

Proper 7, Year A
Genesis 21: 8-21
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Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

Hagar's Song:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

The story we hear today—the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael cast out into the wilderness and left to die—is only part of Hagar's story. Her story begins much earlier. The roots of this story are in Egypt where Hagar is sold into slavery—sold to Abraham as a maidservant for Sarah, a woman desperately longing for a child. It's Sarah who conceives of the scheme to have Abraham father Hagar's child. And when Hagar shows some spunk and Abraham shows some tenderness, Sarah gets tough; Sarah gets mean. Any way you look at it, at any point in the story, there's a whole lot of sadness in Hagar's life.

Every time I hear Hagar's story I think of the gospel song, "Listen to the lambs." The song begins "Listen to the lambs, all are crying, all are crying, all are crying." Every time I encounter Hagar's story, I hear lambs crying.

For Hagar's story is the story of a lamb crying:

A lamb crying as she is taken from her people and sold into slavery;
A lamb crying as she given over to her mistress's husband;
A lamb crying at the harsh treatment she endures at the hands of a resentful
mistress;
A lamb crying in the wilderness.

Hagar, pregnant and abused, flees to the wilderness—the wilderness of Shur. God finds her there, sitting by a spring of water, her shoulders heaving with her sobs. God asks her where she is coming from and where she is going. She replies, "I am running away from my mistress."

God's response? God sends her back—back to Abraham, back to Sarah, back to the life she was fleeing. It makes you wonder. Why would God send her back? Why would God send her back into slavery? Why would God send Hagar back to all that cruelty? It makes no sense. On the surface this sounds like what Phyllis Trible would call a text of terror.

Yet there's a hard truth running underneath this story. There are times when we have to bide our time. There are times when we have to endure in order to survive. There are times when we're forced to choose between two bad options. The wilderness is no place to bear a child. Hagar and the child in her womb can't survive out there alone.

But God does not send her back empty-handed. God sends her back with hope. God sends her back with a promise—a promise that God will so greatly multiply her offspring that they cannot even be counted. That's a promise of life! And God sends her back with

a memory—a memory of God meeting her in the wilderness of her fear and sadness. That encounter with God gave Hagar the strength and the hope and maybe even the wits she needed to endure and survive.

Hagar gives birth to a son. She names him Ishmael—God hears.

The years pass. The child grows. Abraham treats him and loves him as his son.

Then Sarah gives birth to a son of her own and everything changes. On the day of his weaning, Ishmael plays with him. Sarah's resentment and anger return as she watches the two play together. She says to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son." And Abraham complies. He leads Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness, leaving them with only a skin of water and a loaf of bread.

Do you hear the lambs a crying? All are crying.

When the water runs out, Hagar leads her son to a bush and leaves him there. She can't bear to see him suffer; she can't bear to watch him die. Again she sits in the wilderness and sobs. And so does the boy.

God hears their sobs and comes to Hagar, saying to her "Do not be afraid; for I have heard the voice of the boy....Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." There again the promise of life. Then God opens her eyes and she sees a well of water—life giving water. She brings the water to her son. He survives and so does she. In the wilderness of Paran, in the wilderness of their lives, God comes to them and points them in the way of life.

There are times in my life when I expect God to change the conditions in which I find myself. There are times when I want God to wave a magic wand and remove all that plagues me. All that defeats me. All that saps my energy. There are times when I want God to take away my pain. To remove my burdens. To make things different. To make things easy.

But that's not the way God works most of the time. God works in a different way. God meets us in the wilderness of our lives—in our pain and in our suffering and in our disappointments. God gives us the resources to endure, to survive and sometimes even to thrive in the conditions in which we find ourselves—whatever they may be. That's what happened to Hagar the first time she found herself in the wilderness. God didn't change the material reality of her life. When God sent Hagar back to Abraham and Sarah, Abraham was still going along with Sarah and Sarah was still resentful and mean. They didn't change. But Hagar did. God gave Hagar the hope and the strength and the wits she needed to survive in hard times. Sometimes that's all we need.

And sometimes we need a little more. Sometimes we need a nudge to see the resources available to us right where we are. Sometimes we need God to open our eyes to what is

right there at our finger tips. Sometimes we need God to shift our perspective so that we can see what's right at hand.

Hagar followed Abraham into the wilderness. She took the water skin and the bread from his hands. She led her son deeper into the wild. She gave him food and drink. When her resources ran out, she left him to die. She averted her eyes. She sobbed and waited for the end. But God hears his lambs a crying. God opened her eyes. God shifted her perspective. God drew her attention to the resources that lay at hand. She bent down, filled a skin with water and brought it to her son. And they were on their way!

Hagar's story is one of my favorites. God hears a lamb a crying and comes to the lamb in the here and the now of life—in all the messiness, in all the hard choices, in all the difficult realities—hopes deferred, abilities diminished, horizons restricted. God meets Hagar where she is and provides her with what she needs to go on. There are no miracles in this story. Just a promise of blessing, a shift in perspective and the great gift of God's presence in the midst of the reality of life, in the midst of suffering. God's presence and God's blessing—what more can we ask? What more do we need?