

Intersecting Faiths: The Story of Hagar

a sermon by Rev. Jennifer Ryu
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READING: Genesis 21:14-19 (American Standard Version)

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and gave her the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. And the water in the bottle was spent, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot. For she said, Let me not look upon the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lifted up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad. And the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? Fear not. For God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thy hand. For I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

CALL TO WORSHIP (after Norman V. Naylor)

Do *not* leave your cares at the door.

Do *not* leave there your pain, your sorrow, your disappointments and regrets.

Carry them with you into this place like a wounded bird.

Place them on the common ground of life and offer them the possibility of your worship.

Come, make of your sorrows a friend who bears unexpected gift

Come, let us worship together.

SERMON written & delivered by Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu, 9/16/2007

What happened?

What happened in that household that brought Hagar to the threshold of the tent clutching her young son's hand? Abraham at her back, pleading. Go. Please, just go.

And then what brought Hagar to the point of throwing her child into the bushes, turning her back on him?

And what finally enabled Hagar to hear the voice of life itself, returning to her child?

Some of you may remember the events that led up to the expulsion of Hagar and her young son. If you grew up in the synagogue, you would have heard this story on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. If you attended church, you may have heard it in Bible study. If

you were raised in the faith of Islam, you may have read about Abraham in the Koran and heard of Hagar in the stories of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Sara and Abraham waited and waited for a child, but when Sara's womb lay empty year after year, Sara gave her servant, Hagar, to Abraham as her surrogate. Hagar quickly became pregnant. That's when the trouble started in the tent of Abraham. Maybe young Hagar behaved arrogantly. Maybe Sara was jealous.

Even when Sara finally gave birth to Isaac, at the miraculous age of 90, domestic relations did not improve. In fact, things got even worse. With two boys in the family, both marked for greatness (for God promised to make nations of each of them), the tent was getting smaller and smaller. And Ishmael didn't make things any easier. The angel who had visited Hagar while she was pregnant had warned her, saying he will be a "wild ass of a man."

One day Sara found Ishmael bullying Isaac yet again, and that was the last straw. She demanded that Abraham put "that woman" and her boy out!

So that's how Hagar finds herself standing at the threshold of the tent, squinting against the bright morning sun, looking out into the stark desert landscape, holding a single goatskin water bag and a loaf of bread that she knows are a death sentence.

Taking in a deep breath, Hagar grasps Ishmael's hand and starts walking through the wilderness of Beersheba. They wander for days, but find no hospitable place to settle.

When the last drop of water and last crumb of bread are gone, Hagar is overcome with panic and fear. She lets go of her child's hand. She cannot stand to look at him. She cannot bear to witness his suffering. So leaves him under a scrubby bush and walks away.

How could she leave him to suffer alone?
How could she possibly stay and watch him suffer?

To understand Hagar, to receive what she can teach us, we have to get beneath the surface of this story.

Hagar was a woman, a foreigner and a slave. Despised, alienated, separated from her people. The Hebrew account calls her an Egyptian slave girl. The Muslim account places Hagar in a royal line--daughter of Pharaoh. She was given by her father to Sarah and Abraham. Banished from her family and her country.

Now, Hagar find herself banished again, exiled to the wilderness. No more water; no more food; no more options.

Except, of course, there is one more option: to embrace what life *has* given. The waning days or hours with the flesh of her flesh are precious. They hold the prospect of a joy that only comes when mortality is undeniable.

But she cannot bear to do it. She cannot bear to suffer with Ishmael. She cannot bear to sit with him, her pain is too great.

So she turns away from him and sits far away. Islamic folklore says she ran between two hills back & forth, seven times.

In the literalism of the story, she is looking for water. But perhaps what she's really doing is running from the only thing that will really save her--the confrontation with self.

We all have done this, in one way or another. Some terrible pain crashes into our life. Our animal nature struggles to escape, to look anywhere but right at the pain. Alcohol works, sleeping pills, even reality TV—our culture furnishes a cornucopia of escapist opportunities. We have all been in there, confronted with gut-wrenching pain, looking for a way out instead of a way in.

Sometimes we will use other people as a wall to keep from facing our most painful truths.

We say, this child will protect me from a life of loneliness and give me the love I've never had. This man or this woman will complete me and make me happy. This job will assure me of my worth.

But in the desert, where there is no hiding place, where there is no way out, it is almost impossible not to confront yourself.

When all that you know has evaporated, when everyone you loved has gone, and you are left utterly alone, you have nowhere to turn but toward your own heart.

But Hagar is not alone. She is some distance away, but not so far that she cannot see Ishmael. Not so far that she cannot hear him. The sound of his weeping reaches her. She is startled. She has not heard him cry since he was a baby. For years now, she has only heard him complain, argue, insult, defy.

But when he was a baby, he was as sweet as honey. He was Hagar's first and only love. When he was an infant, she even loved his crying.

This time, the sound of his cry slashes at her heart, and it is torn open. Her suffering pours out and with it her love of Ishmael, of even the final hours of Ishmael.

And for the first time, her eyes are open. God opens her eyes. God, moving through the cries of her child, opens her eyes.

She sees in their extremes of their situation, the joy AND pain of being alive.

She cannot take away his pain, she cannot change the situation. But she can make sure he is not alone. She can make sure that he knows that someone sees him, that someone hears him.

This is the noble affirmation of the human being who is also part divine. It is the sharp awareness of life's preciousness, even in, especially in, its waning hours.

As Hagar goes to Ishmael, she sees that he has been digging his heel into the dirt, making an incision in the skin of the earth. A trickle of water has begun to flow from it. They are saved.

Ishmael grows to be leader of a great nation, the Arab nation and Hagar, to this day, is remembered as "mother of the people of the water of heaven."

Father Henri Nowen says that wound can become a source of enlargement and growth and wholeness and even beauty. Wounds can be transformed "by a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as arising from the depth of the human condition which we all share." (from The Wounded Healer, Henri Nowen).

But how does one come to this willingness? By choosing. By saying "Yes, I Shall." It's a choice about how to live one's life.

Life is a package deal. You know this. It isn't a choice between joy and sorrow, between pleasure and pain. It is a choice between all of them or none of them. Rather than opposites that cancel each other out, they are the complementary ingredients of a truly fulfilling life.

The power in your life that allows your heart to open to great joy, the power that expands your capacity to respond to the suffering of others, is found in the same thing that wounds you.

Ultimately it is a choice, and one can choose to say "no." No, I Will Not, I cannot.

Some people have stopped reading the paper or listen to the news because it's too intense. Too much.

I heard a story this weekend (at the Stacey Pastor Workshop, Tulsa, OK, 9/14/07), told by Fred Craddock, a preacher's preacher. He was a guest speaker once at some church somewhere in the South. During coffee hour a woman approached him to say hello.

"Are you a member of this congregation," he asked her.

"Oh no, she said, this is my first time in church."

"You mean first time at *this* church?"

"No, I mean any church. This is the first church I've ever been to in my life."

"Well, how was it for you?"

"To tell you the truth, it was a little scary. Everything here seems so important. And I try to avoid things that are important."

Yes, it is important for us to be willing to confront the depths of our shared human condition and to see our own pain reflected there.

Yes, it is important for us to make the recognition of our suffering the starting point for our service to the world.

Countless people have told me how they have cried in front of CNN, The New York Times, an "Inconvenient Truth."

They said, yes, I am willing to face the pain, to have my heart broken by images of young bodies blown apart in war.

I am willing to face my complicity in neglecting the cries of the earth.

I am willing to let myself care about communities so deeply entrenched in conflict that I know my efforts may not make any difference, and yet I will not turn away.

This is the time of year when billions and billions of Jews and Muslims are earnestly practicing the best of their faith. It feels important. The Book of Life will close in just 5 days, and the Night of Power, when all prayers become especially powerful falls on October 8th.

The air seems full of the sharp awareness of life's preciousness.

The Eternal One has set before us life and death, blessings and curses. Choose Life so that you may live, you and your descendents. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Amen

So may it be