

Hagar: The Other Matriarch of Faith

Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21 by Patty Friesen (Feb 12/16)

When I was on an Israel/Palestine tour with Bethel College, Kansas professor Patty Shelley, we went to Hebron to the Cave of Machpelah, the traditional burial site of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. It is a holy site for Jews and Muslims. King Herod had built a structure over it to appease the Jews around 60 AD and then Salah-daheen, the Muslim king built a mosque on top of it in 600 AD and it has been under Muslim control ever since then until 1994 when Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish settler from a nearby settlement walked into the mosque and killed 29 Muslim worshippers. The mosque was closed for a year and when it was reopened, it had been divided in half with a wall – half for Jewish worship and half for Muslim worship. Of all the walls in the world, built to divide and “protect” people, this is the craziest. Abraham and Sarah’s tombs are in the Muslim half and were cemented over by the Israelis so the Palestinians wouldn’t dig them out. Isaac and Rebekah are in the neutral middle of the mosque and Jacob and Leah are in the Jewish half. We had to go through four metal detectors to get to the Muslim side and in respect we took off our shoes and covered our heads with scarves. Our Palestinian guide said that every day the Israeli soldiers come to the Muslim side to make sure they aren’t digging Abraham and Sarah out of their concrete tombs. We asked if they remove their shoes and cover their heads. Our guide laughed.

Today’s scripture is the root of all this modern day conflict between Sarah and Hagar and the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael. It all begins right after God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 and when they leave their home and travel to Egypt, Pharaoh takes Sarah into his harem. Sarah isn’t laughing now.

While she is there, the narrator speaks of her as “the woman.” She loses her name and identity and Abraham who is so wonderful at advocating for Lot and Melchizedek and others, fails to advocate for Sarah. God tells Pharaoh to let Sarah go, foreshadowing when God tells another Pharaoh to let God’s people go and calls her by name. Pharaoh kicks them out of his country and gives them slaves, also foreshadowing the Israelite plunder of Egypt during the Exodus. This is where Sarah likely acquires Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant.

There is a rabbinic story where Pharaoh offers Sarah any slave she wants and that she chooses Hagar. She obviously favours Hagar enough to send her to Abraham who doesn’t argue with the plan. And the domestic drama goes downhill from there. The oppressed become the oppressors. Hagar conceives and looks with contempt on Sarah. It may be out of resentment to be so used as much as haughtiness but it brings down the wrath of Sarah on Hagar who on Abraham’s approval, beats her until Hagar runs away. The Hebrew phrase of Sarah’s abuse of Hagar, is the same phrase used to describe how the Egyptians treated their Israelite slaves. Violence begets violence.

And then this beautiful verse 7, The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And the angel said, Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going? She answered, I am running away from my mistress Sarah. The angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress and submit to her. I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted. Now you have conceived and will bear a son and you shall call him Ishmael, God hears, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. And she named God who spoke to her. You are

Elroi – God of seeing, for she said, Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?”

Hagar is the first person in Genesis to be encountered by an angel of God, even before the three angels visit Abraham and Sarah. And Hagar is the first woman and first foreigner to be given promises of God and receive a covenant with God that parallel the promise and covenant given to Abraham. But she doesn't call on God as the God of her masters Abraham and Sarah. Hagar is the only person in the whole Old Testament to name God for herself. While God names Ishmael, God hears, she uses her own personal encounter with God to re-name God, God sees. And the God who hears and sees will also be the God to speak to Hagar again.

When Sarah stops laughing for joy over the birth of Isaac and casts Hagar out for the second time in chapter 21, saying, Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac, Sarah treats Hagar as nameless as she herself had been treated in Egypt. Hagar runs to the wilderness, wandering and perhaps looking for the well where God saw her, but there is no well and there is no more water and she casts Ishmael under a bush and where is God now? Verse 17, And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, Do not be afraid, Hagar 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 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 story has so many parallels to other water salvation stories we are reading in Genesis, from creation to Noah to Hagar. Hagar's cry leads to her salvation, a steadfast rhythm throughout the personal and communal stories of Israel in the Old Testament. Fear not, Hagar, the angel says, putting her in the same care of heaven as all the other heroes of the Bible. Yet there is no tomb for Hagar where people venerate her memory and my guess is that this may be the first sermon we've ever heard about Hagar. Is Hagar a perfect heroine of faith? No. She's got attitude but this story shows us that Abraham and Sarah aren't perfect either.

Delores Williams, a black feminist theologian speaks eloquently about Hagar's becoming many things to many people. "Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black slave woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the single welfare mother with child, the homeless woman, the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others. (Interpretation, p.490)

In this story, the people of God should rejoice that God's saving acts are not confined to their own community. God's acts of deliverance occur out and about in the seemingly godforsaken corners of the world, even among those who may be explicitly excluded from the supposed chosen people of God. Here we see God at work among the outcasts, the refugees of the world, who fill our world today as much as they did then. We are to lift them up and hold their hands until wells of water, salvation and healing become available. They are also to discern where God's deliverance has occurred and to name these events and publicly confess them. Once again, we see how Genesis witnesses

to the workings of the Creator God. Telling stories like this one about Hagar keeps that testimony alive and serves to remind the chosen that their God is the God of all the world, including the outcasts.

This will be the key to peace in the Middle East, if each faith which considers themselves chosen, Christianity, Islam and Judaism would recognize the work and promise of God in those outside their faith. This will be the key to peace within the growing cultural, political and religious divide in our own country. This will be the key to peace within Mennonite Church Canada and peace within our own faith community, workplaces and crazy extended families. Let pray:

Thank you God of Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman that you are at work both with us and with people who surprise us. We give thanks to God for the many examples of faith in scripture and in those around us. We give thanks that your mercy exceeds the limits of our own. Amen.

Hymn: There's a Wideness in God's Mercy