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SERMON

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One Among the Stars

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Jews, Christians, and Muslims celebrate the same father of faith, Abraham, who God placed at the foundation of our faith, family tree.

Our tradition holds that late in life, God came close to Abraham in the desert night, calls for his faithfulness, and despite being childless, promises him descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky.

God left out quite a few details of how long and all the circuitous events. Sometimes the details of the stories sound like pulp fiction. Peel back the layers and we find the substance of every epic written since and that echoes in our lives today.

God creates and promises. We plot and scheme. God intervenes and saves.

As directed, Abraham and Sarah left their ancestral home for the land promised by God but took a detour by way of Egypt. While there, a handmaid, Hagar, becomes enslaved to Sarah, and remains enslaved when they leave.

Intimate with her daily needs, Hagar must have heard Sarah complain about God promising her a son, even in her geriatric condition. She sees Sarah becoming desperate. Conniving.

Believing she owns all of Hagar, inside her body as well, Sarah gives her to Abraham, ready to claim any child as her property. Hagar becomes the first from which all other women might claim #MeToo when abused.

The plan backfires. As the child in Hagar's womb grows, the animosity between the two women festers. Sarah's jealousy

reaches the boiling point. She accuses Hagar of not working, being too proud of her pregnancy, and banishes her to the desert.

God found Hagar there.

Hagar is the first person in scripture to give God a name. She calls God "the God who sees."

Hagar identifies God with the name that echoes throughout our faith history for those who have suffered at the hands of established patriarchy, selfishness, classism, and exploited for another's gain.

We have a God who sees.

In that divine encounter, God promises Hagar the same made to Abraham, that her descendants will be "too numerous to count," like the stars in the desert sky.

She returns to the lion's den to raise her son. He bears the name, "Ishmael," which in Hebrew means "God hears," for God heard of Hagar's misery.

God sees and God hears.

God never forgot about the promise to Sarah, even after this cruelty. Despite her age, years later Sarah bears a son, Isaac.

Let's not be deceived into thinking this is a smooth road for any of them. Before I read the lectionary text for today that continues the story, please pray with me.

Creator God, you placed the stars in the sky
and your spirit into our beings.

Gather us across time and space
and stir within us that as we hear
this ancient story of your faithfulness,
we too are caught up in your story
and live in ways that honor all the stars and souls you create. Amen

Genesis 21:8-20

Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar that Egyptian, playing with her son. 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.”

And this thing seemed evil in Abraham’s eyes.

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, 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. 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, and 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.

But 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.

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.

I’ve been a minister long enough, I’ve been alive long enough, to know each family has a trove of buried secrets. Families create and bequeath cover-ups to avoid exposing some perceived fault or shame or transgression. Presumably, if we don’t talk about those things, we can imagine another story, one more pleasing, or fabricate a future we think more stable.

While studying for ministry in Divinity school, a class in pastoral care asked us to construct our family tree. Rather than merely listing dates of birth and death of grandparents as far back as known, we documented illnesses, cause of deaths, addictions, immigration stories, and abuse.

One of my colleagues, a woman a bit older than me who was raised in Mississippi completed two documents.

Her first large sheet of paper depicted a family tree like mine, with aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws, divorces, etc. And she had another, smaller family tree off to the side.

“Why?” I asked and braced myself.

She often schooled me from my naivete of what it means to live as a Black woman.

“Well, that’s my grandfather’s family, my *biological* grandfather.”

A thin smile barely masked her terse voice – “most of my family is black as night on this paper. My pale black skin came from this white man over here who once took my grandma.”

“You know him well enough to construct a family tree?”

“Jackson’s a small town. Of course. When our paths crossed while walking around town, he knows I am his. I bear too much resemblance to be denied. He’d no longer acknowledge me after he became the bank president.”

What a mess, which is exactly where we often find God when we open our eyes to the consequences of our actions. God is not interested in the loyalties we claim to our family, our legacy, our tribe. God created out of love and goodness, with purposeful uniqueness, each human invested with a speck of God’s image.

Whatever else a person may think about the Bible and about Hebrew scriptures in particular: it’s honest. The stories never shy away from presenting less-than-savory facts about our paragons of faith. It’s often the proverbial “warts and all” presentation.

God’s word often challenges us to examine to whom and to what we devote our lives.

Usually where we make the greatest messes in our lives, God appears.

Isaac's birth barely satisfied Sarah's life-long dream before igniting new fears. The birthright laws of ancient times declare that regardless of the parent's wishes the eldest son inherits everything. Consumed with the need to control, to the point of sentencing another to death, Sarah cares nothing about the consequences of her actions. She believes her son to be the sole star in the night sky.

This time, she forces Abraham into her plot, who sends Hagar with meager rations into the wilderness to die.

Wandering, with waterskins empty, Hagar abandons Ishmael and they both sob. Again, God sees, and God hears.¹

We never learn if Sarah discovers God's rescue. Hebrew scripture follows Sarah and Isaac, not mentioning Hagar. Ishmael became a great archer, takes a bride and flourishes.

Islamic tradition actually redeems Abraham in my mind. Their version of the story includes his frequent visits to his son and care for Hagar. Together, Ishmael and Abraham build a cornerstone celebrated by Islam in Mecca. At the end of Abraham's life, Ishmael joins Isaac to bury their father, together.

An adage claims that the victor gets to write the story. Eventually history catches up and the truth speaks. The victor will write **a** version.

¹Daniel B. Clendenin, "Ishmael: God Hears and Sees," *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20050613JJ.shtml>, June 1, 2020. Clendenin's essay inspired my thinking along with Phyliss Tickle's *Texts of Terror*, and

Sarah tried to hijack God to her benefit, forever casting a shadow by her selfish acts. Despite Sarah's desires. Despite any animosity perpetuated about mixed race children. Despite any lies later told to disparage the foreigner, God unquestionably wants Hagar and her son to thrive.

"Nostalgia is the enemy of history," insist sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. They unpack this by writing, "we frequently accept ... tales that corrupt our understanding of the past and mislead us about the present."²

We feel this tension every June with fraught acceptance of Juneteenth as a national holiday, either willing to delve into history or stifle conversation.

When Abraham Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address in 1865 at the end of four years of civil war, few people in either the North or the South would have bristled from his statement that slavery "was, somehow, the cause of the war."

At the war's outset in 1861 Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, justified secession for fear Lincoln's policy to not allow slavery in new territories would make "property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless ... thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars."

The vice president of the southern states, Alexander H. Stephens, asserted the Confederacy was founded based on the

² Brad Braxton, "James Baldwin Reminds Us Not to Be Surprised by This," *The Christian Century*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/james-baldwin-reminds-us-not-be-surprised>

great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition. This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.

Yet, at the end of the war, to salvage their honor, the Southern leaders created new stories.

After the surrender, Davis insisted, the war was fought solely for “the inalienable right of a people to change their government ... to withdraw from a Union into which they had, as sovereign communities, voluntarily entered.”

The “existence of African servitude,” he maintained, “was in no wise the cause of the conflict, but only an incident.”³

That’s a cover-up. Traitors remade themselves as heroes. Without accountability, slavery continued, and blacks and whites were slaughtered if they threatened the economic interests of those who’d lost the war.

The Federal holiday we just celebrated last week, Juneteenth, marks the day the enslaved people of Texas learned of their freedom, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Generations later, we continue to wrestle with intimidation, cover-ups, and lies.

³ James M. McPherson, “Southern Comfort,” *The New York Review of Books*. June 18, 2020, https://getpocket.com/explore/item/southern-comfort?utm_source=pocket-newtab

Stories that rely on old, simplistic tropes are a danger to communities across the country, and ultimately, to our democracy's health. Centuries of antisemitic depictions of Jews, fear of the immigrant, lies about Blacks' inferiority, and ignorant characterizations of Muslims produce fear and violence.

On the other hand, stories that reveal our shared humanity and reflect the reality of our multifaceted society can be a doorway, welcoming others into fuller relationships and real mutual understanding.

The way we tell the stories can be weapons or doorways.⁴

God salted the heavens with stars, smiling as God hung each star with one of our names on it. If anyone believes God checked out of creation after those first days, this story of Sarah and Hagar and Abraham invites us to know that we cannot write anyone out of God's care.

I hope this story also speaks to anyone whose life is burdened. Know that scripture repeats generation after generation over the millennia that God sees and hears.

One last quick story.

At Sunday School Unplugged, I'd rather call a "conversation" than a "class" on Sunday mornings, we talked about the ways God

⁴ Joshua Setfel, Simran Jeet Singh, "To quell racism, tell more stories that welcome the stranger," *Religion News Service*, June 22, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/06/22/to-quell-racism-tell-more-stories-that-welcome-the-stranger/>

interrupts human life. As if the story goes yadda, yadda..."but God" to divert us from further demise.

I don't disparage our holy scriptures, just the opposite. The Bible repeats story after story with the common plot of people acting anyway from selfishly to murderously towards one another, "yadda, yadda." Then God enters the fray to divert or change the action, often marked in the story with "but, God."

The phrase 'but, God' marks a turning point, a place of hope, the moment redeeming will begin for all involved.

In the lull of lamenting all the ways we derail what God created before God steps in, one person calmly offered, "maybe that's what God calls us to do." She said, "Maybe we can be the 'but God' for someone else. We can be the person to speak their truth for the world to hear."

We create a legacy in who we birth and the truth we bequeath. Imagine the way we can polish everyone's star to brilliance.



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