

Sermon: The Other Woman

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 25, 2023. This sermon is inspired by the article titled “The other woman”, originally published by Debbie Blue, in the Christian Century magazine, Nov 24, 2014)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Bible is rich and multifaceted, it is certainly not a propaganda tool written to promote a singular story, a predestined institution, or even an uniform theology. That is what I really like about the Bible. For every narrative, there is a counter narrative prompting us to look a bit more deeply. For every hero, there is an anti-hero, beckoning our empathy and identification. For every act of faith, there is a lingering doubt forcing us to ponder about God, what God is up to, how God does things, and why? The story of Hagar is certainly such.

While Hagar may have been an important figure in Feminist theology and in African-American church, she doesn't usually get much attention from the rest of the Christianity. More critically, when Hagar does come up in our readings, our discussions, she is usually seen and treated as the prototypical ‘the other woman’.

The way I remember it being told in Sunday school, Hagar is sultry and sinister. She is the mistake that Abraham made in a moment of weakness in the flesh and lack of trust in God. Isaac, Abraham's son with Sarah, is innocent and obedient. Whereas Ishmael, Abraham's first son with Hagar, is rough, wild —a bully who mocked his young half-brother, thus deserving to be cast out into the wilderness. Of course, that particular take is very much dependant on the Hebrew word ‘קִטְצָה’ tsachaq, in Genesis 21:9. The text itself is not so clear, nor does it render any moral quality to the act. We will come back to that later.

What we do know for certain, is that Hagar's story occupies two major sections of the Book of Genesis, chapters 16 and 21. These are long and detailed stories cast in yet disrupt the larger patriarchal plot line. The problem all started with Sarah who can't get pregnant, and was well passed the child-bearing age. Despite God's covenant with Abraham, and God's repeated reassurance that his descendent will come out of Sarah, she had

no such confidence, no faith that God can deliver. It was in such a context that Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid servant, came into the picture.

We do not know if Hagar was willing, but I suspect that she really had no choice on this matter, as her mistress told her master to lie with her and entered into her, sort of the biblical way of describing sex. Hagar bore Abraham a son, and it should've been a joyous occasion for celebration, except for Sarah, who felt that Hagar was showing her 'contempt'. The Hebrew word used here is 'לָלַל' *qalal*, which has a fairly wide range of possible interpretations from the harsher extreme of 'to curse', to the lesser extreme 'to look upon with lesser esteem'. Consider from Hagar's point of view: her mistress had forced her to have sex with Sarah's 85-year-old husband (yak!), bearing now a child whom Hagar would no doubt be asked to give up in time.

The power dynamic of these two women was unequal and heading towards inevitable conflict. So Sarah complained to Abraham, and this morally weak old man skirted his patriarchal responsibility and told his wife to 'deal with it'. The ensuing oppression handed out by Sarah prompted Hagar to flee to the desert. It was there an angel of the Lord found her, told her to return and submit under her mistress. But the angel also announced to her, "Behold, you *are* with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael." (Genesis 16:11, NKJV). This is not the only time in the Bible we hear such a line, but it is the first—the first annunciation.

What is more surprising is the promise made to her by the messenger of God, in the preceding verse, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude"—the same promise that God had made to Abraham. Then Hagar, this 'other woman', gives God a name. She is the first person in the Bible to have done so, and she calls God '*El-roi*', or God who sees—a God who pays attention, who draws near and seeks out the cast-out, and a God who makes promises, a covenantal God.

Brother and sisters in Christ, I do not want you to miss this key moment of this emerging monotheistic faith that would eventually develop into the three major religions, the so called the Abrahamic faith of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This covenantal God did not just simply choose Abraham then Isaac, God also blessed Hagar then Ishmael. In time God will also covenant with the Church through Christ, but we know that story well, don't we.

Coming back to Hagar. She returned to Sarah, gave birth to a son, Ishmael. Not long after, Sarah also gave birth to a son, Isaac, thus fulfilling God's original promise, original design. One would think that the two women would finally get along, but no. Sarah cast out Hagar again. This time, over what she saw in Genesis 21:9, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, 'playing' with her son Isaac.

The key phrase here in Hebrew, as I mentioned earlier, is 'קִנְיָן' tsachaq. The King James Version translates it as 'scoffing', with a negative connotation. The New International Version has it 'mocking', also a negative connotation. The Message Version has it 'poking fun', kind of the way an older brother teases a younger brother. The New and Revised Standard Version has it 'playing', much more neutral. Strictly speaking, 'קִנְיָן' tsachaq is simply to laugh.

The irony here is that 'קִנְיָן' tsachaq is what Sarah did, when she overheard the conversation earlier, in chapter 18, between her husband and three messengers of the Lord, that she was to bear him a child this time next year. When she was called out by the same messengers as to why she laughed, Sarah promptly denied it, in a weird, Monty Pythonish exchange of 'did not', 'did so', 'did not', 'did so'. The 'קִנְיָן' tsachaq that Sarah thought of as harmless, perhaps a bit embarrassing to admit, now she applies with a maximum prejudice against Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, the other woman.

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." Ah, Sarah's true motivation revealed. What ensues is a gut-wrenching scene of Abraham, reluctantly letting Hagar go into the desert of Beer-Sheba with Ishmael, his first born, with bread and a skin of water, but with God's assurance that it was the right thing to do.

The bulletin cover this week has an image, from the painting by Frank Wesley, titled 'Hagar and Ishmael'. What I like about this image, though not alluded to in the biblical text, is the nakedness of the boy and his mother: Depicting the total and utter vulnerability of the two in an environment that is totally and utterly unforgiving. One has to wonder, has to ask, why would God permit this? Where is justice in this?

Phyllis Trible, the acclaimed feminist biblical scholar, in her book 'Texts of Terror', has the story of Hagar, as one of four 'bad news' stories for women in the bible. She acutely points out, among various ways that

Hagar was rendered powerless and voiceless in the Scripture, is particularly the section in Genesis 21.

Food and water had run out, Hagar cast the boy under one of the bushes, she then went and sat down opposite to him a good way off, thinking “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” Hagar then lifted up her voice and wept. She was the first woman recorded in the Bible to have cried out loud. But in verse 17, God heard the voice of the boy, not the cry of the mother, yet the angel of the Lord asked “What troubles you, Hagar?”

It is a profoundly troubling yet uplifting moment in this story. Uplifting because God hears (that is what the name Ishmael means literally). When God hears, God acts. A well of water initially concealed now revealed. God re-covenanted with Hagar that God will make a great nation of the boy. The boy grew, God was with him, and he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. In time, God would fulfill God’s promise, and a proud people, a great nation would emerge through the lineage of Ismael.

In the Islamic tradition, Hagar is regarded as the great matriarch. It is through Ishmael that Muhammad comes. In a way, God leads Hagar into the desert so that through her a new faith would be born. While the Hebrew scripture seems to portray Abraham abandoning Ismael, the Islamic stories have him coming to visit his first born repeatedly. There is something endearing about those stories, as Abraham travelled back and forth, between the two sons, as he is the father of not one son but two, the father of not one faith but two.

In Genesis 25, at the tail end of Abraham’s life, after Sarah had died, he took another wife, by the name of Keturah. According to the Hebrew Midrash, a separate body of commentaries on the Scripture, ‘Keturah’ is actually Hagar’s real name. ‘Hagar’ is just a description, literally means ‘the other’. In such a reading, Abraham reunites with Hagar in their old age, lies in bed with her, makes love to her again, and have many more children through her.

When Abraham finally passed on, at the good old age of one hundred seventy-five years, both Ishmael and Isaac were there. Together, they buried their father. In such a reading, old boundaries are blurred, old animosities reconciled, the world is not hopelessly divided, love finds a way. God rejoices, so do we.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.