

June 16: Seen (*Genesis 16:1-16*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Good morning, fellow travelers on the way – welcome to the third message of our summer series on displacement and finding home together. To be displaced is to be moved from our usual or proper place, from where we feel at home, & it can apply to tangible things like individuals or intangible things like emotions. Displacement happens to all of us, and whether it's temporary or permanent, chosen or thrust upon us, the same underlying feelings often affect us: a sense of disorientation, confusion, and loss of control. We might feel adrift or lost; anxious and afraid; or maybe insecure or bitter.

This month, we're focused on Biblical stories of involuntary displacement and how they intersect with our own stories. Last week, we read about the Tower of Babel and Pastor Meg talked about how our fear of displacement tempts us to build towers of self-protection and self-sufficiency rather than trusting God and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. As we enter into Hagar's story today, I invite you to vulnerability to the God who sees you and is for you; to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God's loving presence and voice. Please join me in prayer before we jump in.

El Roi, you are the God who sees us, no matter where we are. You hear our cries, and you are with us in our suffering. Please give us the boldness of Hagar to name you and follow you. Thank you that our story matters to you. In Jesus' name, amen.

One of the wonderful things about having teenagers is that they introduce me to music or art or media that I might otherwise have overlooked. I can't say that I've fallen in love with everything my kids enjoy - there have been hits and there have been misses – but one of the biggest hits is the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, written and composed by Lin Manuel Miranda. My girls can perform the entire musical from memory, *acapella*, and I have also become a huge fan – not only of the music, but of the themes and questions embedded in the story.

On its surface, *Hamilton* is about the Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, and about early American history. But it's also about history itself: how we remember it, and who we remember. Who gets to be in the narrative, who gets forgotten, and who controls the story? In the middle of the musical, Alexander Hamilton's wife Eliza begs him to let her be a part of the story; but after he

betrays and publicly humiliates her, she tries to erase herself from the narrative, burning the letters that connect her to his legacy. After Alexander is killed in a duel, however, Eliza gets the final song and the last word. She puts herself back in the narrative: living a full and vibrant life for fifty more years, giving herself to service, securing Alexander's legacy, and lovingly raising hundreds of children in New York's first private orphanage. At the very end, as the chorus sings the question, "Who tells your story?", Eliza walks to the edge of the stage, looks out at the audience, then gasps in wonder and joy as she reaches up. We don't know what makes her gasp, but perhaps she realized that she is still seen, that her story is remembered and known and told.

It's a powerful experience to know that we are seen: that we are affirmed and valued in all our individuality and particularity. Even if we're not comfortable being center-stage, we don't want to be relegated to the role of a marginal extra, plot device, or entertaining distraction from the main story. We want our pains and joys and tragedies and triumphs to have weight and make a difference to others. We long to be assured that our story matters, that our lives matter, and that we matter.

Hagar is a woman who was introduced as "Sarai's Egyptian slave" in Genesis 16, and her story has too often been displaced from the main narrative of the Bible, as if she didn't matter except as a plot device adding tension to the central story of Abraham and Sarah and their promised descendants. Even Paul, as he writes to the Galatian church about grace hundreds of years after Hagar's life, diminishes her to a metaphor for enslavement to the old covenant, encouraging his listeners to "get rid" of the "slave-woman."

But that's not how God saw Hagar. When we look carefully at her story, we see that she was a woman of extraordinary faith, and that her life mattered deeply to God. When nobody else saw Hagar, God did; and when nobody else heard the cries of her son Ishmael, God did. I want to honor Hagar's story this morning, and as you listen, I hope that you, too, will see her in all of her particularity, and that you will also catch glimpses of the God that Hagar met and named in the desert: *El Roi*, the God who sees.

This coming Wednesday is Juneteenth National Independence Day, commemorating the ending of the slavery in the United States. As I tell Hagar's story, I also want to honor the story of the countless enslaved people of this country who, like Hagar, longed for freedom for themselves and their children;

who believed in a God who saw them and was for them; and who took action to resist and survive and overcome. I want to recognize Wil Gafney and Delores Williams – they are womanist theologians who center the experience and perspectives of Black women as they study the Biblical text, and I learned so much from them as I studied Hagar; their insights are reflected throughout this sermon.

We don't know how Hagar's story began; we are introduced to her in the context of Abram and Sarai and their story. Abram was called by God to leave his country and his people and his father's family and go to a land that God would show him, where God promised to bless him and make him into a great nation. And Abram obeyed – he and his family set out to live a nomadic, displaced existence in a new land. When a famine threatened them, they migrated down to Egypt to survive. Abram was afraid that a powerful Egyptian man would see his beautiful wife and seize her for his harem, so he asked Sarai to identify herself as his sister so that *he'd* be protected if it happened – which it did. The Pharaoh took Sarai to be his “wife”, and gave Abram lots of cattle and male and female slaves. Thankfully, God saw Sarai in her plight and inflicted the pharaoh's household with diseases, prompting him to return Sarai to Abram and expel the whole family from the land.

It's quite possible that Hagar was one of the female slaves “given” to Abram and Sarai during their troubled Egyptian sojourn. When Hagar first appears in Genesis 16, she is displaced and marginalized in multiple ways: she's enslaved; her enslavers have a different culture and language than her own; and she's living far from her homeland. Hagar “belonged” to Sarai, a woman with power and privilege who was displaced in her own way: Sarai lived in a society that valued women based on the children they were able to bear, and she had none. She had already been trafficked once by her husband, and knew she remained vulnerable. Living through displacement does not automatically make us better people, and one of the saddest parts of Sarai's story is the way she used the power she had to exploit somebody more vulnerable. Just as she had been taken into the pharaoh's palace to be used by him, Sarai took her Egyptian slave and gave her to her husband Abram to be used by him. Any child Hagar conceived through Abram would be Sarai's legal descendent. As an enslaved woman, Hagar did not consent to any of this; like many of the enslaved women in this country's history, she had no control over her body, her sexuality, or her fertility.

In a poignant statement, Genesis 16:2 says that Sarai hoped to be personally built up through the pregnancy and birth of the woman she controlled. But that's not what happened. When Hagar knew she was pregnant with Abram's child, she began to "despise" her mistress – literally, Sarai became small in Hagar's eyes – which is the opposite of what she hoped for. In her anger and despair, Sarai blamed everybody but herself, and Abram gave her formal permission to abuse Hagar. And she did – verse 6 says that Sarai mistreated Hagar, using the same language the writer of Exodus used to describe how the Egyptians mistreated Hebrew slaves. Sarai became a cruel slavemaster to her pregnant handmaiden, treating her so harshly that Hagar fled into the wilderness.

Hagar's flight was an act of resistance that put her in great peril. As a pregnant woman alone in the desert, her chances of survival were very low. But God saw her, God found her, and God called her by her name – the first time in this whole narrative that anybody has addressed Hagar by her name. There in the wilderness, God gave Hagar a birth announcement, a promise, and an instruction. Hagar is the first person in the Bible to receive a divine birth announcement, and the first woman to receive a promise directly from God – the same promise God gave Abram, of descendants too numerous to count. God told Hagar to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears". In the same way that God heard the groaning of the Israelite slaves in Egypt and intervened to bring them to freedom, God heard the misery of this enslaved Egyptian woman and intervened to protect and save her.

Hagar also received a blessing from God about the future of her son, although the way it's been translated makes it hard to understand. God tells Hagar that her son will be a "wild donkey of a man", which doesn't sound very complimentary. However, the Hebrew word translated donkey refers to a specific type of wild donkey that roamed the desert and was praised in Bedouin poetry as a symbol of untamed freedom. A better English translation is that Ishmael would grow to be a "wild mustang of a man." Can you imagine how this promise would have sounded to an enslaved woman – the wonder and the glory? The chains of slavery that bound her would not control her son – he would roam free and powerful in the presence of his kin.

Hagar would have needed to cling to this promise of freedom in the face of the instruction that God gave her – to "go back to your mistress and submit to her." The God of freedom told Hagar to return to her slavery – the time of her

liberation had not yet arrived. Perhaps this was the only way to protect Hagar and Ishmael and ensure their survival, but I wrestle with that part of the story. Wil Gafney writes that this is “one of the uncomfortable truths of this passage. One can stand in the presence of the Majesty of God, be fully seen and fully known and simultaneously be entrapped and entangled by the tentacles of evil extending from corrupt powers and institutions. Just ask the Africans enslaved in America crying out for 400 years just as the Israelites cried out during their enslavement for another 400 years. Ask those of us crying out Black Lives Matter even as the bodies continue to drop along with the news coverage. Yet God is there and here seeing and seen, knowing and known.”¹

And here’s the most amazing and beautiful part of the passage: Hagar responded to all this with stunning insight, faith, boldness, and radical obedience. “I have now seen the One who sees me,” she said, and she gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are *El Roi*, the God who sees me.” In the entire Bible, Hagar is the only human being, male or female, to name God. It’s significant that Hagar doesn’t repeat the name her enslavers used for God. She believes in God in spite of the way her God-following slave owners exploited and abused her. By boldly naming the deity herself, she is claiming that *El Roi* does not belong to her enslavers, but is also her God, the One who sees her and knows her in all her personhood, the God who is for her. Hagar blazed the way for countless oppressed people throughout history to put their faith in *El Roi*, the God who saw them in their misery and was for them, in spite of and in the face of the warped faith claims of their oppressors.

Can you imagine the faith it took for Hagar to believe the promises of God and return to the place of her enslavement, her rape, her abusive treatment? It was an act of radical obedience. Yet she did it, and it was there that her son was born and named Ishmael, the name God revealed to her in the desert. Every time Hagar called her son’s name, she was reminded that God heard her misery and listened to her longings. And things seemed better, for a time. God affirmed the promises to Abram and Sarai, renaming them Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael grew and was accepted by Abraham as a son and heir; he was circumcised into the covenant between Abraham and God. And then, finally, God fulfilled the deep longing of Sarah’s heart, giving her a son of her own: Isaac, named after Sarah’s incredulous laughter when she heard God say that she would give birth in a year’s time.

¹ Wil Gafney, “Jesus and Hagar: The Form of a Slave”: <https://www.wilgafney.com/2020/11/29/jesus-and-hagar-the-form-of-a-slave/>

You would think that this would be a joyful time in Abraham's camp. But Sarah couldn't rest securely in God's promise. During the celebration of her son Isaac's weaning, she saw Ishmael laughing with her son Isaac – doing the same thing that Isaac was named after. And Sarah felt not delight, but fear – fear that Ishmael would displace her son as Abraham's primary heir, fear that there was not enough room in the story for two children of promise. And she responded to her fear with cruelty, demanding that Abraham "get rid of that slave woman and her son."

Abraham was torn and distressed over the conflict because he loved his firstborn, but when God reassured him that Ishmael would be protected and would prosper, he took an inadequate supply of food and water, put them on Hagar's shoulders, and sent the two of them out into the harsh desert, where they wandered until they were out of water and out of hope. Weak and despairing, Hagar laid her son in the shade of a bush and then dragged herself away, unable to stay and watch him die, raising her voice in sobbing lament. But she was not alone. God saw Hagar, God heard the cries of Ishmael, and God met them there in the desert, reassuring Hagar of the promise and opening her eyes to see a well full of water, the first of their means of survival. And this time, when God calls Hagar by name, it's not "Hagar, slave of Sarai," like it was the first time. It's simply Hagar. It has been a long and hard road, but Hagar is finally free and her son is her own. God was with Ishmael as he grew up, and Hagar was God's co-parent in raising him. Delores Williams writes that Hagar "and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of poverty...Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side."²

There's one more brief epilogue to Hagar and Ishmael's story that I want to mention. 75 years after all of this happened, Abraham died, and both his sons, Ishmael and Isaac together, reunited to honor him and bury him next to his wife Sarah. That means that somewhere along the way, Ishmael reconciled with the father who had abandoned and banished him and his mother and sent them into peril. He did not return evil for evil; instead, he broke the cycle of retribution and seemed to be living at peace with his kin.

² Delores S. Williams, "Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues," from *Sisters in the Wilderness*, p.31.

Ishmael the son of Hagar became the father of the Arab people, and Isaac the son of Sarah become the father of the Jewish people, and there is deadly conflict between their descendants today. I want to lean into that closing picture of Ishmael and Isaac side by side at their father's grave as hope that there is a way to co-exist in the presence of each other, to come together as brothers at peace. And I also want to affirm that in the same way God heard Hagar and Ishmael's cries in the desert, God hears the lament of every mother and child who fear for their death in Gaza and Rafah, who cry out in pain and hunger and thirst. *El Roi* sees them, and *El Roi* is for them. And as God's children, we cannot close our eyes and our ears and our hearts.

God saw Sarah *and* Hagar, Isaac *and* Ishmael, and God blessed them all; God's story was so much bigger and more inclusive than Sarah feared it might be. And in the same way, God sees each one of us, and God's love and blessing are broad and deep enough to encompass every single one of us. All of us have a place in the narrative, and all of us matter.

Yet it was to Hagar, alone and displaced in the desert, that God appeared – not just once, but twice – the only woman in the Bible to receive two personal visions of God. In her displacement and desperation and oppression, she saw God in a way that Sarah did not, and she was bold enough to name God for herself: *El Roi*, the God who sees me.

What kind of God do you see? Who has shaped your image of God, and how? Do you see a God who knows you and sees you as you are and wills your freedom and flourishing as you are created to be? Do you see a God who dwells with you in your sorrow and pain? When you are called to walk difficult paths or return to a place of suffering, will the God that you see walk with you? If we struggle to see a God who sees us, perhaps we might need to draw near to those who are in the wilderness, who have been displaced or rejected or abandoned or oppressed. Perhaps, it is by seeing those who are suffering, and by standing in solidarity and support with people who are marginalized rather than guarding our position as Sarah did, that we will be able to more clearly see and know the God who sees us and assures us that we matter.

Hagar might not be in the center of the Biblical narrative, but her story mattered deeply to God, and she knew it. May we all have such bold faith. I want to let Hagar have the final word in my sermon, so I'm going to close with her own confession, and I invite all of you to join her in spirit in her declaration to God she dared to name: "You are the God who sees me." Amen.