“The God Who Sees…Even Me”

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Genesis 21:8-21

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Because today’s lectionary text from Genesis begins in the middle of a story, some background information may be helpful.

Today’s text begins with a celebration for Isaac. Isaac is the only son of Abraham and Sarah, the one that God promised, and the one for whom Abraham and Sarah had prayed, and the one whose birth will cause lifelong conflict between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar — the Egyptian slave who was given to Abraham in marriage by Sarah to help secure a future for Abraham.

When Hagar became pregnant with Ishmael, long before Isaac was conceived, Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar, who ran away. While she was in the wilderness, the angel of the Lord instructs her to go back to her mistress and that the child she is carrying will be one in a long line of descendants.

A few years later, when Ishmael is older, a child is finally born to Sarah and Abraham, and they name him Isaac, which means “he laughs.”

Listen now to the reading from Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So 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 Isaac.

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But 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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.

So 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.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then 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.”

And 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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

Then 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.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He 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.

Hi, my name is Sarah. Nice to meet you.

I’m sure that I’m not the only Sarah you know. It is a pretty common name. In 1985, the year I was born, it was the 5th most popular name according to [babynames.com](http://babynames.com). There were always multiple Sarahs in each of my elementary school classes. Each year, I was always Sarah W. If there are other Sarahs watching right now, I know you can appreciate what I’m talking about.

When I was in kindergarten, we had 3 Sarahs. Our teacher asked if any of us had a nickname. One of the Sarahs, whose full name, I have to think was Sarah Margaret, said that her nickname was Meg. Being only 5 at the time, and not having a full grasp on what a nickname was, my 5-year-old brain came to the conclusion that “Meg” was short for “Sarah.” Fast forward 5 years later and we once again had 3 Sarahs in 5th grade. Our teacher, on the first day of school, asked if any of us had nicknames. And I said, “You can call me ‘Meg.’”

Well, as you can imagine, it didn’t last long. Toward the end of the school day, when my deskmate tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Hey, Meg, the teacher has been calling your name for 10 minutes,” I knew (and my teacher knew) that Meg wasn’t going to stick. I went back to being one of a million Sarahs.

I was always jealous of classmates who had exotic names — names that were unique, that no one else in the class had…names that meant you didn’t have to add an initial after it.

I was tired of being just another Sarah in a world full of Sarahs.

I think, I would have rather been a Hagar. You don’t meet very many Hagars these days, other than maybe Sammy Hagar or in comic strips.

After reading today’s text from Genesis, I really think that sometimes, I would rather be named Hagar. Because Sarah doesn’t come out looking too good in today’s passage. I would rather be Hagar because she is the hero of this story.

In today’s text, Hagar is cast out of the family unit. Sarah catches Ishmael playing with Isaac. One commentary writer, Eugene March, examined the Hebrew word for “playing” and explained that the verb form in which it occurs is connected to the basis of Isaac’s name which means “to laugh.” March says that “The term can be interpreted as ‘mocking’ or ‘jesting’ …” and so March makes the interpretive move to suggest that perhaps Ishmael was “Isaacing,” or, “acting as if he were Isaac, flaunting his firstborn status.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

This constant reminder of Ishmael’s status as firstborn is hard on Sarah, and whatever she saw happen that day between Ishmael and Isaac was too much for her. It was the last straw. And so she orders Abraham to kick Hagar and his son out.

Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s demands, but God tells Abraham to do as Sarah says. So he gives her some water and some bread and casts her out from their family. Hagar goes off into the desert, into the wilderness, where she wanders aimlessly until the water and bread have run out and Hagar feels death for her child is imminent.

She puts the boy under a bush and walks a half a mile away, so as not to hear or see her son die. As it had happened in the wilderness before, Hagar is visited once again by an angel of the Lord, who once again affirms that God has plans for Hagar and for her child.

Hagar is finally given agency in this moment. She is finally able to take control of her life. She raises Ishmael in the wilderness, providing for them both until Ishmael can contribute. She even procures a wife for him from Egypt — her native land. And because of *Hagar*, a great nation comes from Ishmael. A great nation begins with someone who is a triple whammy in terms of undesirability: She is a foreigner, a slave, and a woman. And yet, God sees her, and lifts her up.

Yes, I would like to say that I want to be a Hagar. I would like to be named after the first person in the Hebrew Bible to claim God as her own and to dare to give God a name — El-roi - the God who sees me. I want to be like Hagar. Not like Sarah.

But unfortunately, because of who I am and the circumstances in which I was raised, I am more like Sarah than I would like to admit. In fully understanding this ancient story, I have to examine the times in which I have been a Sarah *today*.

In an essay on racial reconciliation vs. white supremacy, Erna Kim Hackett, a Korean and white preacher and writer, discusses the ways in which Christians who are white often interpret well-known stories in the Bible.

I want to give you a heads up, that this might be hard to hear. But, I’m hoping that if we feel our defenses going up, we can remember to take a step back, take a breath, and listen to the whole thing. And then I’m hoping we can unpack what Hackett has to say and find some truth in it for ourselves.

Hackett writes,

“White Christianity suffers from a bad case of Disney Princess theology. As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the Princess in every story. They are Esther, never [Ahasuerus] or Haman. They are Peter, never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisee. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Hackett’s Disney Princess Theology theory rings true for me whenever I read these stories. I always place myself in the “hero” position of the story. What would it have been like to be Esther, to save my people from persecution and death, to stand up to power?

But I never ask myself, “Have I ever been the bad guys in this story? Have I ever been Ahasuerus — have I ever judged somebody solely based on how they looked or based on what our culture has deemed to be beautiful?” Or, even worse, “Have I ever been Haman — have I ever been so tempted by power that I cut someone else down? Have I ever maligned an entire group of people based on the actions of one person?”

And for today’s text — am I more a Hagar or a Sarah? I have to admit, that I see more of Sarah in me than Hagar. I don’t know what it’s like to have very little agency in my life. I don’t fully understand what it feels to be so broken down by a system of oppression, that I feel that my life is near death.

But I *do* know what it feels like to be jealous. I *have* said and done things to deliberately hurt someone else. I *have* tried to make things happen in my own way instead of trusting God. Am I more Sarah than Hagar? Probably. Yes.

These are hard questions to ask. But it is important that we ask them. I share the Disney Princess Theology theory not in an attempt to shame anyone, but as a suggestion of how we might approach difficult texts in a more faithful way.

This theory doesn’t mean that we are never heroes. It doesn’t mean that we *always* choose the sinful way. It doesn’t mean that we can’t change who we are or make a difference in this world. And it doesn’t mean that characters like Sarah are irredeemable. Everyone is a mixed bag.

But asking those questions of ourselves while we’re reading the Bible, *especially when we’re reading texts which feature injustice and oppression*, will help us to see more fully both the need for liberation as well as what our role might be.

Because we still have many Hagars in our world today — maybe not by name, but definitely by circumstance.

In her book, “Texts of Terror,” Phyllis Trible writes about the Hagars of today:

She writes, “All sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water,

The homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

We still have Hagars today. They may be more cleverly hidden, but they still exist. And the God who saw Hagar all those years ago sees them today. And God calls us in this story to help liberate them.

As we move forward as a nation, grappling with issues of race and oppression, with a global pandemic, and a contentious election, it is our responsibility to read difficult texts like these with at least two tasks in mind. First, to ask ourselves, How have I acted like a character in this story? How have I been like the oppressed? How have I been like the oppressor? And secondly, to ask ourselves, “How is God calling me to help in the work of liberation?”

This is the last we hear of Hagar in the written narrative. The last that we hear is in verse 21, we learn that she has helped procure a wife for Ishmael. There’s a whole lot that happens in between, that we don’t know about. But we can try to fill her story in.

We can assume that there were helpers along the way. Perhaps a family took her and her young son into their home. Perhaps a hunter took Ishmael under his wing and taught him how to hunt with a bow. Perhaps several women welcomed Hagar, an unmarried mother, to join them at the well each day, and over time, relationships formed, relationships which helped Hagar find a local girl who would marry into this strange family.

There are many stories like Hagar’s in our world today. And while we can probably feel pretty comfortable that we haven’t directly contributed to suffering, we need not sit too comfortably because God calls us to be like those unknown people who aided Hagar so long ago. God calls us to join in the work of liberation — not just in large acts like attending protests or going to remote areas to build homes, but in the small every day acts of liberation — acts like inviting someone who is different than you into a conversation, like committing to education on a topic that might make you uncomfortable, like gently speaking up when you hear someone saying something that is wrong, even when it’s someone you love dearly.

The call to join God in liberation *will* make us uncomfortable at times. But it’s no where near as uncomfortable as those who are in need of it.

So let’s get comfortable with being uncomfortable. And may God guide us on this journey.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Eugene March; Feasting on the Word; Year A [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Erna Kim Hackett: “Why I Stopped Talking About Racial Reconciliation and Started Talking About White Supremacy.” Mar 25, 2020: <https://www.inheritancemag.com/stories/why-i-stopped-talking-about-racial-reconciliation-and-started-talking-about-white-supremacy?fbclid=IwAR30a1g6YsTpW9KJJx26E5Y-k3TUwYrfolci2LFwQBdq648168aVDwEyRZE> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Phyllis Trible, “Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives” Pg. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)