

And God Heard...

By
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from the pulpit of
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Genesis 21:8-21

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So 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.” ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-

sheba. ¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Family systems are really something. All of our idiosyncrasies are displayed when we are with relatives. Of course, families come in all shapes and sizes. Some are intentional, and some are not. As a minister who has spent a lot of time with families in engineered contexts, I've seen many of the subtleties play out, from weddings to funerals to family receptions.

Picture it with me: Dad shows up with a new girlfriend. Brother arrives late smelling of Jack Daniels. A cousin walks in with yet another lip ring. Your Aunt Loraine watches to see if you're going to eat her potato salad or attempt Aunt Kelly's, which everyone knows is basically store-bought with a little paprika on it. Meanwhile you overhear Uncle Kenneth telling his former sister-in-law, who no one remembers inviting, about how he thinks the moon landing is a hoax.

And everyone always likes to think that their own family is just the craziest. It's why the Book of Genesis is so wonderful; because even a cursory reading tells us that our dysfunctionality doesn't hold a candle to the problematic dynamics of those in the biblical witness. God's presence is poured out through the most pitiful characters we've ever laid eyes on.

Take Hagar. We find her here in this story following the birth of Isaac. Hagar is the maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Her son, Ishmael, is Abraham's first born. But now that Sarah herself has given birth to Isaac, Hagar's precarious place in the family is compromised. Sarah doesn't really need Hagar, or Hagar's son, to fulfill God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation.

And so it is that Sarah sees Ishmael in a light-hearted moment. The Hebrew actually says, "Sarah sees the boy laughing," and a mixture of rage and fear fills her. She tells her husband plainly, "Cast out this slave woman, with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

One wonders what Sarah even saw in Ishmael's laughter. Was it joy, or humor, an ease of being, or an act of belittlement? What was it that caused her to say *Enough*? In any event, she is determined that Hagar will have no place in her house, or this family. And so, the text says, "Abraham rose early in the morning." That same line will be used in the next chapter when he rises in preparation to sacrifice Isaac. But today it is Ishmael who is being sacrificed. Abraham literally places the boy on the shoulders of his mother, and sends them both out into the wilderness, alone, with only a loaf of bread and a little bit of water.

Hagar journeys as far as the water lasts. But once there is nothing left, she sets the child under a desert shrub and walks a good distance away so that she doesn't see what comes next. She sits down and lets out a cry. You will not hear from anyone else but a distraught momma who weeps over her children. None of this is her fault. She is the victim of so much trauma and pain that we should rightly weep with her. In fact, it might be worth pausing to simply reflect on what Hagar's life has looked like up to this point.

She is an enslaved woman; bound to Abraham only because her mistress, Sarah, has determined that God wasn't moving fast enough to fulfill God's promise that Abraham would be a father. So, Sarah tells her old husband to have a look at Hagar, and to see if their promise of children might just need to arrive through her. No mention is made if Hagar agreed to this arrangement. But she nevertheless finds herself with child in due course.

And now, because of Sarah's initial impatience and what seems to be her present jealousy, Hagar and her only child are cast out from their family, from their source of protection and stability, to end up in God knows where. Nothing about this story is prescriptive for the life of faith, for Jews or Christians.

My former divinity school professor, Phyllis Trible, famously referred to this story as one of the Bible's texts of terror, highlighting tales of horror

inflicted on women in our sacred scripture. Writing in 1984, Tribble notes, “As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in hers. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.”¹

Tribble lays it out for us with stark clarity: the story of Hagar is the story of anyone who finds themselves at the bottom of life’s barrel. It is the story of the suffering. Earlier this year I read Barbara Kingsolver’s haunting latest novel *Demon Copperhead*, a retelling of Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, set not in the 19th century streets of industrial England, but in the hills and hollers of contemporary Appalachia. Every chapter of *Demon*’s story reads almost like a self-contained Greek tragedy.

Born in a trailer in the woods to an absent father and an addicted mother, *Demon* is the subject of scorn from the moment he comes into the world. His mother dies, he is passed around from one abusive situation to another, all the while he’s expected to keep going to school and learning algebra as if everything is normal.

After too many losses to even keep track of, *Demon* sighs when he says, “Live long enough, and all things you ever loved can turn around to scorch you blind. The wonder is that you could start life with nothing, end with nothing, and lose so much in between.”² He’s on the bottom rung of the ladder and every time he seems to pull himself up a rung,

¹ Phyllis Tribble. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Fortress Press, 1984.

² Barbara Kingsolver. *Demon Copperhead: a novel*. 1st ed. New York: Harper, 2022.

down he goes. Sometimes we find ourselves at the bottom too, and we wonder what in the world we did to deserve this. Which always assumes a kind of karmic justice we can't fathom but suspect may be true.

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So, we return to this scene in the wilderness with Hagar and Ishmael. And as Hagar is overwhelmed with the sorrow of her situation, verse 17 says, "God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God calls down to her from the heavens and says, 'Hagar! What's wrong? Do not be afraid. God has heard Ishmael's cries. Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation.'"

If we know Hagar's story, we remember that this isn't Hagar's first direct encounter with the divine. Earlier in Genesis 16 Hagar had run off on her own accord, after being abused by Sarah, and God finds her, telling her that she will bear a son. And then she does something that happens nowhere else in all of scripture. She names God. She says to the Lord, "You are El-roi." Which means *God who sees*.

And now, here in chapter 21, we have God again seeing and hearing the deep sorrow of this woman and her son. And God acts from what God sees and hears. Which means one could argue that God is, by some measure, moved by the grief, and the tears, and the pain.

It reminds me of something the old Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield wrote many years ago. It was an essay titled "The Emotional Life of Our Lord." There Warfield studies all the times in the Gospels that Jesus shows human emotions. And you know what he finds? He says that the most common emotion that Jesus exhibits is compassion, marked often by grief, sadness, weeping, righteous anger, and agony.

Let's think about that for a minute. If I may say so, this is perhaps the starkest reminder of what sets Christianity apart from so many other religions. The God we confess is a God who suffers with us. The Old

Testament hints at this, pointing us to the revelation of divinity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus is no Stoic. He is not one for whom we could say possesses a stiff upper lip. He is, as Isaiah prophesies he will be, “A man of sorrows; acquainted with grief.” Do you want to know why I am a Christian? Maybe you don’t really want to know, but I’m going to tell you anyway. I am a Christian because I am overwhelmed by the concept of a God who suffers with us. God comes to our small planet and says, “I get it. I can feel it too. I know what it means to ache. I know what it means to feel all alone, and abandoned, and without hope. I am with you here.”

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I confess to you that I have a habit of buying books that I don’t always get around to reading. Sometimes I buy a book simply for the honor of having it on my shelf. So that when people come into my office they can say, “Look at Frank’s shelves. A distinguished man of letters.” But recently I took one of those books off the shelf. *Destroyer of Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. And what the author highlights in telling the story of how Christianity came to dominate the Roman world is his description of what set the early church apart from its pagan neighbors.

In the eyes of the sophisticated elite of the empire there was an “outlandish Christian notion: the one true, august God who transcended all things and had no need of anything, nevertheless, had deigned to create this world and, a still more remarkable notion, also now actively sought the redemption and reconciliation of individuals. And what was the proffered reason for this remarkable redemptive purpose? God loves the world and humanity.”³

³ Larry W. Hurtado. *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Baylor University Press, 2017.

I wonder if we can even grasp how radical an idea that was to a culture that saw the gods as powerful, but petty; needing the constant affirmation of their creatures in order to merit out goodness. Instead, the church whispered to the world through a crucified yet resurrected savior that it is God who takes the risk in loving us, even to death. And that not even death can stop that love. That is intense. We heard it as well in Matthew's gospel earlier. "Even the hairs on your head will be counted." If God cares for even the sparrows, how much more does God care for you?

Poor Hagar. We shouldn't dismiss her sorrow, even though we know that God will provide for her and make of her son another great nation. In fact, I think we might do well to sit with this sorrow a little longer and give thanks for a God who sits with it too. A God who sees, and hears, and weeps, and rescues.

Amen.