

The God Who Sees
Genesis 16:1-15
June 29, 2008

Unsung heroes and unfamiliar stories of the Bible are our summer focus, our “summer vacation” from the Revised Common Lectionary. Today’s unsung hero is Hagar. You might be more familiar with Hagar, the Horrible, the Viking warrior of comic book fame than Hagar the servant to Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Sarah and Abraham, of course are the stars of the story, Abraham being called by God at the age of 75 to leave his home and travel on faith only God knew where with only the promise that God would make him the father of a great nation.

Time went by; Abram, as he was known then, journeyed far and had many adventures. Although his initial exodus from his home of Haran showed tremendous faith, his subsequent behaviors showed that he had a long way to go. When he went into Egypt, he passed off Sarah, then known as Sarai, as his sister because he was afraid that the ruler would kill him and take Sarai as his own. He did that not once, but twice! And each time, God appeared to the ruler of the kingdom warning him of Abram’s deceit and the dire consequences if anything untoward happened to either Sarai or to Abram.

Abram had many discussions with God about the future – generally about where were all these descendants he was supposed to have. He and Sarai weren’t getting any younger. Finally Sarai, perhaps as tired as Abram was with waiting, had an idea. Maybe it wasn’t directly through her, but indirectly through her servant Hagar, that Abram was to have a child. In their culture, the taking of a second wife wasn’t prohibited, and Hagar was Sarai’s servant, so it would be almost as if Sarai herself were producing this child of destiny.

Abram did as Sarai instructed him to do. Hagar it seems had no voice in the matter. She did as she was told, and soon enough she was expecting. Realizing that her child would be the long awaited descendant perhaps went to Hagar’s head; that would be understandable. Or perhaps jealousy in realizing that this really was Hagar’s child and not her own affected Sarai’s judgment; that would be understandable too. Whatever the cause, Sarai repented of her generosity, and treated Hagar harshly, prompting Hagar to run away.

Our reading today finds Hagar in the wilderness at the spring of Shur, the same place interestingly enough, where the children of Israel encamp generations later after Moses leads them across the Red Sea. This seems to be a place where slaves and former slaves go to encounter God.

Hagar is at the end of her rope; no where to go; no one to turn to. And it is at this dead end that she encounters an angel of God. “Hagar, slave girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” That’s a powerful question, and Hagar only knows the answer to the first part. “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” At this point the angel gives Hagar advice that today we probably wouldn’t give. We’d tell her to find a battered women’s shelter, get some job training, and report Sarai to the authorities for abuse and enslavement. That’s what happened in New York recently. A multi millionaire perfume vendor was sentenced to 3 years in jail and fined \$12,500 because he and his wife enslaved three Indonesian house servants, beating them and denying them food if they were derelict in any way in their household duties. But that’s today.

Four thousand years ago, there weren’t as many options. And Hagar is instructed to return to her mistress and submit to her. That’s why feminist interpreters of scripture call this particular passage a text of “terror.” And that certainly is one way to read the story. But if that’s the only way we read it, we’re missing some pretty important things.

The angel of the Lord gives Hagar a promise; it is the first promise given to a woman in scripture, and significantly, it is similar to the promise given to Abram. “I will so greatly

multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” And, just as centuries later Mary was told by an angel what to name her child, Hagar is similarly instructed, “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.”

In response to this annunciation, Hagar does something unprecedented and unique in the Old Testament. She names God, giving God a name out of her own experience. “You are El-roi” for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” I like the way Eugene Peterson phrases it in “The Message,” “She answered God by name, praying to the God who spoke to her. ‘You are the God who sees me! Yes! He saw me; and then I saw him!’”

Thirteen years pass. Sarah gives birth to Isaac, but her jealousy over Hagar and Ishmael does not diminish. She instructs Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, and a grief stricken Abraham obeys her after God tells him it will be all right, that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. This time there is no going back, and Hagar and Ishmael make their way to Egypt, where she finds a wife for him. This is the only time scripture notes that a mother finds a wife for her son. Ishmael, an independent spirit much like his mother, grows up to become a hunter, and he returns at the news of Abraham’s death to help his half brother Isaac bury their father.

Interestingly, As Isaac’s son Jacob has 12 sons who are the legendary progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel, so Ishmael has twelve sons, 12 princes of the tribes of Arabia. Thus, in both Christian and Muslim tradition, the lineage of our central figures, Jesus and of Muhammad, have been traced through Father Abraham all the way back to Adam.

Now it is easy to ask, why is this story of Hagar in the Old Testament at all. Why include it in the saga of Abraham and Sarah, the development of the chosen people, the nation of Israel. Isn’t it a distraction? Some say that Hagar is only there as a tool to show us what trouble we can get into when we trust ourselves and our own bright ideas rather than waiting patiently for God to act in God’s good time. Certainly life would have been simpler for Sarah if she hadn’t encouraged Abraham to have a child with Hagar. But people in scripture are always more than tools to advance the plot; and God doesn’t just use people then or now simply as devices and then cast them away of no further use.

And so, for us today, I think the story of Hagar has at least two implications, one corporate or communal and the other personal. On the corporate level, is the knowledge that in making promises to Hagar that approximate those made to Abraham, God is in close and caring relationship to those who do not necessarily belong to the ones whom God has chosen to be, as Isaiah describes it, a light to the nations.

Hagar reminds us that God is not limited by the covenant community that God has created, but acts within it and without it, especially with those who are excluded or oppressed. And, because of their own experiences with oppression, God commands the Israelites to care especially for the alien, the orphan and the widow among them, saying in effect, “do not do to them, what has been done to you.” And when they forget, and oppress those weaker than themselves, God’s wrath is called down on them.

In his first sermon, Jesus announced again God’s concern for the downtrodden and oppressed, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19).

On the personal level, Hagar’s story reminds us that when we are in that place where we desperately wish to escape our past, but can see no future, that is when God is most likely to be with us. The God who sees us, as Hagar names God, sees our plight, sees our future, and gives us hope where we had no hope. Sometimes the response is not always the one we want or comes as a complete surprise – Hagar is told to return and to submit to Sarah, to be patient, to wait for the birth of her child who will carry his own promise. But in obeying God’s command, Hagar

trusted God that the future would contain the freedom she so desperately wanted for herself and her child; and she believed that God has seen her and heard her and would keep God's promises, and that her future in God's hands would be different from her past.

Russell Jones, in this week's *Christian Century*, writes about his days in Little League baseball. His coach, a young man just a few years older than himself, had the ability to inspire the team to go beyond their wildest dreams. However, one year, after the team had lost several games, the catcher quit and they were down to ten players. He said he wondered what they were going to do without a catcher. But at the next practice, the coach came over to him, as he stood in right field, the place where, he says, "Little League coaches everywhere play their weakest fielder," looked him in the eye, and said "'Russell, I've been watching the way you throw the ball from right field. Son,' he paused, 'you throw like a catcher.'"

Russell knew that couldn't be true because he was "bat blind." He knew he'd blink his eyes when the batter swung, and the ball would hit him in the face or chest. But the coach helped him into the catching gear—the shin guards, the chest protector, the mask, sent another player to the mound to throw the ball, and then stepped into the plate himself with the bat. With the next pitch, Russell didn't blink; he caught the ball; he was a catcher.

He writes, "Often we see ourselves unclearly: as undeserving, incapable, insignificant, or conversely as entitled, invulnerable, too significant. And our obscured vision limits us, burdens us, and disheartens us. . . . [the coach] led me from being a bat-blind fielder to being a team catcher."¹

There are those of us here who have had those times when there seemed to be no solution, no place to go, no way out. And yet, with God's help, we were able to see beyond our current circumstance, and find the ability to do something we'd never done before or to become someone one we'd never thought we could be, and like Russell Jones today or like Hagar so many years ago, we could give thanks to God who sees us clearly and whose belief in us and whose presence with us can change us entirely. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Russell Siler Jones "As God sees it: a baseball story," *Christian Century*, July 1, 2008, p. 13.