

BMC: Genesis Journeys – God’s Promise is for the Oppressed (Hagar)

Good morning. In the life of a Pastor, there are many occasions to prepare sermons that aim to be relevant personally and corporately and for encouraging the faithful discipleship of the whole church community. When preparing a sermon, the preacher will ideally be listening for God’s Word for the community to which the sermon is addressed – listening for God’s Word in the words of scripture, listening for God’s Word in the witness of the Church throughout the ages, and listening for God’s Word in the words and experiences of the community to which they belong as a fellow disciple. The listening that the preacher does, however, is inevitably filtered through the life and experience of the preacher – something of their life and experiences and learnings will always come through the sermon, no matter how much the preacher may try to mute the influence of their own personal lives in the process. On the one hand, there are times that preachers should mute this personal element to their sermons – after all, a number of us could probably remember a preacher who spent way too much time talking about themselves, as if the sermon was about them. On the other hand, there are times in a preacher’s life when they shouldn’t mute this personal element, especially when the topic, the time of year, or the scripture text for the day is just so clearly related to their own life and experiences that to not mention the this would also be wrong.

The sermon for today was one of the latter experiences for me. This last Tuesday was the 4-year anniversary of my mother Esther’s passing. She died at the young age of 62 years old. This Sunday is also Eternity Sunday, a day when we remember those we have lost. In addition, this Sunday and last Sunday, we have been focusing on two important women in scripture, last week Sarah and this week Hagar. As I inevitably brought my own personal reflections about my mom into my sermon preparation, I couldn’t help but find myself drawn into the ways that my

Mom's story and Hagar's story intersect. Of course, there are many ways that they do not intersect – Hagar was an Egyptian slave who by all accounts was forcibly made a sister-wife to Sarah and forcibly made to carry Abraham's child. The text from Genesis gives us no indication of a loving relationship between Abraham and Hagar. I am so thankful that my own mother had a loving spouse in my Father, who cared for her and supported her throughout their life together. Where my mother's story does intersect with Hagar's as well as with Sarah's, is that her story belongs with the countless other stories of girls and women who have been subjected to abuse and assault in their lives. Scripture gives us a window into the abuse that Sarah and Hagar experienced in their adult life – for Sarah in Pharaoh's house and for Hagar in the house of Abraham and Sarah. Unfortunately, Sarah's own abuse in Pharaoh's house did not keep her from later perpetrating abuse on Hagar. My mother's abuse was different from these women in that it took place during childhood, although the impact was lifelong, and the trauma never left her body.

Speaking about abuse is, of course, difficult, but it is so important, especially in the church, where we talk about the God who lifts up the lowly and brings down the powerful; especially in the church, where we talk often about the importance of truth and justice. As Carol Penner, who teaches on abuse issues and who recently spoke here has noted, abuse is certainly not absent from the church; in fact, the church “ironically house[s] all kinds of violence,” including abuse.¹ We live in a time, thank God, where broader trends in our culture are helping to raise awareness of the many ways that abuse has been perpetrated and kept hidden in the church. We are also working to be increasingly prepared to confront violence when we see it, to

¹ *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, p.1.

hold perpetrators to account, and to support survivors with what they need to move forward. That said, admittedly we still have a lot to learn and a long way to go.

As I broach the topic of abuse this morning, I recognize that I stand up here as a privileged person. I have myself never experienced abuse. Given this, I hasten to say that I don't presume to speak this morning *for* Sarah or Hagar or any other victim of abuse and nor will I speak *for* my mother. There are many important underrepresented women's voices that need their experiences to be heard on the topic of abuse, and, as a starting point, we would do well to look at some of the voices included in this book (*Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*). What I will do for the remainder of my time this morning, is speak from my own location and experience, and in this case, I do so as the son of a mother who belongs to the history of those who have been abused. In this way, as I entered the scripture reading for this morning, I discovered that my story intersects with some of the strands of Ishmael's story as Ishmael too was the son of a woman who experienced abuse.²

And so, as I struggled with knowing how to speak to you a Word from God through the words of scripture about Hagar, I decided that the best way I could do it was through a creative medium in the form of a letter, a letter I have imagined as written by Ishmael to Hagar sometime after Hagar had passed away. I imagine this letter as Ishmael's way of coming to terms with some of his memories and express both his grief over the abuse his mother suffered and his gratitude for the strength and resilience his mother showed in her life. The letter, as I have imagined it, is a way of using scripture to draw us into Hagar and Ishmael's story, and to help us see the ways that God's promise is inclusive of, and indeed is perhaps especially for, the oppressed. The letter is also a way to help us see that our calling, as inheritors of the promise of

² Of course, I do not presume to identify with many of Ishmael's experiences either.

God, is to be a blessing by standing up to the injustice we encounter in the world and standing with the oppressed. The letter is of course also personal, a way for me to “read” the bible as an entryway into the difficult and beautiful drama of human lives like mine and yours, the drama here of mother and son. So, now, without further ado: a letter written from Ishmael to Hagar, sometime after Hagar had passed away.

Dear Mom (Hagar),

You’ve been gone now a year, but it feels like yesterday that you were here with me in Paran, watching your grandkids play in the sand. You wouldn’t believe how much they have grown up since you have left us. Nebaioth is really living into his role as the eldest, taking care of his youngest siblings. You only had a short time to see little baby Kedemah, but he is already walking quite ably on his own and has lots to talk about. As I watch my children grow, I think of you a lot – of the loving Mother you were and the many good times we had together. I think of how protective you were of me. My mind often goes back to that fateful day in the desert of Beer-sheeba when we ran out of water and almost perished after being sent away from home by Sarah. In my dehydrated state, lying under a bush, I could hear you call out to God amidst your weeping. You were weeping for *me*, yes, fearing that I would die, but I know your wellspring of sorrow burst from out of the layers of trauma you had carried over the years. It wasn’t the first time I had seen or heard you crying like that. You had been through a lot: coming from Egypt as a slave, given to Abraham without your consent, made to carry a child as a surrogate mother. I can’t imagine how difficult that all must have been and what you did to survive as you experienced abuse from Sarah before and after I was born.

I remember you told me once that you tried to run away with little me growing inside of you – but you heard God tell you to go back. Even though it’s possible that going back kept you from dying in the wilderness alone, I’ll never understand how God could ask you to do that. I still think it would have been better had you been able to get away somewhere safe and I’m so thankful that eventually you did get away from that toxic situation, taking me with you. But later you told me that you encountered God on that day by the spring on the way to Shur, and that God acknowledged your suffering and made promises to you, promises to “greatly multiply your offspring.” I think I remember you even saying that *you gave God a name* that day: “The God who Sees Me.” I knew even later in life, as you shared your stories of abuse, how important it was that you were believed – that you were *seen* and *heard* in your suffering and in your strength as a survivor. I guess that’s why you called God “The God who Sees Me” on that day, and I guess that’s why you called me Ishmael – “God has heard” – heard your cries at night, heard your longings of a better future, free from harm, free to raise your family in peace.

We eventually did find a better future, although it wasn’t without its significant challenges too. We had a relatively stable life together as a family in Paran, despite the fact that your trauma continued to impact your physical and mental health, as well as your sense of safety around others. You did your best as a parent, and I always felt loved by you. Boy was I a lot to put up

with though – sorry about that. You seemed to take it in stride, though. I’ll never forget how, whenever I would act up or fight with my friends, you would reprimand me and after seeing that I was feeling sufficiently remorseful, you would jokingly remind me of another thing God told you on that day by the spring when you were still pregnant with me. You would mutter under your breath: “I guess God was right, you really are a wild ass of a man.” I laugh now when I think of that. I hope now, though, now that I am a grown man, that whatever wildness is in me is being harnessed for fighting for the good – I hope I can live at odds with those who perpetrate abuse and oppression and live in peace with those who do good.

I went back to Mamre recently upon hearing the news of Father’s death. 175 years old. Isaac and I buried him east of the old homestead. There were a lot of mixed feelings at that funeral. I’m still so angry at him for the way he mistreated you. I know it might sound strange and I don’t know how you would feel about it, but I thought I should let you know that Isaac and I were able to reconcile while at the funeral. We both knew that we couldn’t let the sins of our Father hold sway over us and make us lifelong enemies. I hope we can remain friends and be better men and raise children that pursue justice and blessing for the nations.

I don’t know what else to say, Mom. I love you and I miss you every day, and if there is any chance that this letter reaches you somehow through the vastness of time and space, I want you to know how grateful I am to have had you as my mother. Today and as long as I live, I will always see you as a strong survivor and as a beautiful gift to the world.