

WHEN 'GOD' NEEDS TO BE PERSONAL

Genesis 16: 1-11, 13; 21: 9-21.

On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people marched on Washington protesting unequal treatment of blacks compared to whites when it comes to economic and social rights. Here's part of a speech they heard that day:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!...

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together... I have a dream today!...

This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day... I have a dream!...

And when this happens... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black and white, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"...

Many of you will recognize this speech. It was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr., the acclaimed leader of the black civil rights movement. King is frequently being quoted in protests taking place right now. It is so sad that even as some things have changed, too much has stayed the same when it comes to the inequality of treatment, abuse and opportunities for blacks compared to whites.

So how do we cope? How do we cope when there seems to be such a mountain to climb, such a wall to knock down, such a bridge to build to get to the other side of real change? How do we cope when we're discouraged, dismayed, overwhelmed by the enormity of the obstacles and threatened by the viciousness of the resistance to change? **All of us must put**

ourselves into the shoes of a black person or also an indigenous person in this country today. How do we find hope where God is concerned? What kind of faith do we need to cultivate?

Let's seek out some revelatory guidance from our scriptures. To discern revelation in the story we're given, we need to listen to the witness of the slave woman Hagar. Even though this story is part of the larger story of the patriarchs and matriarchs of that first generation of Israelites, Abraham and Sarah are anything but stellar in their integrity before God. And so, this is a story of grace and of God's steadfast love for sinners of which Abraham and Sarah are representative. To be fair, this is a world that is patriarchal – that means men rule. Sarah is a strong personality, though, and Abraham accedes to her wishes all too often in order to find his peace. This is also a time where men may have multiple wives, and this is intended to help populate the tribe. It is also a time where there are slaves, and the heroine of our story – Hagar – is a slave.

The beautiful thing about this story though, firstly, is that the Muslim faith traces its roots to Hagar and her son Ishmael. This is why Abraham is seen as a patriarch of Islam as much as he is the patriarch of Judaism and Christianity which stems from Judaism. But whereas the Jewish people trace their roots from Abraham's son Isaac, Muslims trace their roots from Abraham's son Ishmael. Even as Hagar is a mere slave, she rises up to become a powerful matriarch of a whole peoples.

Second, Hagar is seen as a heroine for black people and especially black women. Why? Because she is a slave woman. With the history of black slavery, a woman like Hagar who is treated as a mere womb to bear a child for the slave owner, sexually exploited and then discarded, and who is visited by God in her distress and destitution; she is a major figure of hope. She encounters God and God reveals God's self to her. And this encounter and revelation are so personal, that she gives God her own secret name.

To understand how incredible this is, let's compare Hagar's relationship with God to that of Abraham. Abraham doesn't name God himself. God gives God's name to Abraham. It is an act of intimacy, but it also reveals that God is the one to whom Abraham must submit. God is 'El' to Abraham. Only later in the story of Moses and the burning bush does God reveal God's self with the enhanced name: Yahweh. But in Hagar's case, she is permitted to name God with her own name for God. She names God 'Elroi.' Now the only other story in the bible we have where humans are given the privilege of naming other creatures is in the creation story where humans name all the animals. It's a sign of privilege and status to be given the authority to name other life God has created. Imagine the privilege and status of naming God with your own personal name! Hagar, the slave woman is given a privilege no other human is given! Wow!

And so, black feminist literature and theology, called womanist theology, recognizes in Hagar a matriarch and queen who has much to teach us about what it means to suffer, to encounter God in a personal way, and then to turn that suffering into strength, vision and a determination that will rise up into freedom and new life. How so? Let's dig into our story a little more.

There are two times Hagar is in major distress. The first time, she runs away from her mistress Sarah. Why? She is treated harshly. Why? Well Sarah can't get pregnant and so she comes up with a plan because she cannot trust God. She will take matters into her own hands even if such plans are sinful. She will have Hagar impregnated by Abraham and then she will claim the child of the slave woman as her own. Any of you who have read or seen Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" will have a picture of what this means. Abraham is willing to go with Sarah's plan. Of course, no one asks Hagar what she wants. She's just a body to be used for the masters' purposes.

Hagar is also vulnerable to the abuse of her masters. First, it's when she gets pregnant. Sarah resents it deeply as much as she wants to claim the future child as her own. With the true mother of the child still present, it's hard to ignore the truth of her own barrenness. Grief at her own situation turns into resentment and then abuse of Hagar. Then, when Isaac is finally born, Sarah resents having Ishmael there. He must not claim the inheritance as the eldest son and take it away from Isaac. And so, Hagar pays the price by being further mistreated. The first time Hagar runs away while she's pregnant. She's got nothing and she's all alone. But that's when she first meets God. God reveals God's self to her in her affliction, were told, and Hagar find new strength to come back and survive. Her resilience is built on the very personal relationship she develops with 'Elroi' – her own secret name for God.

The second time, Hagar is actually thrown out. Abraham takes her on a journey far away with young Ishmael. He gives them some supplies, hardly enough to survive, and then abandons them. All alone ready to die, somehow Hagar finds the strength to survive. She finds the strength to care for her son and herself and her God is there right with her. And Hagar and Ishmael not only survive; Ishmael becomes a great man, very successful, the father of a whole people. And Hagar is the matriarch who raises him and feeds him with her strength and her relationship with Elroi. What an amazing story! No wonder it has been such a story of revelatory inspiration and hope for black slaves and for Muslims among others.

And this brings us back to Martin Luther King Jr. There's a powerful account of one of the many times King felt he was on the verge of falling apart. He couldn't take it any more. He was rarely ever alone. He was always surrounded by people, always talking to people. The civil rights movement for greater freedom and equality of blacks in America was ever expanding. The pressure was mounting. The personal questions and doubts about his own ability to deliver, to lead, to represent the hopes and dreams of his people in the face of

serious opposition and criticism... the pressure was mounting. He felt all alone. Sure there was lots of support around him. But he was the one who had to deliver. People were depending on him.

But he also had many enemies. Many wanted to see him fall. One night after everyone was in bed, the phone rang. Someone spoke on the other end. He cursed and threatened King. If he didn't stop, he would be dead. King hung up the phone. He began to sweat. Was he having a nervous breakdown? He tried to pray. His preacher father wasn't around. His wife was in bed. He was all alone. He cried up to God... Before that moment, God had never been that personal for him. He knew about God, taught about God, had preached great sermons. But God had not been that personal presence and power in his inner life. It all changed that night. King experienced God's powerful presence, speaking to him words of encouragement, strengthening him. And his relationship to God changed that very night.

King met God like Hagar had thousands of years earlier. What name did he give God? Was God Elroi to him? Whatever it was, both Hagar and King teach us that unless faith in God becomes personal, especially in times of challenge, difficulty and struggle, it will not be enough. Making faith personal doesn't resolve anything on the outside. But it may be just the kind of inner door that may give us what we need to make it through and become the empowered human beings that is in us to become. We need to find that inner voice that cries up to God. And we need to feel that divine energy flow through us.

Whether our hopes and dreams are in the black Lives Matter movement effecting concrete change this time around with ongoing protests and concrete recommendations for change. Whether we join with indigenous peoples of this territory we call Canada in their struggle for equal rights, respect and self-determination. Whether it's the resilience we need to live through this time of Covid-19 and learn some important life lessons. Whether our personal challenges and struggles also come in different ways that are specific to us in terms of what we're going through right now... What Hagar and King teach us is that unless our relationship to God becomes personal, we will find little strength, inspiration, courage and grace to get to the promised land.

May you and I be visited by this God of ours as Hagar and King were visited. May God reveal God's self to us in a special way personal to us. May we, too, find our own name for God, the way we have personal names for those closest to us... God is seeking that kind of intimacy with us in order to pour divine life-giving energy into us and through us into the world around us; Amen.