

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California

Today, we wander through two deserts. Through a literal, physical desert with Hagar, and through a metaphorical desert with Jesus' disciples, a place full of obstacles and thorns. In both unlikely places, there is an encounter with God, and a message that God can be trusted to care for us.

I've always found this story of Hagar and Ishmael one of the most heart wrenching in scripture. But it never occurred to me, until I read Rachel Held Evans a few years ago, to think of Hagar as a hero, as much a Mother in faith as Abraham is a Father in faith. I saw Hagar as someone to be pitied, not someone to be admired. I now see her very differently.

If I may digress for a moment, it turns out that in Islam, Hagar is a heroic figure, a woman of exemplary faith, Mother of the Bedouins and ancestor of Mohammed. Her story is not in the Koran, but it is widely known and told. I want to take just a few minutes to tell you how she is seen, I don't think it hurts to know just a little about the faith millions practice, around the globe and here at home.

In Islam, they change a few things about her story. She is an Egyptian princess, not an Egyptian slave. Abraham does not abandon her, but travels with her until they come to a desolate place near Mecca. He leaves her there, but tells her to trust God to provide. When Hagar and Ishmael run out of water, she runs seven times between two hills looking for water, sure she will find it. Finally, water flows out from under Ishmael's heel, and becomes a spring. Later, Abraham returns and together, he and Ishmael build the Kaaba nearby.

Today, the Kaaba is the center and goal of the pilgrimage all Muslims must undertake at least once in their lives. But Hagar is part of the pilgrimage too. Everyone re-enacts Hagar's search for water, travelling back and forth seven times between the two hills, searching their hearts for Hagar's faith and trust. Only after they have completed this journey do they approach the Kaaba.

I do need to say that I am no scholar of Islam, and what you're hearing I learned from Professor Google. But I feel safe in saying that Hagar is a hero and an exemplar of faith for Muslims.

For myself, the story is more meaningful if Hagar remains a slave, as described in Genesis, because she becomes a hero for anyone enslaved, trafficked, or abused. The story is also more meaningful when we hear the whole of it, because this is not the first time Hagar has travelled through the desert. After she became pregnant, Hagar began to look down on Sarah, which Sarah resented bitterly, so she complained to Abraham. He washed his hands of the matter, and tells Sarah to do what she wants. And Sarah abuses Hagar, even though the pregnancy was her idea.

Here we begin to see Hagar's strength. She refuses to submit to mistreatment, and runs away into the desert. An angel finds her sitting beside a spring of water. He tells her that she must return to Sarah, but also that her son will be a great nation. As with Mary, the angel tells Hagar Ishmael's name, which means "God hears." Then Hagar names God "You are the God who sees me." What an encounter. God sees her, and sees her needs. Of her own will, obeying the angel, Hagar returns to Sarah. But as we hear today, when Isaac is weaned, the situation deteriorates again. The children, Isaac and Ishmael, are fine together, they are playing with each other. It's Sarah, the adult, who can't manage her emotions. Abraham grieves, but when God tells him Ishmael will be all right, he sends Hagar and Ishmael away. Once again, an angel appears to them in the wilderness, guiding Hagar to water, and telling her not to be afraid. We hear that in the end, Hagar makes it to safety along with Ishmael, who grows up, marries, and presumably has children, as promised.

When you think about it, it's astonishing that this story even made it into the Bible. We have many similar stories in our history, just think of Thomas Jefferson. Right now, efforts are being made to erase and remove these stories from historical sites. The authors of Genesis chose to leave this story in. They give us an unlikely hero, a model of grit and endurance and faith. God sees Hagar, and we see her too.

The Gospel today gives us a glimpse into the lives of unseen and unknown heroes, the disciples who first went out into Israel to spread the faith. This section of Matthew has always been difficult for me, because of Jesus' tone. He warns that a harsh and contentious path lies ahead. If they've called me a devil, they'll call you a devil. Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.

I've come to understand that this harsh and urgent tone reflects Jesus' prophetic consciousness of the destruction of the Temple, as well as the situation of Christians travelling in the wake of that destruction. They try urgently to proclaim Jesus' message. Now they are telling aloud what small Christian

communities had held quietly. And conflict of all kinds is coming at them as they try to proclaim the Good News. They are brought before synagogues to defend themselves, they are separated from their families. As the years pass and the apostles fall one by one, they are aware that carrying the cross as Jesus did is not just a metaphor. In this passage, Jesus is warning them of real dangers. We remember that there are places around the world where Christians face these dangers today.

What goes along with these messages of danger is equally real. It is the same message the angel gave Hagar. "Do not be afraid." "Have no fear of them." There is no need to fear people and what they might say or do, the only one worthy of fear is God. But you know that the Father cares for you. Just as God saw Hagar sitting and weeping, God sees every sparrow falling, and every hair on your head is counted. Jesus uses God's omniscience to assure the disciples that the God who knows everything also sees and cares for them.

We may not face slavery or bitter jealousy as Hagar did, and we may not face family and community conflict at every turn as the early disciples did. But there are challenges and difficulties unique to our time and our journey in faith. Jesus promised that if following him means loss and even death of parts of ourselves, those who lose their lives for his sake will find them.

If God calls us out into the wilderness, we can trust him to provide us with water. The God who saw Hagar and heard Ishmael, who watched over the disciples on their journeys, sees and watches over us too.