

Quick recap for those of you who have been out for any part of the last few weeks. We've been going through a series in Genesis about Abraham and his family. We journeyed with God, laughed at God, bartered with God, and now we're appealing to God. It's been a journey of ups and downs. There's been silly walks and jokes about church squirrels and theological curveballs about whether or not God knows everything that's going on.

Now, Abraham is revered as the father of monotheism – believing in one God rather than many gods. Abraham is the father of three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all trace their ancestry back to Abraham. And Abraham is the father of the most dysfunctional family in recorded history. But let's be honest. The reason it's the most dysfunctional family in recorded history is that there are no other families in civilization that have had their story written down for thousands of years – generation after generation of ups and downs and troubles and redemption. I think the next closest example of a family under the microscope is the British monarchy, and honestly, they're pretty scandalous, too. But if any of us traced our ancestry back five generations, much less 5 thousand years, we'd have more than one book of scandalous, embarrassing, dysfunctional, stories. There'd be enough to make a sailor blush.

Does anyone know the PBS series called Finding Your Roots? They use genetics and historians and census information, all kinds of tools to help a celebrity learn something about their family tree that they didn't know before, and in every single episode, they find something amazing enough to make a show about.

For example, actor Edward Norton was proud to learn he was a direct descendant of Pocahontas but embarrassed to learn he was also descended from a slave owner. Julia Roberts was surprised to learn that she was not in fact related to her grandfather Roberts, but was a grandchild of a man named Mitchell, who while married to his family, had an affair with Mrs. Robert's, Julia's grandmother after she was widowed, but she named the baby John Roberts anyway.

All this to say, every one of us has a mixture of fabulous and troublesome stories in our family history. Every one of us. Even the best of us.

And, I have to say, that's one of the things that I love most about our scriptures. You see, we know that the powerful and wealthy are the ones who write the history books, right? World History is really the history of Europeans who colonized the world. American History is about the Europeans who came here and pushed west. Even just this week, there is evidence that those in power now are editing history in museums, school curriculum, and federal reports so that it favors their perspective and narrative. It's happened throughout civilization.

But somehow, throughout the centuries of passing down oral history, then writing it on parchment, and translating it into Greek and then translating that into hundreds of other languages, our scriptures have retained stories that are scandalous to the powerful. It gives me incredible hope that humility and truth will prevail in modern times. If Christians can revere a book that contains their heroes doing shameful things, then I pray that they will not whitewash modern history and turn a blind eye to today's embarrassing and immoral headlines.

Today's text is one of those kinds of texts that could have been lost in time. In fact, it is shocking that the names of Hagar, Sarah's slave and Ishmael, Hagar's son by Abraham, are remembered at all. The majority of women in the Bible are unnamed, slave or not. The majority of sons who are not a part of the storyline are unmentioned and unnamed. And yet, Hagar is incredibly special, and remembered today, and her name, and her faith, and her journey is remembered by millions upon millions of people each year.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let us hear our scripture for today from Genesis chapter 21.

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had

commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

⁸The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Issac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Can we just be honest and admit how horrible this passage is? On so many levels. Slavery, rape, jealousy, abandonment of a child and a woman. Treating human beings like slaves – not having any sense of relationship and responsibility. Abraham and Sarah not taking acknowledging that they were the ones who came up with the plan to impregnate Hagar in the first place.

Both Abraham and Sarah are deeply responsible for this story, and even though God assured Abraham that it would be ok, it was not ok, because it is cruel and inhumane to treat other human beings like that. And while God tells Abraham that He'd take care of them before Abraham tosses them out, Hagar doesn't hear that news until she is desperate and weeping, and crying out to God; appealing to God that her child was going to die from dehydration and malnutrition. Ishmael, too, is crying out, now alone without his mother's comforting presence. Only then did God say, "Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

Owning humans. Controlling their livelihoods. Tossing them out when they are no longer useful. Using a woman to bear a child. These stories are in our holy scriptures and in the Handmaid's Tale, too. For those who don't know, that's a reference to a book written in the 1980s about a future year in New England, when people have become infertile due to pollution and radiation and women's rights are stripped and powerful families get powerless fertile woman to bear children for them. Ugh. That could never happen, right?

Well, before this goes too dark, I want to take a moment today to talk about how God cares for all the world, the powerful and the powerless, the women and the men, the young and the old. How even five thousand years ago, God was showing compassion to more than one race. Having conversations with more than one gender. Promising blessings to more than one class of people. God has always been doing amazing things through unexpected people. Turning failures into blessings. Accepting us even though we are hurtful and cruel.

You might not remember this, but our story today is not the first time that Hagar and God converse. Hagar had already come to know God's love and protection. If we just turn to chapter 16, we find this scene in the storyline . . .

Sarah and Abraham have been waiting for God to fulfill the promise of a child, but years have passed. Sarah suggests to Abraham that he use her slave Hagar as a surrogate for their sake. So, he rapes her, and she becomes pregnant. The scripture says she looked at Sarah with contempt, (I don't blame Hagar one bit for looking at her like that. I mean, imagine how a teenage girl would look at Ghislaine Maxwell after she introduced her to Jeffery Epstein.) But Sarah loses her composure, to put it mildly. She throws a fit to Abraham. Abraham takes no responsibility. He says, "She's your slave, do what you want." Then Sarah (quote) "dealt harshly with her, and [Hagar] ran away from her."

Then, "the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he speaks to her and encourages her to go back to Abraham and Sarah and promises her that she will have a family that is innumerable. The same promise that God gave to Abraham he gives to Hagar.

The Bible says, "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?"

This is also the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Now, I can preach a whole sermon on how slavery existed in the times of Abraham and the times of Paul, and how in the times of Abraham and Paul, slaves like Hagar and Onesimus, in our earlier reading, were sent back to their masters and that was somehow justified. I can preach about how immoral I think that is, and how it was used by Christians to justify slavery, but I know I don't have to. Some would call it preaching to the choir, but since the choir's not back until September 7, I'll have to hope that preaching to you is just as redundant. You know slavery is immoral and inhumane, and that the first slaves came to Virginia in 1619 and that, though it was abolished 160 years ago it remains a blight on our country still, no matter what some people say, segregation still exists in school zones and churches and legislative districts and homeowner mortgages and generational wealth and in the criminal justice system. Friends, the texts we have today do not imply that God condones slavery.

In fact, Hagar, a slave woman, is the first people in the Bible to see an angel. She is the first to give a name to God. She calls God “God Sees Me.” Her son is called, “God Hears Me.” Through the way she spoke to God and to her son, she felt seen and heard. She felt that there was a witness to her pain and suffering, that she was not a possession but a person, and her son was not going to share the same fate she experienced. God promised her, “I will bless and keep him. I have heard your appeal.”

Tradition in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths state that Hagar, mother of Ishmael, raised her son and found a wife for him and he bore many children. The Muslim faith details more of her faith journey, and how she protected and appealed for her son’s life.

Around 630 CE, after Jesus, the Muslim Prophet Muhammad led the first pilgrimage to Mecca, called the hajj, and during the hajj, which takes about a week, there are many rituals. One is called the sa’i. It is a ritual, in the midst of ritual, specifically to remember the faithfulness of Hagar. Now, both the Quran and the Bible say that after Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away with a bit of food and water, the mother and son wandered around in the wilderness until the water was gone. She had Ishmael lie down under a tree or a bush, and she searched for water in both scriptures. The Quran describes it further, saying that she went to the top of a nearby hill called Safa and looked around. Then she ran down the hill, checked on Ishmael, and up to another hilltop called Marwa. Seven times she ran back and forth between the hills, hoping to see someone or something from the vantage points. Finally, exhausted and out of hope, she cries out in desperation, appeals to God, and in both texts, a messenger from God comforts her and provides her a well of water. In the Quran, the angel is named Gabriel. Yes. Same Gabriel.

There is debate between Jews and Muslims about where the hills are, but Muslim pilgrims who participate in the hajj do still, to this day, make seven trips between a hill called Safa and a hill called Marwa, which are about a quarter of a mile apart in Mecca. And there is also a well, which tradition holds is the well Gabriel revealed to Hagar, and the pilgrims may drink from it.

The water gave Hagar and Ishmael a future and a hope. Tradition says Ishmael went on to have twelve sons, a direct parallel to Abraham's grandson's twelve sons. Ishmael is said to have founded the town of Mecca and is an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammed and father of much of the Arab race.

If we wonder how long the Jews and the Muslims have been fighting, it has been thousands upon thousands of years. Before Muslims were Muslims, they were Arabs, and they trace their line to a woman who was enslaved, raped, abused, and cast out. Abraham and Sarah made a series of terrible decisions. Terrible sins. But Hagar appealed to God, and God saw her and heard her and saved her. How many mothers since then have appealed to God, to Yahweh, to Allah, to the One who Sees and Hears, begging God to provide their child with water, food, medicine, shelter, peace, or safety. Across the world, over 150 million children are in need of nutrition assistance. In America, eleven million children are chronically hungry. In Rhode Island, 38% of households are food insecure.

Since October 7, 2023 when Hamas brutally killed and kidnapped Israelis, over 27,500 Palestinian women and children have been killed by the Israeli military. Just this month, a report came out that says over 132,000 children under the age of five, children as innocent as my twins, are at risk of dying from malnutrition in the coming months. The desperation of Hagar is not a five-thousand-year-old story. It is today's story. Let us all appeal to God and to each other and our elected representatives to do more than offer our thoughts and prayers. Let's help them believe that God sees and God hears them and so do we. God have mercy on their souls. Amen.