

If Trees Could Talk: Seen, Heard, Remembered

Genesis 21:8-21

June 25, 2017

This is no remarkable tree, not unique, without specific family, genus, species. It's a desert bush. Not burning. Not medicinal. Not bearing fruit.

It's Any-Bush. And it is witness to a terrifying story—at least parts of it. The implications of what the bush sees and hears are dramatic. Troubling.

Promising.

It asks,

"Who is this woman placing a child under my meager shadow?

Who is this child, so dehydrated no tears come with the sobs?

What are they doing in this wilderness?

Why is the woman walking away, leaving the child?

Can anything help this distraught woman, this suffering child?"

She is Hagar. Egyptian. Maid/Slave of Sarah. Second wife/concubine of Abraham. Because Sarah was infertile, she became a surrogate mother, bearing a child for Abraham on Sarah's behalf. That's the way things were done in those times.

He, the child, is Ishma-el. (God-Hears) First born child of Abraham by Hagar. We don't know how old he is—something between a toddler and a tween, the hints in the text are contradictory. First born children should inherit—both Abraham's fortune and God's covenant of descendants and faithful love.

What are they doing in the barren desert?

That takes some explaining.

Sarah (meaning Princess) in her very old age has finally conceived and birthed a child, Isaac, meaning He Laughs. At Isaac's weaning party, the bells go off in Sarah's mind; Sarah, jealous for her own child, second born of Abraham, fears that Hagar's child will inherit a portion, or all of Abraham's wealth. Ah, the complications of polygamy. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and her son Ishmael away (which was lawful to do to a slave, a foreigner).

Distressed, Abraham hesitates; after all, Ishmael is his son too.

Then for the first time in the passage we hear from God who shockingly, to our ears, says, "Go ahead and do what Sarah asks. It will be okay. Both of your children will become fathers of great nations." In other words, God will see to it that Ishmael survives. And thrives.

Pause.

So God is favoring the establishment? Yes, God validates jealous Sarah's desire to dispose of a powerless foreign mother. It's fair to ask what is God thinking? Do we just give God a bye on this? Is God favoring the lesser of two evils? Or is it a trick? Or is it just God's best effort in trying to settle an argument between a man and his two wives?

And to what extent will God go to preserve the inheritance of Sarah and Abraham's son, Isaac? At this point it's too soon to answer that question, but when God says something this odd, out of character for how we come to understand a God of compassion and mercy and fairness, one can't just merrily skip on to the next scene. This is a complicated situation.

Abraham, still troubled but compliant with God's command, does what he can to ease the pain of the exile. He sends them away with bread and a skin of water. One wonders how long a skin of water will hydrate the two of them in the heat of the desert.

She had found herself in the desert before—she had run away from Sarah, who, upset that her maid was pregnant, began to abuse her, beat her. On that earlier desert journey God had spoken to her, instructing her to go back to her abuser, that is, to Sarah and assured her that she would be blessed with a multitude of offspring.

(This is NOT a justification for a religious leader today to send any abused person back to their abuser). God's actions in this story are indeed puzzling, troubling.

That God would pay her any attention amazed Hagar, and she responded by doing a most extraordinary thing—she gave God a name. El-roi, or “God Sees.

What a marvelous name for God. Remember the movie Avatar? When the indigenous people on the planet greet one another they say “I see you”. Not “I am looking at you” but I see inside you. I am ready to be fully present with you, understand you, am with you. That's the kind of being seen Hagar experiences from God.

Now here she is again in the desert wilderness. This time involuntarily. Just trying to find their way. To who knows where. Would they try to reach Egypt? An encampment of nomads? The reality is a woman and her child are alone in the desert. They find no food, water, villages, friends. The water Abraham supplied them with runs out. How will they survive? Where will they find water?

Now, without water, Hagar assumes the worst. Her already dehydrated and suffering son will die. Probably she will as well. She acts in a stunning, a heart-wrenching way, placing her whimpering, weeping parched-lip son weeping under whatever shade the desert shrub will provide, moving the distance of a bowshot, perhaps 300 feet away. And she weeps.

The shrub's question is our question. Why is the woman walking away, leaving the child?

How can we process this horror? A child left alone to die. A mother too distraught to watch her child die close up. She keeps vigil, from afar. What would you have done? Hold him in your arms and offer as much comfort as you could? Or would you spare the child your own grief, and pain and allow the mercy of unconsciousness to come without hearing your anguish? Don't accuse Hagar of callousness too quickly. In the first instance she is victim, not villain.

Can anything help this mother, this child?

A desert shrub, not so remarkable, not so unique, bears witness to God's intervention.

Ishmael's name "God hears" predicts God's action. God hears—hears the child, the mother. And God speaks, addressing her by name. "Hagar, do not be afraid". We recognize this as typical angel-speech. (Mary, Shepherds, ... do not be afraid) Her heart skips a beat, she raises her eyes to the sky: "Lift up the boy. Hold on to him." And the God she previously named as "The One Who Sees" causes her to see, see a well, a source of water, of life, appear by that not-so-special plant.

Lost, stranded in the desert? Do you know the children's book, "The Little Prince"? "What makes the desert beautiful, is that somewhere it hides a well" But the eyes are blind. One must look with the heart.

Islamic tradition portrays Hagar revered as the mother of faith, with more assertiveness, dignity, portraying her as actively, frantically seeking water, running back and forth through the desert from the foot of one mountain to another. On the seventh lap an angel appears to her, telling her that God will provide them with water. Indeed, God causes a spring to burst up from the ground under Ishmael's heel. Pilgrims at Mecca reenact this seven lap search as part of their ritual.

Hagar gives her son water; he, they survive, becoming desert dwellers. His mother finds him a wife from Egypt, and they multiply, populating the Arabian Peninsula, giving birth in the 6th century to followers of Mohammed. Moslems.

What do we do with this story from under the wilderness shrub?

Hagar is the symbol of the oppressed whom God sees. Whom God hears. Whom God saves. In fact, her story introduces this theme which will wend its way through Hebrew Scripture and the ministries of Jesus.

We barely know her name, her story, but in all the Bible, she is the first person visited by an angel.

She is the first woman to hear an annunciation of a birth.

She is the first person who dares to name the Deity.

She is the only woman who receives the promise of descendants.

Hers is the first pregnancy and child bearing story in scripture.

And yet, she is “stricken, smitten by God, afflicted for the transgressions of Israel. She is bruised for the iniquities of Sarah and Abraham, upon her is the chastisement that makes them whole.”
(Trible Texts of Terror. p28)

Hagar is a symbol of the oppressed, the outsider.

She is the exploited maid;

the black woman used by men and abused by women in the ruling classes;

she is the undocumented woman without legal recourse trying to provide for her family;

she is the “other woman”;

the divorced woman with children;

she is the homeless woman looking for shelter. Protection. Anywhere. Even under a scraggly bush.

The Desert Shrub's witness is that God continues to be with us when we feel abandoned to our wilderness, even seemingly abandoned by God. Hagar's experience reminds us that God's name, God's identity is, ultimately, one who Sees, and Hears and Comes. Sometimes by directing us to see the help that maybe right in front of us—like a well springing up.

The story is also a call to us when we exclude, oppress, want to push out those who threaten our security and comfort. Are we pushing out God along with the persons we fear? When Christians speak of treating all people equally, race, gender, marital status, sexual and gender orientation with dignity and respect, it's not a matter of political correctness. It has everything to do with how God treats all people, transcending the tradition, customs, boundaries and laws to hear and protect the abused, abandoned, misunderstood.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "If you're going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can't pick and choose who's going to be the sparrow. It's everybody." (*Christianity Today*, June 16, 1998, cited in *Homiletics*, June 1999)

And, yes, the story bears the seeds of the centuries old conflict between Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Abraham. Moslems. Jews. This story refutes claims that God only cares for the Jews, to the exclusion of Moslems. God is compassionate, merciful, present to all of Abraham's descendants. Jews, Moslems, Christians. This is a story without Us and Them, it is a story of Us, all recipients of God's blessing.

If this desert shrub, not so unique, not so special bush could speak..

I remember... the day, the day God Saw. God Heard. God Saved. You remember too.