

“Hagar and El-Roi”

Genesis 16: 1-15, 21: 2, 3, 9-19

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I was never supposed to become a minister. That was my father's profession and it seemed like good work to do, but it never occurred to me that I might do something similar with my own life. In college I was an English major and I assumed that after graduation I would follow the path of becoming a teacher or an editor. But that all changed my junior year of college when I took my last general education requirement: a religious studies course.

The course was the Introduction to the Old Testament. I chose that particular class because a friend tipped me off that the professor was one of those hippy types who didn't believe in being called “Professor” or “Doctor” and who didn't believe grading her students. She let you explain what grade you thought you deserved based on the work you did, and then that was the grade she assigned you. It sounded like an easy A. I don't remember what grade I ended up giving myself at the end of the semester—probably not an A, after all—but what I learned in that class has stayed with me more clearly than anything else I learned in college.

This is because it was in that class I was introduced to Hagar and she changed my life. Meeting Hagar through this class was such a transformative experience for me that even twelve years later, as I reflect on Hagar's story as a part of our “Encounters with God” preaching series, everything I want to tell you about Hagar and her encounter with God comes from that class. Everything I want to tell you today was first told to me by my professor, Tina Pippin. I'm sure the years that have passed since I sat in her class have altered my memory and the words I remember her saying are only paraphrased today, but everything I know about Hagar I still attribute to Tina.

On the first day of the Introduction to the Old Testament we were assigned to read Genesis and

to pay particular attention to the story of Hagar. I had never heard of Hagar. I knew the story of Abraham and Sarah, but I assumed Hagar was just a footnote in their epic journey. In class, as we made our way through Genesis, we were encouraged to ignore anything we read about Abraham and Sarah and focus only on Hagar. Tina wanted us to listen to Hagar and hear her side of the story. Once we had read it, together we made a list with two-columns that described Hagar's life—one column with the good things that happened to her and one with the bad things that happened.

There are a lot of bad things that happen to Hagar. She is a slave who is given to Abraham when his wife Sarah is unable to get pregnant. Hagar is seen as the solution to their infertility problems, and we can assume she probably did not have any choice in the matter. She becomes pregnant. Sarah was angry and jealous, so she does something harsh to Hagar. We don't know if it is physical or emotional abuse, but we know that it was harsh enough to make Hagar run away.

When Hagar is scared and alone in the wilderness, an angel of God appears before her. Finally! Something for the good column. This angel offers her protection and tells her that her unborn child, a son, will be wild and strong and through him her offspring will be more than she can count. And then the angel sends her back to Sarah. At this point there are arguments for the good and bad column. The bad is that Hagar was sent back to a place where she might suffer further abuse and would have to continue to be a slave. The argument for the good column is that at this time, as a pregnant woman with no family or husband, Hagar would have been in even more danger if she had returned to Sarah. It's messy and complicated, so that part goes in a little bit of both columns.

In part two of Hagar's story, her and Sarah each have a son by Abraham. Sarah once again becomes jealous, this time of Hagar's son Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away; more for the bad column. They are once again in the wilderness, and once again, God appears. She is told she does not have to return to Sarah. God will protect her and Ishmael. And Hagar is able to watch her son grow up and become a strong and powerful leader of his own nation. Score a big point for the good column.

Dividing Hagar's story into two columns was a simple enough exercise, but it showed us

something important. When we separated these events into good or bad, we were able to see that every single time there was something good, it was directly connected to an encounter with God. Every time there was hope or protection or a promise for a better future, God was right there beside Hagar—speaking directly to her. This taught me that Hagar was not just a footnote in Sarah and Abraham's story. Hagar was her own person with her own relationship with God. Hagar was important. Hagar was worthy of God's attention and care and words.

In fact, I saved the best part of the good list for last. This is really good: Hagar was so worthy of God's presence that when she first encountered God in the wilderness, she gave God a name: El-Roi, meaning, “The God who sees me.” Hagar gave God a name, and not only that, but she was the very first person in the Bible to name God. Abraham, Sarah, Lot, Noah, Adam, Eve—all of them encountered God, but it was Hagar, the castoff slave-girl, who first gave God a name. How amazing is that? This is a woman to remember! This is a woman as worthy of as much honor and respect as any prophet or king who would come after her.

For me, hearing this story for the first time, I thought this was just about one of the coolest things I had ever learned in my life. I couldn't believe that a God—our God!--not only appeared before and spoke to a woman whose name most of us hardly know, but that same God gave Hagar the privilege of proclaiming God's own name as El-Roi. In learning this, Hagar transformed before me from a powerless slave-girl into a fierce woman with a story of her own that was worth telling.

This was a good lesson to learn. To realize that God cares about even the most forgotten people among us. To realize that greatness does not come from your position in life but that it can come from the strength of your relationship with God. It was a good lesson, but if the class ended there, it would have just been that: a nice lesson I learned in some class I had to take twelve years ago. But class didn't end when we closed our Bibles that day. That was only the beginning of my introduction to Hagar.

When we finished discussing the text, Tina escorted our class out of the room, downstairs, and outside to the quad. We kept walking until we reached the entrance to our beautiful women's college

campus where we all lived and studied. We walked through arch that led off campus, and crossed the street. We walked up to the fourth house on that street and stopped. We stood facing it. It looked like every other house on the street, except that it had a tall privacy fence surrounding it.

Tina explained to us that this was Hagar's House and that each of us would be volunteering here over the course of the semester. Hagar's House—and that was its real name—was an emergency shelter for women and their children who were homeless, many of whom had escaped abusive situations. Residents stayed for at least a month and received meals, job and computer training, free childcare, and many other resources to support them building a new life for themselves. For these women, Hagar's House was the spring of water in the middle of the desert.

I had walked by this house countless times over the years on my way downtown without ever seeing it. But that semester, I spent part of every week at Hagar's House. I volunteered as the nighttime host—eating dinner with the residents, spending time with them in the evening and making sure they had everything they needed before bed, and then every Saturday morning I provided childcare so that moms could work undisturbed in the computer room.

At Hagar's House, it was me that encountered God. I met women who opened up by sharing their stories and demonstrated more determination and strength than I had ever seen in my life. I witnessed courage and grace and watched mothers love their sons and daughters. Through this experience, I was transformed.

Volunteering at Hagar's House taught me that the reason we still read the Bible is because the stories inside of it are still unfolding in our world. It taught me that even when someone is ignored or discounted or invisible to the rest of us, God still sees them. It taught me that God is El-roi, the God who sees me. That's a God I wanted to know better.

I am indebted to my professor, Tina, for introducing me to Hagar. She was an unconventional teacher but her methods worked. The lessons she taught me were so powerful that by the end of the semester a small voice in my head started saying, “Maybe I should think about going to seminary.”

I still love Hagar. I hope each of you will get to know her better and fall in love with her too. I hope that in hearing her encounter with God, each of us will be reminded that there are no requirements in who you have to be or what you have to do in order to encounter God. Just remember what Hagar said: Our God is El-Roi; the God who sees me; the God who sees you.