

## **Sermon: An Unexpected Hero**

6/21/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There is a certain irony about today's Old Testament lesson. For over a century, in the United States, we have celebrated Father's Day on the third Sunday of June. Today is the day on which we pause to give thanks for our fathers. Today is the day on which we pause to give thanks for people like Abraham, the father of Isaac, whose descendants were blessed by God and became a great nation, Israel, God's chosen people. Well, today is the day on which many of us pause to give thanks, because, for some of us, giving thanks is not so easy. For some of us, like Ishmael, memories of our fathers make us think back to how we were treated compared to our younger sibling and how we were later cast out, severing what little relationship we had. Some of us are unable to give thanks because we had fathers like Abraham, the same Abraham we gave thanks for just a few seconds ago. Yes, there is a certain irony about today's Old Testament lesson.

Abraham was supposed to be the father of a great nation. God had promised him and his wife, Sarah, that they would have more descendants than the stars in the heaven and the sand on the seashore. But how can you have that many descendants when you don't have a child and your wife, at 76 years old, is well past child-bearing age? After several years, they decided that if God's promise was going to come true, they would need to take matters into their own hands, so they had Abraham sleep with his Egyptian slave girl, Hagar. The birth of Ishmael was both a blessing and a source of conflict. While Abraham had his heir, Sarah and Hagar had a falling out, with, as we hear earlier in Genesis, Hagar only staying after being told to do so by God. As it turns out, not even the birth of Isaac could heal the rift.

Abraham may not have been the ideal father, but he did care about Ishmael. He could see that Sarah was acting out of jealousy, so when she came and asked him to cast out ‘this slave woman and her son,’ he became quite distressed. Ishmael was his son, after all. Sure, Isaac would always hold a special place in his heart, but that did not mean that he did not care about Ishmael or his mother. Abraham wanted for them to stay, and after what had happened earlier, you might expect that God would have agreed. Except that when God appeared to Abraham, God told him to do as Sarah had requested. As Abraham’s heir, God was prepared to make a nation of Ishmael, if Abraham was willing to send him and his mother away. So Abraham rose early in the morning, gave Hagar bread and a skin of water, and did as Sarah and God asked. Their departure almost immediately turned tragic.

Soon after leaving, Hagar found herself wandering through the wilderness with her young son, their food and water gone. She had no one to turn to and had no expectation that any help would come. So she placed her son under a bush and walked a short distance away, weeping, because she could not stand to see him die. It was there that God appeared to her and told her to not be afraid. God had heard the cry of the boy and promised her that, if she lifted up her son and held him fast with her hand, God would make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and allowed her to see a well of water in the distance. She immediately went, filled the skin with water, and gave her son a drink. That day, God saved them, and God would continue to be with them in the coming years, as they put down roots in the wilderness and lived into God’s promise.

The irony of today’s Old Testament lesson is that the hero of the story is not Abraham, Ishmael’s father. Rather, the hero of the story is his mother, Hagar. Hagar, the slave who heeds God’s call and returns to Abraham and Sarah, despite the emotional trauma she had already endured and would be forced to face. Hagar, the single mother was sent out with little more than

a loaf of bread and some water. And Hagar, the grieving mom who heeds God's call to go, lifts up her son, and holds him fast with her hand. Hagar, Hebrew Bible scholar Phyllis Trible writes, is a source of hope and promise, and not just to us gathered here. "She is the faithful maid, the surrogate mother, the resident alien, the other mother." She is a representative of the people in every society who are rejected, scorned, and looked down upon.<sup>1</sup>

Hagar was not one of God's chosen people or a part of God's preferred plan. But God did not abandon her, because no one is beyond God's care. No matter whom we are or what we are going through, God promises to be by our side, just like God was with Hagar, helping us along the way. Which is why, when we look at Jesus' ministry, we do not see someone who rejected or looked past the outcast. Rather, we see someone who sought them out. While others feared lepers and announced their presence by shouting, "unclean, unclean," Jesus welcomed and even touched them. While others hated tax collectors, Jesus invited Matthew to be his disciple and stopped a parade under Zacchaeus' tree so that they could have dinner together. While others looked down on prostitutes, Jesus sat beside and cared for them. And while others condemned those accused of adultery, Jesus looked on them with compassion and challenged "anyone among you who is without sin [to] be the first to throw a stone."

Everywhere we turn in the Gospels, we find Jesus looking for the outcast and welcoming them into his presence. He defied social norms and called on his followers, both then and today, to do the same. But as we all know, following in Jesus' footsteps is easier said than done. All too often, we try and convince ourselves that we do not need to look for and welcome the adulterers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and lepers of our time. We try and convince ourselves that so long as we do not see them, then we do not need to be alongside them. Until we read Gospel lessons like

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 28.

the one assigned for today. Gospel lessons that remind us that following Jesus will always be easy or popular. It will require that we take up our cross and follow God's call, even if that puts us at odds with those around us. Because when we take up our cross, we too must look towards the outcast.

Who do you think of when you think of an outcast, of Hagar? Do you think of a homeless person sitting on the side of the road? What about someone attending rehab? Perhaps, you think of someone who is mentally ill or a person sitting in a jail cell. Maybe you are thinking of someone who is in the United States illegally and someone who is gay, lesbian, or transsexual. And don't forget the unmarried mother or her child, whose father left before he could remember. What makes the story of Hagar so difficult to hear is that, the more we think about it, the more we realize just how relevant it is. We realize just how many people we know and walk past every day who are outcasts. People who we might not give a second thought to any other day, but now can't help but notice; like when you buy a new car and suddenly see it everywhere you look. And we might even come to admit that we are outcasts too.

None of us are perfect. None of us deserve God's grace. We all deserve to be sent out into the wilderness with little more than a loaf of bread and a skin of water. But that has never been God's way. Because even when we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, God is there with us, promising us new life, if we are willing to take up our cross and follow Him. That day, Hagar was willing to take up her cross and follow God, and as a result her son became the father of a great nation. What call has God placed on your life? It might not be something as dramatic or profound as being the head of a great nation, but it will transform our lives and lead us somewhere we never could have imagined. That much I can promise, and that much God promises too. Amen.