

**Message for June 25, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“Seeing What is Revealed to Us” Rev. Trish Eckert**

The powerful story of Hagar in the Bible underscores how messy and complex God’s work in history really is. As people of faith, we believe that God answers prayer and keeps promises, but this story will shake us out of simplistic notions of God’s call, God’s promises, and God’s faithfulness. Hagar is not just a supporting character in the story of Abraham and Sarah. She is not just the mother of Ishmael. Looking at Genesis 16 and 21 through Hagar’s eyes reveals that her story is Israel’s story. And it has a lot to teach us about how God shows up in our own stories.

The story of Sarah and Hagar is like a fairy tale about a wicked stepmother. The story is told twice: first in Genesis 16 and again in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Genesis, which we just heard Diane read. Sarah is an older, barren woman with power; Hagar is a younger, fertile woman who is enslaved. God has promised Abraham that he will have descendants, but Abraham and Sarah are old, so Sarah comes up with a solution: she gives the enslaved woman Hagar to Abraham as a wife to bear children for him. After Hagar conceives, Hagar looks on Sarah with contempt, and Sarah strikes out at her. Hagar runs away to the desert but encounters an angel, who tells her to return because God intends to make a numerous people from her son, whom she is to name Ishmael, meaning, “God hears.” During this unexpected meeting, Hagar names God *‘el ro’I*, exclaiming “You are the God who sees me...Have I truly seen the One who sees me?” This powerful moment invites us to consider, do we truly see what is revealed to us? Sometimes invitations, opportunities, leadings, callings – are right in front of us and we completely miss them.

Today’s text picks up after Sarah has given birth to Isaac. Sarah gets in touch with the fact that her son will have to share his inheritance, so she demands that Abraham drive Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is distressed, but God tells him not to worry, because Isaac is the one whose descendants will bear Abraham’s name, but also God will make of Ishmael a great nation.

So, Abraham sends Sarah and Ishmael away, with only a loaf of bread and a skin of water, and they begin wandering aimlessly. Soon, the water is gone, and Hagar puts Ishmael under a shrub a distance away from herself, because she can’t bear to watch him die.

Although this sounds like a fairy tale, we know it is part of Scripture. Hagar’s story is tragic and ethically challenging. Dr. Phyllis Trible, an author and professor known as one of the leading authorities of feminist interpretation of biblical texts, notes, “All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith.”

It is easy to get so caught up in the politics of this story that we can’t see what elements of it speak to our own condition today. Building and growing a family is still a political

act = family values, tradition, finances, climate change, access to birth control, abortion, and health care, access to affordable childcare, housing, health insurance.

Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar were caught in their own era's realities re: the worth of a woman being tied to motherhood, and I press you to notice how some of those realities still apply today, and the thread of their legacy that is woven into our own stories. Ultimately, I encourage us to reflect on the connection between Hagar and the divine – what was revealed and how she responded in the midst of the ultimate crisis/emergency – the impending death of her child and herself.

Most people who read/hear the story of Hagar are so gripped by the horror of her plight that they have difficulty focusing on any positive aspects of her life. Dr. Tribble points out that Hagar is the first person – not the first woman, but the first *person* – in the Bible, who is visited by a divine messenger. She is the only biblical character who dares to name God. She is the first woman who receives a divine promise of descendants – her child becomes the father of a great nation.

These positives, however, don't erase the suffering. Neither do they answer our questions: why does God send Hagar back to Sarah's oppression, when Hagar flees into the desert earlier in the text? The theologian Elsa Tamaz points out that God's plans are not for Hagar to return to the oppression.... She writes, "What God wants is that she and her child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn't yet been born. The first three years of life are crucial. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision. This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham."

The kinds of questions this story raises for modern readers are how privileged people relate to those who serve them, whether as domestics in their homes, in public establishments such as restaurants, dry cleaners, and nail salons, or, at an even greater distance, in third-world countries. We also must face which lives we value and which we think are expendable.

This ancient story was tumbling around in my head and in my heart this week just as current events on international waters were unfolding that revealed how differently we value the lives of others.

On one vessel, five people died on a very expensive excursion that was supposed to return them to the lives they knew. On the other, about 500 people died just days earlier on a squalid and perilous voyage, fleeing poverty and violence in search of new lives.

After contact was lost with the five inside a submersible descending to the Titanic, multiple countries and private entities sent ships, planes and underwater drones to pursue a faint hope of rescue. That was far more effort than was made on behalf of the hundreds aboard a dangerously overcrowded, disabled fishing trawler off the Greek coast while there were still ample chances for rescue.

The disparity in apparent concern shown for the migrants versus the submersible passengers prompted countless online discussions and statements by leaders around the world. Issues of class and race were brought to the forefront just as experts also acknowledged attitudes toward migrants have hardened, not only doing little to help those in trouble but actively turning them away, and even treating as criminals private citizens who try to rescue migrants.

This week within our own lives we are faced with whether we see the inherent worth of every person. How readily do we recognize that each person is a child of God?

When delving into the story of Hagar, we see that in the midst of so much suffering, God does not forsake Hagar. In the wilderness, Hagar again encounters an angel, who tells her not to be afraid, “for God has heard the voice of the boy” Ishmael. The angel reveals to her a well of water, and the two survive. Even though Hagar was abandoned by those who should have cared for her, God remembers the enslaved woman in the wilderness. This text gives space to remember those who are harmed by the ones who should protect them. It is a reminder that the people we often lift up in our stories can be the villains in the stories of others.

Hagar shows us that even when we wander in wilderness places, even when life circumstances and systems of power push us down and toss us out, God is drawing near us.

Hagar was in a state of desperation; she had to feel like her world was falling apart. And yet, knowing that God saw her, brought her comfort, and gave her direction.

Friends, the God who saw Hagar, sees each one of us. God sees us in the midst of our loneliness, in the midst of our fear, in the midst of the unknown. God sees us and hears us. God also sees and hears your co-worker, your neighbor, your friend, your enemy...every single person holds tremendous value.

And we have the opportunity to see those around us, to listen, to be present to them. What is revealed to us about ourselves? About others? How might we consider the path of suffering that Hagar endured and the loving presence that God made known to her?

Hagar’s story is a ray of light streaming into dark circumstances, pointing us to a God who makes a way out of no way, whispers to us that we are never completely forgotten, never all alone, never left for dead, whatever our circumstances may be.

I invite us now into a few minutes of contemplation, to imagine the ways our path or the path of others might run parallel to that of Hagar's – what does it mean to be fully present to God's presence? To encounter the divine and turn our attention to what is being revealed to us? The reflection questions are in your bulletin – I encourage you to spend time with the one that speaks most powerfully to you in this moment:

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- When have you experienced being *seen* by the Divine?
- What do you yearn to see in your own life or that of others?
- What do you hope might be revealed to you?
- What have you glimpsed in the past that was life-giving?
- What images or “knowings” sustain you on your journey?