the hands of history.

In this scripture, Hagar calls God "El Roi", meaning the "God of Seeing". God saw Hagar exactly as she was. Unlike how Sarai and Abram saw her, God saw her as a child of God, worthy of hope and love and affection. Although God sends her back to abuse, God makes promises and fulfills those promises.

We believe in a God that sees us. A God that sees us in our sin and in our brokenness. This is a God who sees us, no matter how much money or power or wealth we may have. A God who sees us in our darkest moments. Our God is a God of every single one of us.

Hagar's faith, like Abraham's, was tested. But her faith, unlike the patriarchs, was not immortalized in art, literature, nor in the genealogies of our New Testament.

Yet just one person in all our Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was Hagar--foreigner, woman, slave.

The voices of the women of Genesis have been silenced for generation after generation, but I hope that through this series you've been able to glimpse a small window into the joy, passion, and faith of these women. Women have always and continue to have things to say.

We ask each other, as Christians, to look at the Hebrew Bible and to glean what we can from the experiences of people thousands of years ago. To lift up the voices of people long silenced and to continue to lift voices of people who are silenced today.

Thank you