

## Hagar And the Universality of God's Love

In all my years of study, I had never paid close attention to Hagar. I always focused on Abraham, Sarah and their son Isaac. I've never heard a sermon on Hagar, and in all my 50 years of preaching I have never have preached on her. That would have stayed the case had I not read acclaimed American novelist Marilyn Robinson's stunning book on Genesis, "*Reading Genesis*."

She reads the first book of the Bible with different eyes than I have imagined, carefully, with a keen eye on the text itself, not commentaries on the text, and with an eye on the sweeping arc of the book and its overall meaning. That meaning I would call God's loving creation of all humankind and the desire to see all the peoples of earth flourish, not just the Hebrew people all people, not only with the chosen people of Israel but all peoples whom God has chosen to bless.

I was reading along in her book 'til I got to her treatment of Hagar's story, and it was as if I had never read it. I in fact had never read it carefully, thoroughly, deeply.

I have read to you the story as translated by Everett Fox, whose translation hews as close as possible to the Hebrew text and its sounds. Now, let's look at it a second time.

## I

First, I'd say that the stakes for reading this text are as crucial as the war between Israel and the Arabic people of Gaza and surrounding countries. It also invites us to think about our own sense of America as a chosen nation. One strain or another of American Exceptionalism has been part of our national story since our beginnings, for better and for worse, in my mind mostly worse.

Some who came over from England saw America as a New Israel, God's newly chosen people. American Exceptionalism believes we are cut from a different cut of cloth than others peoples. However, John Adams, who later became President wrote that there was, "no special providence for Americans, and their nature is the same with that of others." We have flirted with, if not embraced a kind of national "messianism" where we saw ourselves as the savior of the world.

The Genesis and the whole Hebrew Bible can lead us in two directions, one which sees Israel as the Chosen People of God, the only one, or as a people called by God to a particular purpose, that is, to pass along its blessing from God to all peoples. The choice is momentous.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that there is war tradition and a peace tradition in the Bible. The question is, which is the main message and which is the lesser message. Today Prime Minister Netanyahu is

using the parts of their Bible which is the war tradition to prosecute the war in the Middle East.

There is also an exclusivist tradition and a universalist tradition in the Old Testament. We choose which one is the closest to the heart of God. If we read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, his teaching and his ministry, it is clear to me that he believes the peace tradition and the universalist tradition, the ways closest to the heart of God.

Margaret Atwood's chilling and prescient novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, takes its premise from Hagar's story. In the fictional realm of Gilead, America has become a violently patriarchal nation where young women who are fertile are forced to bear children to privileged families when the wife of the family is infertile a growing problem in the nation.

There are layers in every story. Hagar's story is about racism and generational trauma as in the legacy of slavery in America. It explores our prejudices, our notions of national and racial superiority. And, most importantly, it is about God keeping God's promises when we lose sight of them.

## II

God called Abraham to leave his home country and go to an unknown country to found a people who would bless the world. With an amazing blend of courage and faith he went.

Soon after he arrived in the Promised Land a famine arose and Abraham and his wife Sarah went to Egypt. There Abraham did a cowardly thing. Sarah was most beautiful, and Abraham, fearing that the Pharaoh might kill him in order to add Sarah to his harem, passed her off as his sister. The Pharaoh, more righteous than Abraham, returned Sarah to him when he discovered the deceit. Who knows how this cowardly act affected Sarah!

God had promised Abraham he would make of him a great people with descendants numbered as the stars in the night sky. But Abraham and Sarah were now up in years and a child had not been born to them. Following the custom of the time, Sarah gave her Egyptian slave mistress to Abraham so Hagar might bear a son to them. It worked; Hagar was pregnant with child. But Hagar could not help gloating in Sarah's presence. In Everett Fox's translation Sarah became of "light-worth" in her eyes.

She went to Abraham and said, The handmaid I gave to you to have a son is now looking down on me! It your fault. You make it right! Weak Abraham said, You handle it.

Sarah began to treat her harshly and Hagar ran away. Now something startling happened: for the first time in scripture God's angel, or messenger—that's what angel means in the Bible—appeared to her. The first appearance of an

angel in the Bible! To Hagar, the Egyptian slave on the run! God cares for the outsider too.

The angel told her to return to Sarah, even to Sarah's mistreatment of her. It sounds harsh, but perhaps that was the only way she would not perish in the wilderness with her child yet to be born. Then came the annunciation, much like the angel's message to Mary in Luke's gospel:

“You are pregnant!

You will bear a son.

Name him Ishmael, God Hears,

for God has heard of your affliction.”

That's what God always does, for all people, hears of their afflictions and comes to help—all people, not just God's chosen people.

### III

Now the story turns to the part you know well. Abraham and Sarah have despaired about having a child together. Sarah was in her nineties and Abraham around 100. One day three visitors show up and Abraham offers hospitality. They are angels in disguise. They tell him that Sarah is to bear a son! Sarah, listening behind a flap in the tent starts laughing, laughing at the sheer impossibility of it all. But Sarah laughed all the way from the retirement home to the maternity

ward. And when the son was born, she named him Isaac, which means  
 “Laughter.”

And then she began to laugh even more. I love Fox’s translation:

“God has made laughter for me,  
 All who hear of it will laugh for me.”

Can you hear the sound of her joy?

#### IV

Now back to Hagar’s story.

When Sarah now had her own child, Isaac, to have Hagar and her son Ishmael around was intolerable to her. She went to Abraham and said, Drive Hagar and her son out, for he will not share the inheritance with my son! Abraham was troubled. But God said to him, do not worry about the lad. I will make of your son Isaac the beginning of a great people. And I will make of Hagar’s son Ishmael also a great people, for he too is of your seed!

So the next morning, Abraham, following Sarah’s demand to cast them out, packed up some bread and a skin of water and sent them out.

And now the next miracle. As they traveled into the desert wilderness they ran out of the bread and then the water. Not being able to bear seeing her son die,

she placed him under a desert bush and went a sat a bow's shot away. The she began to weep loudly.

Now God's angel appears a second time and says, "What ails you, Hagar? Be not afraid!" That's the main message of God's angels all through Scripture! Like in the angels' messages in the birth stories of Jesus. God had heard the voice of the lad, the lad!

Then the angel said, "Go lift up the lad, grasp him by your hand. I will make of him a great nation! Then Hagar's eyes were opened, and she saw a well of water, filled up the goat skin from its waters and gave her son water to drink. They were saved! Abraham's other son, Issac, would later be saved by a ram appearing in the thicket. Ishmael was saved by the appearance of a well of water! God wants every child's life saved.

## V

What meanings have occurred to you as you have heard Hagar's story. Where has it touched your heart? Where has it vexed you? This story is a foundational one for Islam. Hagar is the mother of their Arabic people and mother of their faith. As they tell her story, it was Allah, their Arabic name for God, who told Abraham, whom they also see as the father of their faith, who told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. And it is God who showed them the spring of water they call Zamzam which saved their lives.

For Islam one of the five pillars of their religion is to take a pilgrimage to Mecca, and guess what's one stop as part of the pilgrimage? Yes, Zumzum where they remember the holy time and place where Hagar and Ishmael's lives were saved. Arabic and Muslim people are God's people too.

Have you wondered how God could use cowardly Abraham and jealous Sarah? How God could use you too, even with your flaws? None of us want to be defined by our worst moments, and God doesn't want you to do this to *yourself* either!

Have you gotten the wondrous message that God wants all his children to thrive, and that all people are God's chosen people, chosen, like the Hebrew people, to bless the world with God's own blessing? The poet wrote,

How odd of God

To choose the Jews.

God chooses us too in all our oddity.

Ishmael's name means "God Hears". God hears all our cries and comes to save. God's ears are already inclined to us and our needs. Already and always, forever. Praise be the God of Hagar and Ishmael!

