

“Women Rising”

*Part V of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21

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From the Pulpit

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I am honored to be with you today. I am grateful to your pastor, Dr. Tim, for this invitation. It's a privilege to call him colleague AND friend.

This morning, in this sermon series on Race and Racism, I would like to explore a story that does not always get a lot of attention, about a relationship between two women, one man and God. For God is often, if not always, in the midst of our human relationships.

“Woman Rising”

Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21

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*Let’s pray and then we can talk further. God of our weary years.
God of our silent tears, God who has brought us safe thus far.
Thank you for these moments that are yours and ours to share.*

*Now God, I am standing your promises that you would stand up
in me, when I stood up on your behalf. Allow the words of my
mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable...*

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I won’t read the text from Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21, (but suggest at your leisure sometime, that you read this text, its worthy of at least a 6 week bible study on the several themes) but simply will retell the biblical story of two women, one man and God. It is a story that runs parallel to the experience’s African American women during the period of chattel slavery in the United States.

Christian and Muslim African Americans have, for the most part, placed scripture and the biblical text at the center of their faith traditions. Scripture is God's divine word for living.

The story in Genesis 16 and 21 is an "ancestral story" that mirrors the experience of enslaved African women in this country. It has at times been preached in the context of finding God in the Wilderness (another theme in African American history). It has been preached in the context of legalism as found in the book of Galatians 4:21-31. It has even been explored in the context of Islam and the bible, as Hagar and Ishmael appear in the Islamic tradition as foundational to Islamic faith traditions.

For more than 200 years, African Americans have appropriated the biblical figure of Hagar. She has appeared in the literature, social science, historical, anthropological and theological sources:

Edmonia Lewis – 19th century African American sculpture carved a famous Statue – Hagar in the Wilderness.

Ex-slave **Susie King Taylor** – in her narrative tells of her grandmother who named one of her children – Hagar Ann.

The poet, **Paul Lawrence Dunbar**, in 1906 wrote about the Members of the Afro American Sons of Hagar Social Club.

Richard Wright – referred to the African American family as Hagar’s children.

Maya Angelou’s poem, *The Mothering Blackness*, alludes to the woman as “black as Hagar’s daughters.”

Our beloved, **Toni Morrison**, whose passing we continue to mourn, named one of her characters, Hagar, in *Song of Solomon*.

Many others, known and unknown, have lifted up Hagar and the theme of survival struggle.

However, this morning my perspective comes from the womanist¹ theologian, Dr. Delores Williams, and her work: *Sisters in the Wilderness: The challenge of God-Talk*.

African American Christians have appropriated biblical stories and personalities and their experiences as sources for models of faith, courage and hope as a promise that God participates in the human struggle for freedom.²

For black women, Hagar’s story is a “haunting one”. It represents for the black woman, sexual and economic exploitation, trauma and violence at the hands of her Hebrew mistress. Like slave women, Hagar – a female slave of African

¹ Womanist is a term derived from the word “womanism” created by Alice Walker in her work, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.” In essence it means the behavior of a young black girl who is “acting” grown – like a woman.

² Delores Williams, page 171, Hagar, Sarah and Their Children.

descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother for to her owner's son and who was abandoned in the wilderness as a homeless single mother.

This story has been the story of many of our great, great grandmothers, great grandmothers and yes, even grandmothers. It has elements of my own maternal grandmother and my mother's stories as women who worked as domestics.

It may not be fair to make this story carry the total weight of race relations in the modern world, yet many aspects of the "themes" of this text find similarity within our historical context of these 400 years of Africans in America. I am two generations away from the women who worked as domestics.

And if I really tell the truth, I remember those times when I went to work with my mother as a teen and young adult, to help my mom serve holiday parties when I was in college and home on vacation to earn a little spending money.

The appropriation of this story has been foundational for black women doing theology, especially Delores Williams who sought to create a theology that was inclusive of women, and men and children – the entire African American community.

What is important to note here is that, Williams was perhaps one of the strongest critics of Black Liberation Theology and Black Theology, developed by James Cone in the 1960s. James Cone, known as the father of Black Liberation Theology created the model of liberation theology *as a cultural lens through which to examine not only the biblical text but also to interpret theological standpoints on the issue of social justice*. Dr. Cone trained as a systematic theologian writes these words:

“a gospel when interpreted that has nothing to do with Black people’s struggle for cultural identify and political justice is antithetical to the central message of the Gospel – liberation.”³

Delores Williams and other women theologians, said it was a theology with limitations as far as black women are concerned, because it did not consider the context of women’s lives and experiences. Therefore, issues of gender, sexual orientation and exploitation, poverty and economics were not inclusive.

Hagar’s experience in the wilderness is symbolic to the living reality of many African American women and children who live in conditions of peril here and now. A single mom abandoned and alone (but for God) has spoken to generations of women in our culture. She has appeared in poems, sculptures, sermons, stories, painting (and soon to appear in a

³ James Cone, I Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, 2018, pp. 59 - 64

piece of fiber art), and a reminder of the suffering endured by generations of black women.

I want to share with you this morning, a few take aways or themes from this story.

- 1) **Faith** – A faith tradition that has undergirded women’s faith and belief that God sees, hears and is involved in our struggle for survival, it provides HOPE in times of trouble.
- 2) **A method of biblical interpretation** – womanism or womanist theology – a special lens that includes black women’s traditions and practices as a way of biblical interpretation. It is different from feminist theology (a theology of predominantly white women) and black theology (a theology predominately practiced by black men) because it includes the full dimension and unique oppressions of black women.
- 3) **The theme of resilience** in the midst of suffering and trauma.

Faith in God’s Presence: Hagar and Ishmael are alone in the desert; banished from the household of Sarah and Abraham, God found Hagar and told her to return. God gave her a promise almost identical to the promise made to Abraham. God promised to make her descendants “too

numerous to count.” The name Ishmael in Hebrew means, God hears, for the Lord has heard of your misery. Hagar is the ONLY person in the whole Bible to name God. To give God a name – she shows amazing agency and power in this poignant moment of encounter with the divine. “You are the Living One who sees me.”

Fast forward fifteen years to Genesis 21 – which takes us back to the story of Ishmael. Isaac’s birth to Sarah, now causes jealousy with Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Again, Sarah demands that Hagar and her now teenage son be banished to the desert. No resources – no food and no water - perhaps the equivalent of a small bottle of water and a granola bar in the middle of the Sonora desert. It appears that both mother and son will perish in the wilderness, so Hagar leaves her son under a bush and goes a way off so that she won’t have to witness his death. Like any mother, she weeps and sobs as mother’s do, with love for her child. One again, the Genesis storyteller uses word play on Ishmael’s names to make the point, God heard the boy crying – which is like saying – God heard the boy named God’s hers. “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees a well of water. She fills a skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

Finding water in the desert, is about surviving against all the odds. Making a way out of no way. My grandmother would say, “He may not come when you want Him, but He is always on time.

So many black women have felt moments of despair where there just did not seem to be a way out. Struggling to protect our children, especially our boys whose very lives seem to be in peril beginning at birth. And even when they reach adulthood, which many of us used to think – “we can breathe now.” Grown, out of high school or college, or the military or on their way to making it – only to be confronted with the peril of “I can’t breathe” because it does not matter their age or situation, the lives of our sons and our daughters **are still in jeopardy.**

Hagar and Ishmael model for generations of African American women, that in spite of poverty, trying to hold the family together, make a living for herself and her child with only God by her side.

In the theme of resilience in the midst of suffering and trauma.

Resilience in the midst of suffering and generational trauma resonates across the generations of black women. I am reminded of the life of Maya Angelou who tells of her own story of rape and abuse as a child and young adult. In, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She shared a story that was the story of so many women who could not find their voice to tell of their experiences of violence and sexual exploitation. Generational trauma that has been passed down from one generation to another because women and to “generations yet unborn.” *Caged Bird* was like a breath of fresh air for some who were able to say – that’s my story too. Perhaps if she [Maya] could get better – then so can I. Healing can and does take place when we are able to see ourselves in the lived experiences of others. Renita Weems writes, “at some time in all our lives, whether we are black, white, Latina, or whatever our ethnicity, two women involved with the same man and both have his children, we need another woman, who is “just a sister away” to sister us and not exploit us.

In the midst of suffering, there are no easy answers. Why we suffer or why some people suffer more than others. Ishmael and Hagar bear witness that God is not impersonal or impassive, without feeling or emotion. God is with us in our struggles against all odds, to make a way out of no way. In the

midst of trials and tribulations, God is watching. God invites us to offer a cup of water to one in need and to welcome the stranger. There are just no easy answers to the suffering – I don't know much, but what I do know I know for sure... We can sing ... Our mothers, and grandmothers had a song. A song and a text – I don't know if Hagar had a song...but if she did...I imagine that she might have sung, *His Eye is on the Sparrow – and I know He Watches Me.*

Sister Rosetta Tharpe sang it in 1951.

Ethel Waters sang it in 1952.

Mahalia Jackson sang it in 1956.

Carmen McRae said it in 1958.

George Beverly Shea sang it in 1959.

Marvin Gaye said it in 1968.

Tennessee Ernie Ford said it in 1975.

Jennifer Holiday sang it in 1986.

Lauryn Hill and Kirk Franklin sang it in 1993.

Andy Griffith sang it in 1997.

Gladys Knight sang it at Michael's funeral in 2009.

Ron Isley sang it at Aretha's funeral in 2018.

And I, mother of three sons, continue to sing it in 2019.

His Eye is on the Sparrow and I know He watches me.

You ask me why I can sing in the midst of trials and tribulations. I sing because I am happy. I sing because I am free.

God's eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me!

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TEXT

Genesis 16: Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not been able to bear children for him. But she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed with Sarai's proposal. ³ So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram had settled in the land of Canaan.)

⁴ So Abram had sexual relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant. But when Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress, Sarai, with contempt. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "This is all your fault! I put my servant into your arms, but now that she's pregnant she treats me with contempt. The Lord will show who's wrong—you or me!"

⁶ Abram replied, "Look, she is your servant, so deal with her as you see fit." Then Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that she finally ran away.

⁷ The angel of the Lord found Hagar beside a spring of water in the wilderness, along the road to Shur. ⁸ The angel said to her,

“Hagar, Sarai’s servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress, Sarai,” she replied.

⁹ The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority.”¹⁰ Then he added, “I will give you more descendants than you can count.”

¹¹ And the angel also said, “You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael (which means ‘God hears’), for the Lord has heard your cry of distress.¹² This son of yours will be a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey! He will raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live in open hostility against all his relatives.”

¹³ Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, “You are the God who sees me.”^[a] She also said, “Have I truly seen the One who sees me?”¹⁴ So that well was named Beer-lahai-roi (which means “well of the Living One who sees me”). It can still be found between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ So Hagar gave Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born.

Genesis 21:8-21

Hagar and Ishmael Are Sent Away

⁸ When Isaac grew up and was about to be weaned, Abraham prepared a huge feast to celebrate the occasion. ⁹ But Sarah saw Ishmael—the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar—making fun of her son, Isaac. ^[b] ¹⁰ So she turned to Abraham and demanded, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son. He is not going to share the inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won’t have it!”

¹¹ This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. ¹² But God told Abraham, “Do not be upset over the boy and your servant. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. ¹³ But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar’s son because he is your son, too.”

¹⁴ So Abraham got up early the next morning, prepared food and a container of water, and strapped them on Hagar’s shoulders. Then he sent her away with their son, and she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water was gone, she put the boy in the shade of a bush. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down by herself about a

hundred yards^[c] away. “I don’t want to watch the boy die,” she said, as she burst into tears.

¹⁷ But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, “Hagar, what’s wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. ¹⁸ Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants.”

¹⁹ Then God opened Hagar’s eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness. He became a skillful archer,²¹ and he settled in the wilderness of Paran. His mother arranged for him to marry a woman from the land of Egypt.

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