Hagar

Genesis 16:1-16

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I have a colleague who says that the problem with most churches is that we are just too nice. Now, in a time when people in this country seem to be competing to be unkind to one another, it’s hard to imagine that a group of people could be “too nice.” But what my friend means is that people who have struggled with hard things in their lives often feel they have to “put on a happy face” to come to church. That they have to pretend that all is well, unless what isn’t well is something people understand, like cancer or an accident or natural disaster.

But if what isn’t nice in their lives has to do with problems in their family relationships, drug abuse, sexual abuse, infertility, committing a crime and going to jail, losing a job, being a soldier in a war, mental illness, poverty…you get the idea, then many feel they can’t bring that to the typical majority-white suburban congregation. They may fear that people won’t understand or, worse, will judge them. Sometimes they fear that God won’t understand or will judge them.

Which is why we need to hear stories like the one we heard today about Hagar and Abraham and Sarah. Because the Bible is actually full of stories like this, where people go through really terrible things and struggle through relationships with other people and with God, what the Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible calls the “Texts of Terror.” So often we don’t use them in worship because we are afraid of upsetting people or offending people or because we think our Bible heroes need to be seen as purely good and righteous, when most of them were not always. Like most of us. We need to hear them because, as Hagar says, we worship “the God who sees,” and in that seeing loves us and works with us in the midst of whatever is “not nice” in our lives.

Let’s look at Hagar’s life for a minute. She was enslaved by the Pharoah in Egypt, so the odds are she was from sub-Saharan Africa, a black enslaved woman. Pharoah gives her to Sarah (long story for another time) to be her slave, and now she is taken farther away from home. Because Sarah and Abraham do not trust that God will come through on the promise of giving them children, Sarah tells Abraham to take Hagar as his second wife. Note Hagar’s opinion on this is not solicited, so she is essentially raped and told that any child that results from the rape will belong to Sarah, not to her. This is what happened on a regular basis during the time of chattel slavery in this country. And for those of you who have read or seen *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this story, and others like it in scripture, are where Margaret Atwood got the central idea for her novel.

After Hagar gets pregnant, Sarah perceives that Hagar no longer respects her, so Sarah “afflicts” her, with Abraham’s permission. The Hebrew word used here is the same one later used to talk about the Egyptians “afflicting” the Hebrew slaves. Hagar’s mistreatment was so bad she ran away into the wilderness, knowing that her attempt to return to Africa would probably result in her death and that of her child.

Hagar suffered forcible enslavement, being torn from her home, twice, rape and forced pregnancy, physical and emotional abuse, hunger, and thirst, and hopelessness, all at the hands of the great patriarch and matriarch chosen by God to form a new nation.

This is tough stuff. And believe me, if you read on in Genesis, things only get worse after the births of Ishmael, Hagar’s son, and Isaac, Sarah’s son.

I’ll tell you right now, there is not a simple happy ending to this story. Hagar and God’s messenger, or perhaps God, have a tough and honest conversation, a model for all who are struggling. The result of the conversation this time is that God wants Hagar to return to Abraham’s house, where she will likely face more “affliction,” but God promises her that her son will also be the father of a great nation, and he will himself strive with difficulties, but succeed. As one scholar reflects on this story, “Just because Abraham and Sarah are chosen doesn’t mean they’re the ***only*** ones who are chosen. (Lewis Smedes in Bill Moyers, *Genesis*, p. 197)

Hagar, enslaved and abused black woman, is the first person in the story recounted in the Bible to give God a name, and the first person to have a conversation with God about which we are told. She is the first woman to have an “annunciation,” a prophecy about a child in her womb. Wow. Her story was so important over generations that it got re-told and re-told even though Abraham and Sarah do not come off well in this tale! Why did that happen? Why didn’t the storytellers seek to sanitize the history? I think it was because so many other people who suffered needed to know that God sees them, that they are heard, even when the story they need to tell is “not nice.”

I have served two congregations over the years who had a practice of testimony. Testimony is when people who are members of the church share a time where God was present to them in a particular way. Sometimes the testimonies are about nice things that have happened to people and brought them joy and closeness to God and others. Sometimes they are about hard things. I remember a powerful story told by a Vietnam Vet about the battle of Hamburger Hill where most of the American soldiers died and where he thought he would as well. He talked about his straining to cope with what had happened to him after he got back, battles with alcohol and survivor guilt.

In another congregation, a woman who had gone to prison for embezzlement told of coming to terms with what she had done and with what happened to her and others in prison. In both cases, their courage to tell their “not nice” stories helped other people get in touch with how God had seemed both absent--and present--to them, gave them the bravery they needed to tell ***their*** stories, and gave them hope that God indeed did see them. And love them. And that the church did, too.

Hagar. Let us say her name and remember her story. The angel of God said that God had “given heed to her affliction,” God had heard her. She then called God “El-roi,” the God who sees. When the Hebrew slaves were afflicted in Egypt, it was Hagar to whom they turned for hope. You, too, are heard and seen by God who loves you, whether your life is and has always been “nice,” or not. No matter who you are and where you are on your life journey, God hears and sees and loves you. Amen.