



Moral Imagination

By

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First Lesson | Psalm 86:1-10

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me. There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.

Second Lesson | Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit

along with my son Isaac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened

her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Sermon

In the Islamic section of Cairo, one of the oldest Mosques in Egypt, Ibn Tulun, sits on a site called the Hill of Thanksgiving. The historic site underwent a full restoration in the early 2000s, and it is certainly worth visiting, especially because it is one of the few minarets the public is permitted to climb. Because of its already elevated location, the 360 view is remarkable.

What most tourists don't linger long enough to learn are the local - really the neighborhood - legends that have been told over the centuries about the holiness of that place. This oral history was written down in the early 20th century by a British expatriate who lived

in the historic house next to the site after years of being told the legends by the local sheik. In an updated publication of these legends, the grandson of this Brit describes the collection like this -

“There are 14 stories told, each effortlessly combining the magical and the everyday, the mysterious and the mundane, while weaving a fluid path through time encompassing pharaonic, Christian, and Islamic events... one might be under the impression, by the end of the book, that everything in the world happened here.”

The first legend tells that this location, the Hill of Thanksgiving, was actually the mountain upon which Noah's Ark came to rest after the flood, not Mount Ararat as you might have been told in Sunday school. It was also here that the legends tell that Abraham walked with his son Ishmael up this Hill as God had commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son. Here, God appeared to Moses, speaking from a bush that burned but was not consumed, and even here on this Hill, where the Mosque stands today, Moses engaged in a battle of wits with Pharaoh's magicians, turning his staff into a snake. The stories go on and on.

When we lived in Cairo, I would take friends to visit Ibn Tulun. I loved repeating these legends to others and imagining that I was walking in the same place that Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, and Moses had walked. To be clear, I didn't actually think any of those events happened in that place - but through a sacred imagining, I could somehow locate myself not just within the stories of the Bible, but within the story of that neighborhood of people who cherished these legends.

Communities often find ways of locating themselves within the great stories that give meaning to their lives. By claiming this hill as a place where sacred history unfolded, generations of Egyptians were saying that God's story did not belong only to distant lands and ancient peoples, but that they, too, had a place within it.

Our story for this morning from Genesis, and, in truth, all of the stories of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, lend themselves so well to this kind of identification, as we see timeless dramas play out within them. Not just dramas of faith, but of families, friendship, conflict, and human striving.

We join the story of Abraham's family in a particular moment when the promises of God come up against the actions and foibles of human beings. God has called Abraham and promised him on multiple occasions that from his children will come a great nation of God's people. But that promise has been slow in its coming. So slow that in an effort to hurry those promises along, Abraham has a child with his wife Sarah's slave, Hagar.

Hagar is an Egyptian whose name is interpreted to mean alien or foreigner. She becomes pregnant and then bears Abraham the child, Ismael, much to Sarah's consternation - and Sarah behaves exactly like a person who almost immediately regrets what they previously thought was a great idea.

Here in chapter 21, Sarah finally gives birth to her own child, Isaac, and her jealousy reaches a peak as she sees Abraham's two sons playing together. Abraham is torn and seeks counsel from God who assures Abraham that his son Ishmael will also be the head of a great nation and that God will provide for him as well.

Hagar and Ishmael are sent away with supplies into the desert, and when those supplies run out in an act of grief and desperation, Hagar sets the child in the shade of a tree and sits at a distance to weep. God hears the cries of the child and of Hagar, and an angel of the Lord appears to offer them the safety of both a nearby well and the gracious, loving mercy of God.

We all know that for our Muslim brothers and sisters, it is Ishmael, not Isaac, who is the biblical ancestor of their tradition. Did you catch in that legend from Ibn Tulun that for them it was Ishmael and not Issac who God commanded Abraham to sacrifice as an act of faith? I would argue that in our story for today, Abraham indeed is asked to sacrifice Ishmael, sending him and Hagar away to what Abraham would have known was certain death, needing to have enough faith that God would fulfill God's promise.

Old Testament scholar Katherine Sakenfeld writes about her relationship with the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and recalls first learning about Abraham in her Presbyterian Sunday school class as a kindergartener.

When she told her mother about the lesson, her mother used that occasion to explain their own Jewish ancestry. Sakenfeld remembers telling all of her friends that she was kin to Abraham. She was connected; she was a part of this epic story.

It wasn't until she was much older that she learned the fullness of this family story - of Sarah's barrenness and even Hagar and Ishmael's very existence.

She tells the story of attending a conference in the late 1980's, "A conference in which Jewish, Muslim, and African-American Christian women spoke on the story of Hagar and Sarah. In the course of that conference," she writes, "I found a hero I'd never imagined. First, the Muslim speaker lauded Hagar as the progenitress through Ishmael of the Arab and Muslim community worldwide. Then the African-American speaker claimed Hagar for her community with reference to a long folkloric and musical heritage from 19th-century slavery and subsequent Jim Crow era, a heritage that I would never have guessed. And then the Jewish speaker suggested that all the problems between Sarah and Hagar really should be laid at the feet of Abraham

and the system in which they lived. The biblical stories suddenly took on new significance for me. Hagar, a minor character in my own white Protestant tradition, was more essential than Sarah in the tradition of others.”

For many African American and Muslim women, Hagar has never been a minor character. Through their wisdom, we understand Hagar as the enslaved woman whose body is used to secure another family’s future. She is the mother sent out with her child into a wilderness not of her own choosing. She is the woman no one in power protects, the woman whose grief is treated as inconvenient, the woman who must somehow keep living after being cast aside.

Across generations, women have recognized something of their own history in Hagar’s story. In spirituals, sermons, folklore, and womanist theology, they have seen in her not only suffering, but endurance. Not only abandonment, but God’s unwavering regard. Hagar is a witness to the truth that God sees those whom society overlooks and hears the cries that others would rather ignore. Through

her, communities shaped by the legacy of slavery and segregation have found assurance that the cast-off are never cast away by God.

Biblical Scholar Wilda Gafney writes, “Hagar is the launching point for contemporary womanist discourse and continues to fire the exegetical imaginations of readers and hearers of African descent in multiple religious traditions...I read Hagar through the wholesale enslavement of black peoples in America and elsewhere; Hagar is the mother of Harriet Tubman and the women and men who freed themselves from slavery.”

One of the women who found herself drawn to Hagar’s story was the nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis. Born in 1844 to a Black father and an Ojibwe mother, Lewis became the first internationally recognized African American and Indigenous American sculptor. Working in a world that offered few opportunities to women and even fewer to artists of color, she eventually settled in Rome, where she carved marble sculptures that explored faith, freedom, race, and biblical themes. Her most famous sculpture, completed in 1867, is

entitled *Forever Free*, depicting a man and woman who have just heard the news of the Emancipation Proclamation, with their chains still visible; there is a hope that fills their faces and a dignity in their posture. The sculpture of Hagar on the cover of our bulletin this morning is also one of hers, and the upward tilt of Hagar's head and the clasp of Hagar's hands look almost exactly like the woman depicted in *Forever Free*, unlikely a coincidence.

In a recent *New Yorker* article about Edmonia Lewis, art critic Zachary Fine reflects on the power of sculpture as it relates to Lewis' own remarkable and layered biography. He writes: "French poet and art critic...Baudelaire, in an essay entitled "Why Sculpture is Boring," argued that one of the disadvantages of sculpture was that it "shows too many surfaces at once," unlike painting, which can offer a single and coherent point of view. As a person ambles around a sculpture, perspectives multiply; interpretations are born and dissolved; shadows play on the surface and complicate the interpretive field, making hair look like spaghetti or a nostril look angry. The funny thing about that argument, of course, is that it is a

wonderful explanation for why sculpture isn't boring. The freedom to move about the object, to mentally embroider a narrative on bits of motionless steel and stone - that's what makes the form interesting."

This is what makes the biblical story interesting as well. Its layers and facets. Its dynamic and complex interpretive field. Its folds and shadows and potential to sustain and even inspire multiple points of view.

In his book *Lens of Love*, Jonathan Walton describes his kind of reading of scripture, what theologians and ethicists have come to call - moral imagination.

"Moral imagination challenges us to look at what appears to be nothing to identify something. It asks us to look upon those who are deemed nobody by society and see somebody loved by God. Moral imagination is essential to an ethic of love and justice. When we immerse ourselves in a biblical narrative, moral imagination helps us identify with biblical characters. Over time, this can improve our ability to empathize with others. In the same way that biblical narratives help us to reimagine what was

possible in the ancient world, the same moral imagination can help us reimagine what is possible in our world regarding love and justice.”

In a moment when the world is short on empathy, when all of us, of all ages, are focused more on the flat screen in front of us than the three-dimensional world around us, when we all are struggling to understand those who have different opinions from ours, different experiences than ours, reading scripture with a posture of moral imagination gives us practice at seeing our place and the place of others in a complicated world.

We remember Hagar so that we are more open to those not like ourselves. We remember so that our hearts will be opened to the outcast and downtrodden. We remember so that we believe that God sees and hears, that the cry of the one lonely and fearful person in the wilderness does not go unheard.

Communities have always found ways of locating themselves within the great stories that give meaning to their lives. That is the work that is set before us. We don't just read scripture, we walk slowly around it, watching as it changes

in different light, recognizing ourselves within it, listening when others relate to something or imagine something that never would have crossed our minds. And in doing so, we discover that God's story is larger than we first thought and God's mercy wider than we first imagined.

We enter these ancient stories searching for our own place within them. And once we are there, if we are willing to look around long enough, we discover that we are not alone. Others are already there. They have seen things we have missed. They have asked different questions. They have found hope in places we overlooked. And together, may we discover that God's story is larger, richer, and more beautiful than any one of us could have imagined on our own. Amen.