

Proper 7 A 2017

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 11:24-39

Hagar's story

is the original handmaid's tale.

Truly.

This story of Hagar and Sarah and Abraham,

And their sons,

Was the germ of the dystopian novel

That became the current tv series

That seems too chillingly prescient and close to home

In our anxious time.

The current story comes uncomfortably close to home,

But the original handmaid's tale

Speaks eternal truth about who we are

And offers us a glimpse

Into the mystery of God.

Hagar, at the center of this story,

Has become,

When we can see her at all,

Sign and symbol

Of what we know about ourselves,

But wish we did not.

We enslave her,

exploit her,

Scorn her gift,

And banish her.

She shows us that we use each other

To meet our own needs,

That we throw away what brings us shame or doubt.

Hagar has come to symbolize

What we hide from –

Painful knowledge about who we are.

Except that Hagar is not a symbol

Or a cipher –

She is a person,

With feelings and fears

And a future.

When we make her a symbol,

Burden her with the weight of gender, race, and class,  
We continue to exploit her.  
She is her own woman, and she has her own story,  
Revealed in bits and pieces in scripture,  
Teased out by the rabbis,  
Waiting to be uncovered more fully  
By those who would have been her friends.

So look at her story.  
We heard the second half of it today.  
Hagar's story is all about seeing.  
It is the word that jumps out  
If you have eyes to see or ears to hear.

Everyone tangled up in this story  
Sees from their own perspective.  
Sarah sees Hagar's son –  
The one whose birth she engineered  
But who is no longer needed –  
Playing with her long awaited and most valuable son,  
And she decides to get rid of what she doesn't want to see.  
Banished Hagar, her jug of water used up,  
sees a spring of water in the wilderness,  
And decides to get up and live,  
And save the life of her child.  
Those two moments of seeing –  
Only two of the many in this story  
And the earlier chapter about Hagar –  
Those two moments of seeing,  
If we can see them,  
Show us something essential  
About ourselves  
And about God.

We throw away what we don't need  
And don't like,  
But for God nothing is thrown away.  
And if we can believe God sees us,  
Then we become God's partners  
In struggling for our good  
And the good of the world.

God wants us as partners;  
God wills our freedom and our fearlessness –  
And God is the giver of water in the wilderness,  
To Hagar,

To the children of Israel  
On their journey from slavery to covenant,  
To the woman who meets Jesus at the well.  
It begins with Hagar.  
She is our forerunner in the faith.

The Hagar we glimpse out of the corner of our eyes,  
If we are quick about it,  
Is not only vulnerable and exploited,  
But free and fearless.  
And God is not only the champion of the chosen,  
But the defender of the defenseless.  
God is the helper of the hopeless,  
And Hagar is a survivor.

Hagar the Egyptian,  
Enslaved and exploited,  
Used by Sarah as a surrogate  
and then thrown away  
when her offering,  
a son for Abraham,  
is no longer useful or valuable –  
that is the Hagar we see  
if we tell this story,  
as we have through all the centuries,  
as a story of the winners.  
Abraham's story.  
Sarah's story, we have begun to see and say as well.  
We have thought we were being inclusive  
When we added Sarah to the recital of our ancestors.  
But this is Hagar's story too,  
And she shows us something essential  
About what it means to know God.

For a moment,  
Follow Hagar into the wilderness.  
She has her child,  
Who is still infinitely precious to her,  
Even if he is no longer valuable  
To Abraham and Sarah.  
And she has a loaf of bread,  
And a jug of water.

What happens to the water  
You bring with you into the desert?  
First, it gets warm.

Then it begins to taste bad.  
Then it runs out.  
Only God can give the water  
That never runs out.  
That's what Hagar discovers –  
The water that never fails.  
The water she brings with her out of slavery runs out.  
The water God gives in the wilderness  
Brings her back to life.

In the first part of Hagar's story,  
The part we didn't hear,  
Hagar runs away to the wilderness  
And runs straight into an encounter with God.  
There are many things we could say  
About that encounter,  
But those things are a story for another day.

Here's what we might hold onto for today:  
Hagar, not only exploited but abused,  
Runs away from her oppressors  
And ends up facing God.

Remember, God is new for Hagar,  
As God is new for Abraham and Sarah.  
Hagar comes from a land of other gods,  
As do they.

Hagar, in her encounter with the holy one,  
Becomes a hero of the faith.  
She becomes a forerunner of the people who reject her,  
One who finds God in the wilderness.  
Except that she is stronger,  
And has more courage.

Hagar, in the first story,  
Gives God a name.  
She is the only one in scripture to do this –  
Until Jesus.  
She calls God, the one who sees.  
And she, like God,  
Is a see-er.

In the story we hear today,  
Hagar is the finder of water,  
The one who sees what God shows.

She discovers the spring of water welling up,  
And it brings life.  
And so she becomes the mother of a great nation.

Hagar has been held up,  
In the recent past,  
As a sign to us  
Of what it means to be oppressed.  
And that's true.  
When we move from ignoring her,  
To defending her,  
She becomes more real  
But as long as we hold her up  
As a symbol of the oppressed,  
We deny her the fullness of who she is.

Hagar is a woman of courage,  
A survivor, a matriarch,  
A theologian  
And a spiritual leader –  
A finder of water in the wilderness.

So what does all this mean for us,  
Here and now?  
Is this a complicated game,  
Finding new treasures  
In the trove of scripture,  
Stories hidden in plain sight through all the ages?

Or is this a gift to us,  
Who need water in the wilderness now?

What can this story give us,  
To guide us on the way?

We are the children of Abraham and Sarah,  
And Hagar is the mother of the other.  
But might she be willing  
To be our mother too?

Jesus knew this story.  
He knew he was descended from Abraham.  
But he was also the son  
Of a woman who knew how to take risks,  
A woman who listened to God.

He knew that God breaks into stories of despair  
And humiliation over and over again,  
Bringing water from the wasteland  
And bread from heaven.  
He knew that in every story of loss,  
Of abandonment,  
Of hopelessness,  
God is hiding somewhere,  
Seeing, knowing.  
He told his friends,  
And the crowds that followed him,  
That not a sparrow falls to the ground  
Without God knowing it.

God is, as Hagar saw,  
The one who sees.  
The one whose eye is on the sparrow.

God's eye is on Hagar,  
Outcast and alone.  
God's eye is on Hagar,  
Finder of water in the wilderness.  
God's eye is on the sparrow,  
And God watches over us.

A re-reading, after many years, of the first chapter of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984) was important to me as I prepared this sermon text.