

Rev. Erin Grayson  
Suquamish United Church of Christ  
Sunday, July 19, 2020

**Scripture Lesson: Genesis 16**

**Meditation: A Way Out of No Way**

I had already written this meditation on Friday night when I heard the sad news that US Congressman and civil rights activist who resisted Jim Crow era segregation, John Lewis had died. The story of Lewis' life teaches us something about perspective, and how looking at the same story through a different lens is a powerful tool for change: shifting perspective cultivates empathy for marginalized characters, the powerless ones--black or brown, differently abled, LGBTQ+, or women. And from place of empathy, our spirits are stirred to transform oppressive narratives to ones of justice and liberation for us all.

The story I will reflect on today speaks to the power of perspective. I pray it will stir our spirits to change the stories unfolding before us right now. And I pray that it will give us hope that no matter our circumstances--the messes we've made or the conditions we have no control over—God sees us. And God promises to make a way out of no way, if we have the eyes to see.

Even if you aren't familiar with the bible, it's likely you can name a few main characters who feature prominently in the narrative, heroes or otherwise. I'll give you a moment. Who comes to mind?

I'm not a mind reader but if I had to guess who you're thinking of, I might say Jesus, or Moses, or Noah, or Abraham or King David. Maybe it was Peter, Paul or John; or if you're really well-versed maybe it was the prophet Habakkuk who came to mind (and if it was, I'd be seriously impressed...and very curious).

I would be surprised, though, if you thought of Zipporah, or Phoebe, or Hagar because these are lesser known characters, if you've heard of them at all. It's because they are women, and women's stories *were and are* largely overlooked and often misinterpreted, and worse, manipulated.

The biblical writers were almost certainly male and products of a social structure we call "patriarchy," a system in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded. As a result, when women are highlighted in scripture it's usually for things like being a good wife or their ability to bear children; their worth was based on how well they could do both of these

things. Otherwise they had no agency, which is to say they had no power to make their own decisions or to live as freely as their male counterparts.

Women who were independent or claimed some personal autonomy are often remembered as maligned characters like Eve who is blamed for the fall of all humankind, or Jezebel, who is a wicked woman who deserved her fate: to be thrown from a window and her body be fed to the dogs. There are plenty of stories of misogyny and femicide in the bible as a result of patriarchy.

If you heard me preach about Esther a two weeks ago, you know there are exceptions. Esther is celebrated a biblical heroine who, though at first limited by her role in a patriarchal society, found a way to use her position to save the Jewish exiles in Persia from genocide. But you'll also remember that Esther's full story does not get the attention it deserves in the lectionary, the yearly cycle of readings that are meant to expose people to the whole of the biblical story. Instead, Esther's story gets briefly mentioned, but only in part and the focus is her cousin Mordecai's rise to an elevated position.

It seems the women of the bible haven't yet escaped the limitations of patriarchy, as even now the designers of the lectionary readings have heaped on them another layer upon them.

Sister Ruth Fox, a Catholic Nun of the Benedictine Order, wrote about a reaction to her teaching about women of the bible. A woman in the congregation remarked that she never knew Jesus had female disciples. Sister Fox wrote, "[...] a disproportionate number of passages about the women of the Bible have been omitted in Christian teaching and preaching. Women's books, women's experiences and women's accomplishments have been largely overlooked [...]"<sup>1</sup>

The result is that we are denied a chance to learn from women's experiences in the bible, and also that we end up perpetuating the harmful patterns of rendering women invisible and silenced—yesterday and today.

But there is something we can do to interrupt this pattern. We can liberate female characters who are marginalized, and release ourselves from limited perspectives that blind us from deeper truths their stories offer—truths that we can apply to our lives and circumstances.

One way to do so is to read stories about women through a feminist and womanist lens. A feminist reading of a story challenges patriarchal messages, and can even free us from the

---

<sup>1</sup> Sister Ruth Fox's paper can be accessed at <https://www.futurechurch.org/women-in-church-leadership/women-and-word/women-in-bible-and-lectionary>

notion that God is exclusively male.<sup>2</sup> A womanist reading of a story can do all of that, while inviting us to consider a black female perspective, which is to say the perspective of one who is doubly marginalized by gender and race.

UCC Pastor Ellen Sims once reminded her congregation that it's "...often those who are invisible to the powerful [who] are the ones who see God more clearly and who are seen by God."<sup>3</sup> This theme becomes a mainstay of Jesus' ministry. Surely, then, we have something to learn from them.

Hagar's story in Genesis is a good learning opportunity. The story in which she is a character is better known as the birth of Ishmael and Isaac, sons of Father Abraham. Abraham's wife Sarai/Sarah is remembered as the mother of Isaac, the one from whom the nation of Israel is born. Her slave girl Hagar is remembered, if at all, for birthing Ishmael who will eventually become an outcast in the family.

Biblical scholars classify this tale as an etiology, or a cultural myth which explains the first split of the family tree of the Abrahamic faiths: the Jewish and later Christian faiths symbolized by Isaac, and the Islamic faith symbolized by Ishmael. The sacred texts of each of the three branches of the family tree contain and honor this story. And interestingly, though not at all surprisingly, the story has been contorted and used to divide those faith traditions, using the characters of the women as symbols of division.

But surely there is more to glean from this story than etiology; more than the birth of two nations as the main event, with a side show of two fighting women.

So, let's look at Hagar's character from a womanist perspective. I wonder what deeper truths about God and about ourselves are revealed when we are curious enough to consider the perspective of the most oppressed?

Hagar is doubly and even triply marginalized: she's a woman, and she's a servant in Abram and Sarai's house. We also know she's from Egypt, so she's black, from a different ethnic tribe. When Sarai decides it is impossible for God's promise of many offspring to be born to her, she begs her husband to impregnate their slave girl, Hagar, so that Sarah might inherit God's promise through her. We have no idea whether or not Hagar consented to this plan, but we do know it was perfectly legal in patriarchal structures.

---

<sup>2</sup>See Rev. Ellen Sim's sermon at <https://opentableucc.org/sermon/the-woman-who-saw-god/>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

But when Hagar became pregnant, Sarah became jealous. She felt threatened by Hagar's newfound worth, and she harshly abused Hagar. Although Sarah is a victim of patriarchy, she is privileged over and above Hagar the slave. She is both a victim and an oppressor. The abuse became intolerable and Hagar fled into the wilderness where she encountered a divine messenger near a stream. The messenger spoke to her tenderly and made a promise to her like God had to Sarah, that she too would give birth to a son through whom a great nation would be born.

And then Hagar, the most powerless person in this story, made the boldest move of all the characters. Hagar had eyes to see the messenger was God speaking to her and she affirmed it by naming God, El-Roi, as well as the stream in the dry desert which she named Beer lahai Roi to honor the place where she saw God. Modern scholars are unclear about the meaning of the name El-Roi, but that's not the interesting part--even more remarkable is that Hagar took the initiative to name *herself* as "one who saw God and lived." Hagar saw God, and was seen by God and in this life-giving move, she claimed her identity and worth outside of her circumstances.

Despite this beautiful truth, there is a troublesome message here for modern readers like us. It's confusing that the messenger advised Hagar to return to Abraham and Sarah, her abusers. Perhaps what we can take from this part is that God pointed a way for a way Hagar to live and for her son to be safely born, rather than perish in the desert.

Hagar did return to Abraham and Sarah's house where she gave birth to Ishmael. And not long after, the few chapters beyond what we read in Genesis 16, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. Sarah once again felt threatened by Hagar and so she banished the slave girl and Ishmael once and for all. As Hagar wandered the desert wilderness, this time with her young son who was tired and thirsty, she saw God again. This time, God heard and responded to the cries of the young boy. When Hagar saw God, she begged to be spared the sight of her son's death. And God responded as God had responded before. God's vision was one of life, as God turned Hagar's gaze toward a stream which suddenly appeared. And the boy drank his fill before God affirmed the promise made before: you will live, Hagar and from you a great nation will be born.

Reading this story from womanist perspective, we learn something important through the character who is least powerful. God sees those who are marginalized and invisible to those with power and works through patriarchy, or any other oppressive system that we might

devise. In the character of Hagar, Womanist theologian Delores Williams wrote that “God has made a way out of no way.”<sup>4</sup>

And that offers all of us, no matter who we are--black, brown, white, woman, man, trans, gay, bi, old, young, or differently abled--a message of hope: God *sees* us, and knows our suffering, hopes, joys, and needs--even when we otherwise feel invisible. And despite the wilderness of our lives, God makes a way even when there seems to be no way. God’s vision is life, and God promises to quench our thirst with living water when we turn our gaze to God.

When is the last time you felt like Hagar in the wilderness? And when have you experienced the tender assurance of being seen and known by God? Likewise, when have you offered another, especially one who is invisible or marginalized, the gift of really seeing them—affirming their value and worth as a child of God, equal and beloved? How does a shift in perspective transform our understanding of how God works? God’s vision of liberation for all people?

Like Hagar may we have the courage to see and be seen. To know that no matter our circumstances, God sees us, and especially the most vulnerable among us. May we find inspiration in her example to share God’s vision of life and liberation for all people. God can make a way out of no way. And like Hagar, may we understand that we too have the power to birth hope for all the world. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup>To read an theological interpretation of Hagar in which Theologian Delores Williams’ Womanist interpretation is referenced, see <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/569c082f7b96bf7734da4c/t/5bf3ef90cd8366b587589712/1542713233200/Reaves+-+Sarah%2C+Whiteness%2C+Power+%26+Memory+%28R%26E+Nov+2018%29.pdf>