

October 6, 2019
Susan Gascho-Cooke
Hidden Figures -- Hagar
[Genesis 16](#) and [Genesis 21:8-20](#)

This morning, I'd like to start this sermon time with a bit of a reminder about how sermons function in Anabaptist faith groups. Ideally, in the tradition that CMCL grows out of, a sermon is just a conversation *starter* — one person in the community laying out their best understanding of a scripture — hypothesizing about how it was intended to be understood, and putting forth suggestions for what the message might be for the gathered group in their time and place. This process was/is an accountability tool with the whole community, to help one another in faithfulness to following Christ.

In smaller congregations, it's a little easier to see this model still at work. My congregation in Atlanta, which had forty folks on a full day, gave a separate part of the service to conversation around the scripture(s) and sermon. They call it "further liberty," and it's separate from Sharing Time.

Here at CMCL, it can be harder to manage — especially when we are in one service, with sometimes 190-200 of us packed in here. How do you have a useful conversation about *anything* with that many people?

I have fallen into the habit of not expecting much conversation about sermons. I throw invitations into my sermons, to think about this ... or reflect on that ... But there's not often a closed loop. I don't often get to hear what *you* think about something. And you don't often get to hear from each other, at least not *during* the service.

I'll never forget the first time in Atlanta when someone stood up after I had preached and said, "Actually, I read that passage a very different way ..." and proceeded to offer a different interpretation and vision than I'd shared. What a gift that was! To me, an opportunity to geek out and dive in deep with a scripture I'd given a lot of thought to. And a gift to the whole group, the conversation that would ensue. I think we were much more likely to have a fuller understanding of the passage because of the conversation.

I bring this reminder to you, of the tradition we spring from, because this morning's story is a particularly hard one. And while we may not have time to engage long back and forth given the limits of our service, I want to remind you that in the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition, we as the pastors are not supposed to be where buck stops in theology or biblical interpretation. We are the ones most often tasked by this community to put prayerful thought and reflection into scripture, and to bring the results of that reflection to you on Sundays, but ultimately, the meaning made should happen *together*.

So, I will bring you my heart and mind on our scripture for today, but I ask you to take up this story, too. To ponder it for its meaning for us here, now. It's a story I've struggled with for years — and I bring that to you, my community of discernment, today.

Our "hidden figure" today is Hagar. Hagar is different from *Serach bat Jacob*, who was our first hidden figure in this series. Serach's name is mentioned three times in the Bible, but only as a line in a genealogy each time. Hagar has almost two entire chapters devoted to her story. So, she is in some ways much less hidden than many women in the Bible. Her story, as written in our scripture, however, seems to be the story of how a figure becomes hidden in plain view.

Without doubt, Hagar is largely hidden in Christian tradition. We have hymns and prayers that reference “the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac.” But neither Marcy nor I could think of any Hagar hymns, and she’s not in our printed prayers in the same way Sarah is. The way Hagar’s story is presented in the Hebrew Bible, which is the Christian Old Testament, is that Hagar was a prop that Sarah *used incorrectly*. The moral of the story, as I is always somehow about Sarah — her lack of faith in resorting to bringing Hagar to Abraham. If only she’d been patient, trusted Abraham and God, none of this inconvenient Hagar stuff would ever have happened. And when Hagar and Ishmael are, finally, abandoned to the wilderness, Abraham and Sarah feel that they have protected the really *important* thing — the line of inheritance and wealth and power. To them, it’s as if Hagar and Ishmael never happened.

This telling of the story hides so much.

First of all, neither scripture or Christian tradition are honest about what happens to Hagar in this story. If you look at the front of your bulletin, you can see a common rendering of the “transaction” in which Sarah gives a human being to her husband as a gift. There’s a word for when someone’s body is touched intimately and reproductively in ways they don’t give consent to. It’s not a word we use often in church, because the reality of what the name stands for is *so* evil and inappropriate.

That word is rape.

And U.S. history has done the same whitewashing with its own history. We talk about slave owners having “mistresses” among the enslaved women. If you have no choice in the matter, you are not a “mistress,” and the meeting of your bodies isn’t “sex.”

The story of Sarah and Hagar is one of the places where Margaret Atwood found her source material for *The Handmaid’s Tale*. And Sarai is right in the mix — one woman enabling the betrayal of another woman.

If you’ve heard the phrase “white women’s tears” in popular discourse, Sarai and Abram are teaching a master class in this story. Things do not go how Sarai wants or expects, and she is upset. Nothing wrong with being upset, and nothing is wrong with tears.

But there is power behind the upset of a person connected to power, and Sarai is connected to power through Abram, the patriarch here. She is his first wife. So her tears put into motion a panic — her tears must be quenched, at all cost, and the cost is usually paid by someone of less power and privilege. Abram was willing to throw out Hagar and his firstborn son to staunch the tide of Sarai’s tears.

It’s part of what played out in the real-life courtroom drama that occupied our country’s attention this week. When Amber Guyger, the white female ex-police officer was found guilty of murder for killing Botham Jean, a black man eating ice cream in his own kitchen, which she says she mistook for her own apartment. After her sentencing, the victim’s brother hugged her and told her that he forgave her. And the black female judge in the case also hugged Guyger and gave her a Bible.

Social media exploded with emotion around this. White social media (at least my sample of it) was mostly moved and pleased at the display of kindness and forgiveness. Granted, a lot of my white social media connection is Anabaptist, and we’re kind of big on public acts of forgiveness (think Nickel Mines). Black social media (at least my sample of it) was outraged at the way white social media was interpreting the actions as a forgiving hug to all whiteness.

Some wonder, and I share their wonderment, if there wasn’t an element of survival instinct in those actions: to stem the tide of Guyger’s tears, in hopes of stemming the tide of reprisal that would likely come in response to her tears.

And yesterday, a key witness for the prosecution, was found shot and killed. Shot in the mouth ... for having spoken out, perhaps? We don't know.

African-American women throughout the centuries of American history have also been forced to live in a survival mentality, and they have recognized that in Hagar's story. Reading Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* in seminary was a life-changing experience for me. In this book Williams, an African-American female theologian writes about Hagar's meaning in womanist theology and experience. She lays out the story of Hagar in a way that brings her to center, instead of leaving her as a mere pawn in Sarai and Abram's games.

Why would you choose this character as your patron saint? Why celebrate identification with this exiled, powerless, scrappy person, who ended up outside of the "chosen line"? This was eye-opening and disturbing to consider as a young, white twentysomething seminarian — a heretofore unquestioning daughter of Sarah.

Hagar is a bold woman. She is the only person in the Bible to name God. Not the only one to *call out to God*, but the only one to tell God what God's name was to God's face. And interestingly, she names God *El-Roi* — "one who sees." This is interesting, because she was Egyptian, and the symbol for the Egyptian god, Ra, was an eye. So, she was maybe even giving the God of Abraham a name from her own religious tradition. In this account, Hagar does not "convert" to Abram's God, at least we're not told about it if she does. She calls God out.

And the story betrays her on so many levels. Not only is she cast out, but the messenger of God doesn't even say he heard her cries. It says he heard the cries of her *son*, and he says he's speaking to her on behalf of her son, not herself. She is promised a nation in order that Abraham's seed (in Ishmael) won't be wasted.

But, in the midst of this painful story, it is once again those in exile who see and name God. Hagar wasn't being provocative and bold. Her aim was not to be controversial. She was, very simply, at the brink of death — in desperation. Which is a place where a lot of things become clear, and a lot of what is inessential? *poof!* goes away. Hagar is not worried about power, about legacy ... about what God will think of her. She is worried about her own survival, and the survival of her son.

What happens to the people we hide? The Bible doesn't hide Hagar. Rather, she is hidden in plain sight to white, Christian eyes. We don't see her, even when we read two chapters about her. She is a mistake of Sarah and Abraham's, and God "fixes" the mistake for them, or rather lets them get away with fixing their mistake, making things "back to normal" for them at Hagar's expense. And Abraham is said to have felt "bad" about the whole thing, but it doesn't keep him from casting out Hagar and his son.

So, what does it mean that we claim descendancy from Sarah and Isaac?

Part of my crisis of faith in seminary still lingers — have we been on the wrong side of history for 4,000 years? How can an institution built on such a flawed & cracked foundation possibly be sound?

It's a similar question about being white in this country of ours... how can an institution founded on genocide and slavery be a viable structure?

We continue to be faced with these questions. Communities often want to bring back the exiles after time has passed, and they regret the casting out. But they usually want to welcome back the exiles without really acknowledging or incorporating any of the wisdom and experience gained by the exiles in their time away. As if God was not with them in exile.

Liberal Christian congregations want to be able to be “welcoming” to LGBTQ folks who were previously rejected — they genuinely want to right that wrong, I think. But often times the congregations don’t want to actually *become queer* — just to welcome queer *people* to be re-join their very straight institution. Not acknowledging that the exiles were the ones in the right all along. I wonder if it might be that our church institutions are the ones that need to ask to be welcomed back into communion, not vice-versa.

We are stuck in the same dilemma as our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. We don’t want to share the inheritance. We don’t want someone else in charge of it the inheritance, or the legacy. We feel kind of bad about it, but *too bad, out you go*. Anyway, *she* made me do it, right? Adam got to make the same defense.

I bring this story to you not because it is “interestingly” problematic, or to make us go “hmmmm.” But because think there’s a key here to unlock us all from the tragedy we repeat in this story. I genuinely believe this is one of the stories Christians go “Groundhog’s Day” on (y’know the movie where the same day repeats over and over the main character finally figures out what he needs to do differently).

What is our call in this story, oh fellow daughters of Sarai and sons of Abraham and Isaac? Be my community of discernment. Take this story home with you and let me, and us, know what you find.

May wisdom be our prayer and our song.

Sources:

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. Delores S. Williams.

The Women's Bible Commentary. Ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe

Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne. Wilda Gafney