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# The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Genesis 21:8-21



One of the most successful, popular, and longest-running game shows in American history is “Family Feud.” Created by Mark Goodson in 1976, the show—as you are probably aware—features two families trying to outdo the other in guessing the top 5 or 6 responses to various survey questions previously posed to 100 survey-takers. So, for instance, the host (Steve Harvey) begins each round with a prompt like: “Based on a survey of 100 American adults, name a bad job for someone who is afraid of heights.” Or, “Based on a survey of 100 American adults, name something you might eat with a hamburger.” And then the families try to guess the top 5 or so responses to that particular prompt.

Now, imagine that we’re all on set playing “Family Feud: Hebrew Bible Edition.” Steve Harvey calls your name, and he says: “Based on a survey of 100 American adults, name an important character in the Hebrew Bible.” What would you say? Who would you name?

While I have not taken the time to survey 100 American adults on this question, my guess would be that the top 4 or 5 names would include figures like: Moses, David, Abraham, maybe Adam or even Noah. And if you, like me, are thinking of these sorts of figures, you are right; these are certainly significant Hebrew Bible individuals. But there’s another person, almost entirely overlooked, whose significance—in a very specific way—outshines all of the brilliance of Moses, David, and the other famous guys. I would venture to guess that virtually no one, neither here this morning nor in a random survey of 100 Americans, would respond to the Family Feud prompt by saying the name of Hagar. And yet, as we will see this morning, it is Hagar, a most unlikely individual, who is given the privilege of doing something unique and unparalleled throughout the rest of the Bible.

So who is Hagar, and what does she do that makes her so unique and special amongst all the other remarkable biblical figures?

Hagar appears primarily in two main chapters of the Bible: Genesis 16 and, our reading this morning, Genesis 21. Literally, “Hagar” is not a person’s name but means “the foreigner, the alien”: “ha-” (the) + “gar” (alien) = “the alien.” Not only vulnerable due to her foreignness, Hagar is, for the writers of Genesis, the epitome of a marginalized person: she is marginalized and

vulnerable in just about every way imaginable: besides being a foreigner, Genesis also tells us that she is an Egyptian—implying that she is dark-skinned. Furthermore, she is a woman; she is enslaved to Sarah and Abraham; and if all this were not enough, we learn from Genesis 16 that she is sexually exploited by Abraham, in Abraham’s quest for a child. Then, to make matters even worse, Genesis 16 also tells us that once Abraham impregnated Hagar, Sarah (Abraham’s wife) jealously abused her, so much so that Hagar fled for her life into the barren desert.

It’s hard to imagine a more vulnerable person: a dark-skinned woman from a disdained people group (the Egyptians), an enslaved foreigner who is sexually used and then physically abused by her masters, who flees pregnant and utterly destitute into the desert, effectively choosing death in the desert for herself and her unborn child rather than to continue risking her life in Abraham’s abusive home.

In Genesis 16, it is at this very point, this most hopeless moment in Hagar’s life, when she is all alone in the wilderness, that God shows up. And as God is rather infamous for doing, God opens the conversation with Hagar in a very unusual way: God asks Hagar two questions which God surely already knows the answers to. God calls out to Hagar, “Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?” (Gen. 16:8). This stops Hagar in her tracks. Just imagine Hagar, pregnant, bruised, beaten, secretly hurrying away from Abraham’s home: running, stumbling, falling, and getting back up again, she cannot get away fast enough. She’s going deeper and deeper into the desert, further and further away from the site of her abuse, yet tragically closer and closer to her certain death amidst the barren wilderness. And as she continues to stumble her way through the rocky, sandy terrain, suddenly all alone in the vast desert, a voice breaks through the silence: the voice of God calling out to her, asking Hagar where she is coming from and where she is going.

This voice, in itself, probably saves Hagar’s life because it causes her first to stop running into the wilderness, and second, it begins a conversation between Hagar and God in which God tells Hagar two main pieces of information. Once God has gotten Hagar’s attention through the odd questions about her travel plans, God essentially tells Hagar, “I’ve got good news and bad news.” God begins with the bad news: “You’ve got to go back to Sarah and Abraham,” God says. “I know you don’t want to, but

you've got to." God doesn't give Hagar any reasons why she has to do this most difficult task (although presumably Abraham's encampment is the only place in that wilderness region where Hagar can find any food or water). Nevertheless, God doesn't explain the reasons; God just says "go back." That's the bad news, but then God counters this with the good news: "I will be with you"—and even more than this—"I will bless you." God tells Hagar that God will give her innumerable descendants, which communicates both that God will be with Hagar, that she can rely on God to care for her, and also that God will give her a special blessing, the "innumerable offspring" blessing given only to really important figures like Abraham.

It's at this point in Hagar's story, after God has met her in the desert and told her both the good and bad news, that a most remarkable thing happens, something which sets Hagar apart from all other characters in the Bible, something that merits Hagar's inclusion on that "Family Feud" board of important biblical figures. After God has concluded God's speech, in Genesis 16:13, Hagar then says to God, "You are El Roi, the God who sees me; I have now seen the one who sees me." This is an unparalleled statement for multiple reasons: not only does Hagar tell us that God is the one who sees people like her (a pregnant, foreign, abused woman), not only does Hagar tell us that she has seen God and lived to tell about it (something that God later will tell Moses is impossible: anyone who sees God should automatically die), but even more impressive and remarkable than these two things is the fact that here in this statement, Hagar names God. Hagar gives God a name: "El Roi," the "God who sees me."

"What's so important about Hagar giving God a name?," you might say. "I can make up all sorts of pious names for God." No, the writers of the Hebrew Bible are telling us something very significant here: in the entire Bible, Hagar alone is the person authorized, entrusted, commissioned to give a name to God. Names in ancient Israel were extremely important: names were understood to express the very identity, the essence, of the named individual. Names were so highly regarded and so associated with one's identity that they became the basis for mighty invocations that used the names of exalted figures like God, and later Jesus, to access supernatural power to heal the sick and cast out demons.

So when the authors of the Genesis portray Hagar—and

Hagar alone—as the person qualified to bestow a name upon God, what are they saying? They’re telling us that it this most marginalized person, the most vulnerable person imaginable in ancient Israel, who can truly see God’s identity, God’s values. It is not the biblical scholar or even the most pious believer but instead this marginalized, abused person who knows God—who knows God’s character, nature, and identity; who knows God’s very name better than Abraham, Sarah, Moses, or any of the other much more powerful and famous figures of the Bible.

There’s a certain irony in the fact that history doesn’t know Hagar’s actual name (remember, “Hagar” simply means “that foreigner”), yet “that foreigner” knows God’s name, perceives God’s identity, at a depth and degree that enables “that foreigner” alone, out of all the hundreds of biblical characters, to identify God by name.

Why is it the case, we might wonder, that the name, the identity, the character and nature of God is known only to “that foreigner” among us?

Genesis doesn’t spell it out, but seems to suggest that it is Hagar’s very vulnerability which is the key to her insight into God’s nature. We might often wonder where God is, why we don’t hear from God or see God, why God is seemingly so silent, so uninvolved in the troubles of our lives, communities, society, planet. Yet the fact is that God is where God’s always been, revealing Godself to the Hagers of the world. When Hagar was running into the desert in Genesis 16, God came to her, started a conversation with her, and, as Hagar herself says, God “saw” her, and she saw God. In our passage this morning from Genesis 21, Hagar again is in the desert, this time not out of choice but because she has been sent there, essentially to die with her young son, and once again, in the midst of deadly, desperate circumstances God shows up: while Genesis 16 says that God “saw” Hagar, Genesis 21 says that God “heard” the sound of her little boy crying. Once again, God begins a conversation with Hagar with a seemingly obvious question, “What’s the matter, Hagar? What troubles you?” Once again, God follows these odd questions with a strong word of reassurance: “Do not be afraid, stand up, I will be with you.”

It’s not that God is unconcerned or uninterested in the privileged, but that the marginalized have a unique perspective and ability, and perhaps even calling, to name God, to tell us who

God is and what God stands for. Because it's the Hagar's who are out in the desert, and the desert is a very quiet place. The desert is also a very deadly, dangerous, scary, and threatening place, but that very vulnerability creates the conditions of silence and solitude—and often desperation—needed to hear God's voice, to perceive God's deeds, to recognize God's presence among us.

So if we want to know God, we would do well to learn from those Hagar's—"those foreigners"—we tend to overlook because they are by definition the marginalized, those at the edges of society's interest, care, and attention.

How might we learn from those Hagar's—"those foreigners"—whose very vulnerability offers them a unique window into the heart of God? Some practical suggestions: this summer—

- Read a biography of an oppressed person who followed God's lead in resisting that oppression, someone like Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth;
- Attend an African-American church service;
- Support equitable pay and affordable housing initiatives; learn about and support anti-discrimination efforts in pay, housing, education, and other areas;
- Attend a BLM event or rally;
- Volunteer at a local homeless shelter or food pantry;
- Contact Melanie MacFarlane about volunteering for Partakers, the prison ministry at MCI Concord;
- This afternoon, google the Poor People's Campaign and discover how you could get involved; and,
- Creatively come up with your own ideas for how you might help out and learn from modern-day Hagar's.

In a few moments, we will have the joyous privilege of celebrating the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and as Baby Campbell is baptized this morning, we also will have the opportunity to reaffirm our Baptismal Covenants. In doing so, we will pledge to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves," and we will promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being." How better to honor our promises before God than to get to know some present-day Hagar's, to build relationships with them, and perhaps to be surprised by what God might teach us through them.

Finally, as I conclude, we also would do well to pay attention to those most vulnerable, ragged edges of our own lives. While we each might not be Hagar in an ethnic or socioeconomic sense, perhaps we know Hagar's vulnerability as we face illness, or addiction, or loneliness, or fear. Those desperate, desert-like Hagar moments are precisely the moments when we are best able to glimpse God's presence and hear God's voice: "What are you doing, Joe?," God compassionately asks. "Why are you here?" "Where are you going?" "Turn around," God says, "go back, trust in me: I will be with you, so do not be afraid." Amen.

