

## ***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

### *Deliverance Stories: Truth in the stories of the rejected*

Genesis 16:13-14

Rev. Tyler Amundson

July 14, 2019

Genesis 16:13-14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup>So she named the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” <sup>14</sup>Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

(Break for first service for response to God’s word)

Riverside chapel

There was once a land where people lived by a beautiful river. The people in that land would walk along the river banks every day. They listened to the water rushing. They caught the breeze in their faces. They tasted the refreshing water. They felt the rocky shore underfoot, watched the birds soaring and swooping, and heard the breeze rustling through the trees.

They were so overawed by the beauty of their riverside land that they felt a deep desire to praise and worship its creator. So they built a little chapel on the edge of the river. But when they went inside their chapel, they were sad to notice that they could no longer hear the water rushing or the sound of the wind, or see the birds soaring, or taste the water or feel the kiss of the breeze or the feeling of the banks under their feet.

To try to make up for this loss, they filled the chapel with their own words and songs in an attempt to recapture the magic of the mystery. But they disagreed about which words, which songs to use. Once united in community, they began to fragment into opposing

factions. Gradually more and more of them stopped going into the little chapel because they didn't find the creator's spirit there.

One little girl, however, kept on coming back, to sit there in the silence and the stillness. Years passed and she became a wise old woman. Every day she rejoiced in the wind and the rushing water of her riverside home and every day she spent a quiet half-hour in the chapel. People began to ask her why she did this.

"Well," she explained, "if I listen carefully to the deep stillness there in the chapel, I hear the wind and the rushing waters, the Eagles and the trees, right inside my heart, where they can never fade or die, and the creator spirit invites me to take a walk inside my soul. And the spirit seems to whisper: 'Outside, inside, I am everywhere: beyond you, within you, beside you, above you, below you, around you. There is nowhere that I am not. Be at home in me.'" <sup>1</sup>

Scripture is a challenging reality in the church of today with people in our culture beginning to use meaning for political gain. For us as Methodists, we need to take some time to understand what scripture means for us to understand our call from Christ and the story of what God is doing in our lives. Especially in a time when we aren't even sure what it means to be United Methodists anymore.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist way of being Christian loved dearly a passage found in 2 Timothy to understand the role of scripture in the community to help people seek holiness and connect with God together.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

---

<sup>1</sup> Modified from a story by Silf, Margaret. One Hundred More Wisdom Stories (pp. 19-20). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, <sup>17</sup> so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

While this might seemingly point to scripture meaning the entire Bible, as we receive it is all inspired by God. It is important to remember our current Bible was not put together until nearly 400 CE. This passage in 2 Timothy referred to the holy text of the community it was written for. A reminder that while we have one Bible now, that holy texts have change throughout time. They have taken time to come together and to be molded into what we have today.

John Wesley goes on to say, “We know, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know likewise that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every [person’s] conscience.”<sup>2</sup>

Meaning for us as Christians there will be parts of our Bible that attach more closely to our own conscious, our own call from God to let go of those things that separate us from God, sin, and to embrace a creator and God who lets us know we are loved.

Wesley finally says in a commentary on 1<sup>st</sup> John “We love [God] because he first loved us” — is “the sum of the whole gospel.”

Meaning the thing we should go to the gospel with is an understanding first that God is love, and that God has loved us before the cosmos and will love us after.

Today we are working to understand liberation stories in the Bible. Our Bible is filled with countless tales of people who found themselves as slaves, or oppressed finding hope and new life. Our God seems to have a particular call for those people who feel condemned to a life of less

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/quinquag/WesleyEpistle1.html>

than human. Which may be some of the good news we all need, because at some point in our lives we all will be made to feel less than who God created us to be. The sins of the world tend to want to separate us from the God of love, and we need to know that like these characters in the Bible, God will show up for us too.

Scripture like the chapel built by the people on the beach too often becomes a hollow space where we cannot hear God any longer, and I think in our current age it is the liberated people who have given us some of the strongest reminder of the power of scripture. For they have had to seek in the chapters and stories a balm to heal their soul, while others of us have simply sought the rules and weapons to prove our rightness. Like the author of our study this summer, I suspect this is why Jesus said, “Matthew 7:7 Common English Bible (CEB)  
<sup>7</sup>“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

In America some of the richest theology comes from people of African descent whose theology developed as they saw empowerment from within the scriptures to stand up and say, “We are just as much a human as those with a lighter complexion.”

Allen Dwight Callahan observed,

“African slaves and their descendants discerned something in the Bible that was neither at the center of their ancestral cultures nor in evidence in their hostile American home, a warrant for justice in this world. They found woven in the texts of the Bible a crimson thread of divine justice antithetical to the injustice they had come to know all too well.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired (p. 39). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Martin Luther King Jr. used this very language to dream of a new nation that transformed us all as a people. We begin to struggle to understand what this might mean and we still struggle today as we face yet again another round of realizing the sins of our own culture. With the mass incarceration of another generation of African Americans and the incarceration of mass amounts of children in concentration camps along our border, and even here in Yellowstone County when we realize the deadly sins of human trafficking happening right here.

Sometimes we have to admit we continue the pain in our own time, that we thought we had thrown off long ago. Today after worship we are going to go outside and engage in an act of repentance. We are going to pour red sand in the sidewalk cracks to remember as pass by the narrow parts, the in-between parts of the shapes of our community that there are some people that slip between and are lost. This sand is to remind us of all those who are disappearing into a 21<sup>st</sup> century slave trade of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Lest we think these are not faces we know this is a picture of Marie, a 54 year old woman who is healing from generations of abuse. I encourage you to read more in Yellowstone Valley Woman's magazine from March and April of this year. Know that liberation is needed right here in our hometown. Marie's story is one of healing from this, but the time it takes to heal is 40 years or more in many cases. An estimated 1 out of 6 endangered runaways become human trafficking victims. There is repentance to do friends.

In the liberation stories there is buried a truth and for Marie it played out, 40 years is how long the people tend to wander in the wilderness. 40 is a sacred number. Sometimes it is 40 days of floating alone with a small population before God comes to clear the way. Sometimes we have to spend time lost amongst the wild beasts and chaos of the world, to know learn where God can possibly heal our lives. Then a small

child, a surprising character wakes us up to the fact that God is trying to liberate us all into a new kingdom, reality, and universe. God is trying to help us give birth to freedom and liberty for all God's creation.

People telling the story behind the story is part of the tradition of the scriptures. Jesus' ancestors did it, and so have we in sermons for 2 millennia. Our Jewish Brothers and Sisters call this story behind and between lines of scripture midrash.

Take for example our scripture from today, a young woman who is fully exploited dares to do something even the patriarchs of Israel could never do. Hagar dares to name the unnamable God. Hear now Hagar's story as our author for the study, Rachael Held Evans Tells it in a Midrash of her own:

#### THE WELL

Most of the time, God does the naming.  
Abraham. Isaac. Israel.

Just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar—foreigner, woman, slave.

I do not wish to be remembered as powerless, for power is the currency of men; but before the wilderness, before the naming, my station ranked me among the invisible. Dark skin and foreign tongue curried little favor in Beersheba, land of the Seven Wells, where warring tribes marked moments of peace by digging together for water.

I belonged to a woman blessed with all the things a woman wants—wealth, nobility, legendary beauty, and divine favor—but not the thing a woman in an unsettled territory needs: a womb that can carry a boy. Sarah wore her laugh lines like jewelry. She told stories better than anyone I've ever known. The desert wind sent her white hair dancing and carried her unmistakable peals of laughter through the

arid atmosphere like rain. Old and young, men and women, slave and free ventured to her tent for advice on breeding goats, arranging marriages, spicing food, and offering prayers. And yet, in our world, they called this woman barren.

I had the misfortune to belong to a woman who believed the wrong name.

So she gave my body to Abraham. Long as I live I will never forget how casually she informed me of my duty, rattled off at the end of a list of linens to gather and food to prepare. You will think me callous for not being more angry, more resistant to the charge before me, but bearing the child of a tribal leader, even in another woman's name, carried with it the possibility of more freedom, or at least a challenge to my expendability. The moment the old man rolled away from me—he never once looked me in the eye—I begged the gods of Egypt for a boy. If I survived the birth, I might even live to see him marry. Oh, I begged to every god in every language I knew.

A baby's movements don't begin as kicks, but as subtle, enigmatic flutters; they don't tell you that. So I doubted right until the morning when, lying on my side after another night of fitful dreams, I placed my hands on my belly and felt the sudden, certain impression of a heel. No woman can prepare for the awe of it, the overwhelming surge of joy and fear. Instinctively, I looked around for someone to tell, but of course, no one was there. Then came a second nudge, this one longer and firmer, as if to say, "Don't you dare think yourself alone, Mama; we're here in this world together." My baby had yet to take a breath of air, and already we shared a secret. That must have been the moment I started singing, little fractures of the lullabies I remembered from my mother—a woman whose skin, I think, smelled of saffron, and whose voice, I think, was soft and deep as a dove's. (The memories of slaves are dappled ones.)

Perhaps I sang a bit too loudly. Perhaps I carried myself with more confidence than before. Your scribes will say I grew contemptuous of my mistress, but your scribes never asked for my view of it. The only

thing I know is that for every day my belly grew rounder, Sarah's spirit grew stormier, a wind-assailed reed about to break. A slave expects harsh words and withheld rations, but the physical abuse surprised me. Taunts turned to slaps, barked orders to mule whips to the back. I would not have fled had she not threatened the baby's life; I want you to know that. I would not have taken the risk of running into the desert in the dead of night with only a jug of water and some stolen bread to sustain me had I not feared the worst. Abraham did nothing, of course; my mute idols even less. Did they even notice? Could they even see?

Your scribes will remember it as a silly women's spat, an anecdote to explain how this cursed land grew populated, but your scribes never carried a baby through the desert. Your scribes never knew the singular desperation of counting the hours from the last assuring kick.

I took the road to Shur, the closest thing I knew to home. But as the sun rose like a great unseeing eye over the fifth or sixth mile, and the weight on my pelvis numbed my legs, I collapsed into the dust.

Water gone, food regurgitated, blood streaking down my thighs, I waited there to die . . . or to deliver . . . or both. Who will find my body? I wondered. And what story will they tell of it?

Then, on the rippling horizon: a well!

I crawled to it, plunged my face in. I think I must have fainted there, or slept.

All I know is when I opened my eyes, a stranger stood beside me—a presence neither male nor female, neither Egyptian nor Hebrew, neither safe nor threatening—and in a voice that sounded like my mother's, spoke:

"Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?"

This stranger knew my name.

"I am fleeing from my mistress," I answered. What could I say of where I was going?

"Go back to Sarah," the stranger said. "But do not be afraid. Not only will this child live, but through him I will give you a whole nation of

descendants, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, too numerous to count.”

I cannot tell you why, but immediately I believed. This stranger with the voice of a dove spoke with the authority of God.

“Your son will grow into a fighter,” God said, “a wild donkey of a man. But even as he struggles, he will survive. Call him Ishmael, for it means ‘God hears,’ and God has heard you in your misery today.”

In spite of everything, I smiled at the part about the donkey, for already I knew how that boy kicked. Every mama is something of a prophet.

You may think a prophecy of struggle and strife would dishearten a pregnant mother, but a slave does not struggle or strive; a slave only obeys. If the prophecy was true, it meant this boy, my Ishmael, would be free.

With what force I could muster, I rose to face God, the brightness of the sun obscuring both our faces. I knew it was the God of my mistress, whom she called Yahweh, but if I was to be the mother of a nation, I would need to give this God a new name.

“You are a God who not only hears, but also sees,” I said, surprised by the strength in my voice. “I have seen the One who sees me.”

So I named God as I named the well: El Roi, the God Who Sees.

And it was a name remembered, for as your Scripture reports, “That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi. It is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.”

Many of my sisters would draw from that well: the Hebrew midwives who defied Pharaoh by delivering the babies of slaves, the despised Samaritan who scandalized a town for daring to speak to the Messiah, the young women ripped from their homes in West Africa and shipped like livestock across the sea, the mamas who saw their boys lynched and the grandmas who saw their grandsons gunned down, the millions of black and brown people whose names the world has forgotten but whose God never failed to see, the fierce female

prophets and preachers who rose from the ashes of their suffering and dared, like me, to survive and to name. I, too, would return to it, years later when Sarah banished me to the wilderness again, this time with a little boy clinging to my legs.

My faith, like Abraham's, was tested. But my faith, unlike the patriarchs, was not immortalized in Caravaggio's reds or Chagall's blues for later generations to view, nor was it remembered in the litany of Hebrews or in the genealogies of your New Testament.

Yet just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar—foreigner, woman, slave.

Don't you dare forget.<sup>4</sup>

Friends, our God can liberate us from all those things that separate us from life and help us hear the sounds we long to hear again. This is only done sometimes when we clear out and make room for those hidden stories to remind us where we have gotten lost. Sometimes after 40 years we have to watch the next phase of life happen by standing back like Moses and letting the people go on without us. For others it may be after being in the wilderness and being oppressed they get to name God for us. I can tell you this from my work, it won't be the ones standing in the this place who name God, but the ones who we least expect, who have fallen into the cracks of society who will name God for us. Just like Hagar.

---

<sup>4</sup> Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (pp. 29-34). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.