

“She Lifted Up Her Voice”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Genesis 21:8-21  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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Women who have been sexually exploited are often re-victimized. After being violated, they are cast aside. They are shunned or blamed for what happened to them. This happens every day in our criminal justice system and on our campuses and in our churches. It happened long ago to Hagar. It is a pattern that keeps repeating itself, and one we have yet to eradicate.

Before we explore our passage for today, let’s rewind to Genesis chapter 16. Back when God had promised to make Abram into a great nation but before Sarai was ever pregnant, Hagar’s body was introduced as a solution to the problem of their barrenness. We do not know whether Sarai never conceived or whether she suffered multiple miscarriages. What we know is that she suffered an agonizing life of waiting and wanting, of hoping and praying with nothing to show for it. In those days it was common practice for slave women to bear children for their masters, and so after decades of unsuccessful attempts to get pregnant, Sarai suggested that Abram take Hagar and have a son that way. Abram complied.

The plan worked, but, as it turns out, no one was very happy about it. When Hagar ended up pregnant with Abram’s child, she began to look upon Sarai with contempt, which seems to me like a normal reaction to being forced to sleep with the husband of the woman who owns you, then forced to carry his child, and oh, by the way, go ahead and keep sweeping my floors and making my food and watering my livestock while you’re at it. I can almost hear Sarai’s jealousy coming out in her daily demands. “Don’t complain to me about morning sickness or exhaustion or swollen ankles! At least you can have children! Get back to work.”

And I can feel Hagar’s resentment towards the woman who used her and abused her and is now envious of her. I can see her lying alone in bed at night, hand on her belly, crying, praying that she won’t feel that same searing resentment towards the child, who is innocent.

Sarai, like a dutiful wife, had gotten for Abram what she was not able to give him herself, but she hadn’t counted on it hurting this much. Despite Hagar’s involvement being Sarai’s idea, perhaps a part of her had hoped Abram would refuse and cleave only to her . . . but who was she kidding? She was the wife he pawned off to other men to save his own skin. What made her think he would reject her offer to give him Hagar? As long as it was a means to an end, women could easily be traded.

We do not know for sure how Sarai acquired Hagar in the first place, but there’s a good chance it happened in Egypt, since Hagar was Egyptian. You may remember that when Abram and Sarai traveled to Egypt during a famine, Abram told the Egyptians Sarai was his sister, for she was very beautiful, and he didn’t want the Egyptians to get jealous. Thinking Sarai was Abram’s sister, Pharaoh took Sarai into his house, and because of her, Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts, including male and female slaves. Doesn’t it seem likely that Hagar was among that number?

Which means that Sarai, who acquired Hagar by going home with another man against her will, then gave Hagar against Hagar's will to Abram. It is hard to fathom how she was able to justify owning a human body as her own to command after knowing what it was like to be property herself. Perhaps she felt she had earned it. Perhaps after her experience in Egypt she despised Egyptians—it was easier to hate them than to blame her own husband. Or perhaps her contempt for Hagar was really just masked contempt for herself—for not being able to conceive, for doing to Hagar what had been previously done to her, for taking a short cut and choosing ease over integrity. We learn in Sarai that experience as a victim does not prevent you from becoming an oppressor. Sometimes when the powerless gain some power, they simply repeat the cycles of abuse and coercion.

And so it was that after Hagar conceived, Sarai's disdain for Hagar grew fierce. Unlike Hagar, her status did not restrict her from openly expressing her hatred, and she began to harass Hagar. As a slave, Hagar did not have much recourse, and so eventually, with a child in her womb, she ran away. She likely didn't have anywhere to go or much hope for survival, but an unknown future still seemed preferable to her present misery, and so she ran.

As she ran away, Hagar encountered God beside a spring of water in the wilderness. Presumably she had stopped to rest and get a drink when the Lord appeared and told her to go back, to return to Sarai and obey her. As far as we can tell, Hagar responded first in stunned silence. She said nothing as the Lord spoke to her not once, not twice, but three times.

We all know better than to send a woman back to her abuser, but when God did so, God was able to include promises about the wellbeing of her son. Though God's instructions seemed ludicrous, God wanted her to know she had been heard, and God heeded her suffering. It is important that we interpret this story in which Hagar returned to the source of her abuse not as a rule but as an exception. She did not return as someone neglected and overlooked by God, but as one who had been fully seen.

God even told her to name her son Ishmael, meaning, "God hears." And when Hagar finally did speak back, it was to name God—*El-roi*, the God who sees. When God named her son, Hagar responded by giving God a name of her own. God said, "I *hear* you," and Hagar answered, "You also *see* me." She was the only person in Scripture to ever name God. She was an outsider, a woman, a slave, and yet she had this extraordinarily intimate, perhaps mystical, experience with God. As one scholar said, "It must be stressed that the sentence references a mutual seeing for both God and Hagar. The effect of claiming to have been seen by God is Hagar's way of asserting her personhood and a relationship with God that even Sarah doesn't have. When Hagar is removed physically from those who control every aspect of her life, a personal identity and relationship materializes. As a socially marginalized woman, her most intimate relationship, it turns out, is with God."<sup>1</sup> To mark this incredible experience, the place where Hagar encountered God was called, "The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me."

All of that is backdrop to the story we read today, which took place many years later when Ishmael was a teenager and Sarai had become Sarah and Abram, Abraham. In her nineties, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, whose name meant laughter. She had laughed with skepticism when God promised a child in her old age, but after his birth she laughed for joy, saying, "Everyone who

hears will laugh with me.” What Sarah did not account for was Ishmael’s laugh. In chapter twenty-one, verse nine, it says Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, laughing. Many of your translations say Ishmael was playing, but the Hebrew word also means joking or mocking, and it comes from the same root word for laughter that Sarah used. As far as Sarah was concerned, it wasn’t okay for Ishmael to laugh, and it certainly wasn’t okay for him to take the place of Isaac, son of laughter, son of Abraham, son of Sarah.

And so it was that after all those years of managing to live together, now that Sarah had a son of her own, she decided she could bear it no longer, and she made Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. While you can see why Sarah was so uncomfortable having Hagar around, you can also see how none of this was Hagar’s fault.

Nevertheless, Hagar was kicked out of the household and once again re-victimized. She ended up back in the wilderness. The wilderness, you remember, was where she first encountered God, only this time it seemed as if God had truly abandoned her and forgotten his promises to her. She was alone in the wilderness with her only son, and eventually they ran completely out of water.

Without a way to take care of him, at this point in the story, Hagar left Ishmael under a bush and walked away because she could not bear to watch her son die of thirst. With her back to Ishmael, the text said she lifted up her voice and wept, and I have always envisioned her sobbing in sorrow, until I saw the sculpture, “Hagar in the Wilderness.” I used this image on the front of our worship guides this morning because the artist suggests to us that Hagar wept in rage, that when she lifted up her voice, she yelled and screamed and hollered and shook her fist at God, and of course she probably did just that. One does not survive all that she survived, then go down without a fight. One does not encounter God as she had and not protest God’s absence. She knew God was capable of showing up. She knew she had made it this far and it just wasn’t fair to die now. None of it had been fair, but one of the ways she had endured was by holding on to those promises, and she wasn’t going to let go without making some noise.

As it happened, God again appeared to Hagar, and God told her to keep holding on, to hold fast to her son, for God would indeed make him great. For the second time, God appeared to Hagar in the wilderness as she was leaving the house of Abraham. This time God did not send her back—perhaps because this time she could make it to freedom with her teenage son by her side rather than carrying him in her womb across the desert.

Whatever the reason, God’s instructions were different, but the promise remained the same. Interestingly, the text says God heard the voice of the *boy*, even though we just read that it was Hagar who was crying. I can’t help but hear God’s comment as a promise to Hagar that God’s care and God’s listening are ongoing realities that will extend through the generations—not just to her but also to her offspring.

Not only did God hear Hagar and Ishmael; God also helped Hagar to see. The text reports, “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” It’s as if the help was there all along, but she could not yet see it. God saw her, but in the midst of her trials, she could not see that God saw. She had named her wilderness visitor, “the God who sees,” but over the years she had lost sight

of her initial encounter with God. Life was just too hard for that memory to seem believable anymore. But thanks be to God, this was a temporary blindness only.

It ought to be said that none of what happened to Hagar at the hands of Sarah and Abraham was okay. It was all wrong. And yet, what this text suggests to us theologically is that no one goes unnoticed by God. There is a huge contrast between God and Abraham, between God and Sarah in these stories. In every scene with Abraham and Sarah, Hagar has no lines. But when she encounters God, it is because God hears her, and both times they have a conversation. When she is with God, Hagar has a voice, and her voice is heard, unlike her encounters with Sarah and Abraham in which there is no evidence she was given a voice at all. In fact, she is not even called by name. They call her, “My slave,” and “that slave woman.” It is God who calls her by her name, *Hagar*, and who recognizes her as human and sees her value.

Sarah and Abraham are considered the mother and father of our faith, and yet sometimes they behave like terrible human beings. Thankfully the God they follow transcends their sins and cares for the ones they have neglected. This does not give license for God’s people to be terrible, but the story does give us assurance that God draws near to those who suffer and those who are cast out. Those we overlook, God sees. Those we ignore, God hears.

Rather than imitating the so-called heroes of our faith who can be just as greedy and selfish as we are, the story invites us to imitate the God of Hagar, the God we find in Christ, who rushes to the side of the weary and the wounded.

The story challenges us to consider whether we are still banishing the children of Hagar—our Muslim brothers and sisters who claim Ishmael as father. Do we still regard them as illegitimate sons and daughters? Do the sins of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah live on? Do we re-victimize those who have been used and abused, blamed for what is not their fault and shunned from communities? Do we refuse to believe God would bless their descendants as well as ours, that they, like Hagar, are allowed to give God names, that they, like Hagar, might see and hear God in ways that we have not?

From the viewpoint of our faith, we may historically consider ourselves the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, but theologically we are the sons and daughters of God, and we are called to treat the whole world like family, for there is not a person God created whom God does not love and cherish.

Beloved, let us give thanks to our God, the God of Hagar! Let us rejoice in the God who sees us and sees them. Let the God of Hagar open our eyes that we might see. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Tracy, “Hagar: She Who Speaks with God,” bibleodyssey.org