

Genesis 16:1-16

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Hagar Discarded

You might need to take a bath after this sermon. I mean as sordid as Genesis 16 is, wait till we look into Genesis 12, 13, 14 and 15. Let's put it this way, if Abraham and Sarah had sent their saliva off to Ancestry.com, they would have very surprising results coming back. With not a lot of branches in the tree, honestly. And there's also sexual slavery, violence, and abuse. Welcome to church everybody!

Let's look at this in 3 Scenes.

Scene 1: The Sordid Backstory.

Let's start with this: Abraham and Sarah share the same father. We don't learn about that until Genesis 20. When they travel to Egypt due to famine, Sarah's beauty became a liability for Abraham. Because Pharaoh takes what he wants.

Abraham prioritized his fear of death over Sarah's protection and tells Pharaoh, "She's my sister," which isn't false. Let's be clear: He knowingly sold her to a man who would use her for sex. Hip Hop speak: she was "pimped out." Sarah is a survival of sexual violence, sexual abuse and her partner is complicit.

Sarah's body made Abraham a very wealthy man.

After leaving Egypt with great wealth, Genesis 13-15 unfolds with God telling Abraham that He will be a God to him and his descendants, who will be scattered and prosperous. However, the promised children were still not materializing. And now we're ready to read Genesis 16:1. Sarah had no children. But she had a slave. Courtesy of Pharaoh.

And so she has Hagar, who was 1) female in a patriarchal culture 2) an Egyptian, so ethnically inferior in the culture and 3) a slave, just an object to be used. And so, Sarah, as is often the case, goes from victim to perpetrator.

Richard Rohr likes to say if we don't transform our pain, we will transmit it onto others. As Sarah does.

Imagine Hagar. She's taken out of Egypt. "Your name now is Foreigner. Your name is Stranger." And it's not even a feminine name, it's a male name. But her female body will be colonized to gestate the hopes of Abraham and Sarah.

And you know what, it “works,” the way things “work” in any oppressive social construct. The way things tend to “work” when we get sick of waiting.

A child *is* born. But Sarah rejects this child, rejects Hagar, and then blames Abraham for her idea. Talk about a master class in gaslighting. After being dealt with “harshly,” a word used for “rape” in other contexts, Hagar rightly runs away, because running away is sometimes your only option. Hagar may not know what else to do, but she knows she has to get out.

Scene 2: The Intervention.

Hagar is discarded and alone. Damaged goods in her culture.

And then we have this God figure in verse 8 come in: “Where have you come from and where are you going?”

Such powerful questions. And before asking those questions, the messenger of God addresses her by name and predicament: “Hagar, slave girl of Sarah.” God knows her pain, knows her story. God is not looking for new information. God is reaching out in relationship.

And the first thing that God says to her is really problematic.

“Go back to Sarah and submit to her.”

NOPE, would have been my response.

“Go back to your abuser.” You will never be told that by this pastor, or this church.

I wouldn’t blame Hagar for saying “hard pass.” I can’t undo that tension in the story.

But perhaps something deeply mystical has happened here. In this moment, Hagar feels deeply seen and known, which gives her the courage to trust God against all odds. If you don’t know that you are seen, known, and loved by God, how could you ever trust God with your life?

In verse 13, Hagar becomes the first person in the Bible to name God, calling Him El-ro-ee, “the God who sees.” Before Abraham names God “Jehovah Jireh,” and David calls God “El Shaddai,” it is Hagar, a female Egyptian slave, who recognizes God as the one who sees her——and us.

In 2010, performance artist Marina Abramović spent three months sitting in a chair at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. Seven days a week, for six hours each day, she faced an empty chair, drawing over 1,500 visitors to her exhibit.

And people were invited to come and sit. As she looked into their eyes. And they cried. What caused those reactions? It's the power. The mystery. The impact. Of being seen. Of being known.

Because if you begin to believe that God sees you like Hagar, you will — maybe against all the odds — trust God with your life. Finally, someone who sees me. Let me tell you.

To the single mom or single dad struggling to make it on your own ...

To the person with a serious illness that you haven't told anyone about ...

To the person who doesn't know how you're going to make it financially this month

...

To the person who is married but incredibly lonely ...

To the person who didn't plan on being single this long ...

To the person who's been holding a secret that has negatively impacted you for years

...

To the person who's been rejected ...

To the person riddled with shame ...

To the person battling addiction ...

To the person who is black/brown skinned in a world designed for whiteness ...

To the person who has suffered rejection from family because of who they are ...

God sees you. And being seen heals.

Scene 3: The Invitation.

It's an invitation to allow yourself to be seen by God, so you can see others.

And as Jesus' followers, this is what we should do as well, because Jesus saw everybody, especially those overlooked.

God asks Hagar, "Where have you come from? Where are you going?" Those are good questions to ask if you want to really "see" someone with compassionate curiosity.

One step further: Are you seen by yourself?

Because I can tell you, for some of you, your own self terrifies you. But when you find yourself, you know what you will find? You will find God. Who has been there all

along loving you with compassion. As God does right now in the midst of your life unraveling.

At a retreat a few years ago, I was led in a guided meditation called “The Compassionate Friend,” which encouraged us to envision someone in our lives who embodies compassion. Instantly, I thought of my wife, Terely, as I sat in silence with my eyes closed.

But then something happened. In my mind's eye, in what was becoming a trance for me, Terely receded, and a 7-year-old version of myself came into the view. And I talked with 7-year-old Fred, who was part of an anxious, violent family system with all the slamming doors and the fists going through a door and afraid of everything. And who was molested at 5 and 6 years old.

And in this moment, with my eyes closed, 7-year-old Fred says to me:

It's going to be all right. It's going to be OK.

As he started to recede, I said, “You have to give me something.” Seven-year-old Fred pulled out my old rabbit's foot — a soothing talisman I hadn't thought about in years. Then the retreat leader broke the silence, saying, “Whoever this compassionate friend is, recognize that it's you.” When I opened my eyes, tears streamed down my face and soaked my shirt.

Terely, my wife can be very compassionate with me. God knows I need her to be.

But who can be more compassionate to me than the 7-year-old version of myself who knows what I went through?

Because as you began to really know and see yourself, you will see that God has been there all along.

Waiting. Waiting.

Feeling invisible? God sees you. Entirely. God loves you fiercely. No more hiding, no need to hide.

Amen.