

Sermon for Third Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Genesis 21:8-21

More than 20 years ago, I was sitting in a lovely garden with a group from United Presbyterian Church, Paterson, celebrating the retirement of its long-term church school superintendent. Paterson is NJ's third largest city, which now has the second largest concentration by percentage of Muslims in the U.S. It was founded at the site of the Great Falls and in close proximity to New York City by Alexander Hamilton on July 4, 1792 as the nation's first industrial city. By that summer, it was about a century from its heyday. Its labor force has always been diverse. United had become primarily black then and still is today.

I had been excited to spend the summer working there as a seminary student. My church in a leafy suburb a few miles away had been involved in some shared outreach projects. I remember the chair of United's mission committee lamenting that well-meaning groups from the primarily white suburbs often drove into Paterson to meet with them and found ways to support their programs, but somehow he and the members of his church were never invited into their communities.

I was focused in part on building suburban-urban partnerships. I learned a lot – but clearly not enough –that summer. One of my projects, quite modest, was using the bus from United' *Safe Space Summer Day Camp* for a two-parish trip on a Sunday afternoon to the Tanglewood Music Festival, so members from our two churches could mingle and enjoy the music and, in particular, so a gifted 8th grader at United whose mother did not have a car would have a chance to hear his favorite piece – Beethoven's 9th Symphony – performed live. Within a week, a realtor from the congregation took me on a tour of the City– she'd hoped my suburban-urban focus would include finding ways to lessen the streams of new model cars coming into her neighborhood driven by people from the suburbs to buy drugs.

Maxine, the guest of honor, was a magnificent woman whom everyone respected and loved. As a nurse, she headed up employee health at a regional hospital. I overheard her say to another person of color that afternoon that it's no wonder that such a high percentage of African-Americans suffer from high blood pressure as compared to whites. She wondered aloud about the cumulative effect of experiencing racism just about every day when everyone tries to tell you that racism no longer exists. And we have all heard the statistics that COVID-19 strikes people of color far more severely and that the maternal health of women and survival of babies of color is much worse than of whites.

Some of the members of my church were excited for the opportunity I'd been given that summer while others were quizzical– why would I choose to spend the summer in a depressed and dangerous city that many work so hard to leave? It was through United that I would participate in my first Watch Night service on New Year's Eve, as we gathered to give thanks, to ask God's blessings and to remember how slaves had watched vigil on New Year's Eve in 1862—no doubt accompanied by prayer and fasting--for Abraham Lincoln to announce that the Emancipation Proclamation would take effect, changing the legal status under federal law of more than 3.5 million from slave to free in the Confederate states. I confess it's only in recent years that I have learned about Juneteenth which was celebrated

yesterday, commemorating the announcement by Union General Gordon Granger to African-Americans in Galveston Texas that they were free, ending slavery in the U.S.

But as a white person in this country, I am free to learn at my own pace, as it were—or not to learn, to my own detriment; I am free to spend a summer in an inner city and then return to my prosperous suburb and now to my home in the country surrounded by pastureland. I can be surprised to learn only recently that the history of slavery in the State of New York is of greater duration than of the State of Louisiana or to see an artist's rendition of an escaped slave Ishmael from a newspaper advertisement in the Quebec Gazette from a town next to mine listing the reward for his recovery—all these choices I have as a person of white privilege that others do not.

Events of our time, of the linking of one pandemic with the pandemic of racism and brutality show us that something is seriously wrong in our country. Has slavery really ended in the U.S. when we have 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners? The 13th amendment contains a loophole which has been exploited by those who promote a mythology of black criminality. Race, the justice system, and mass incarceration with its inherent violence intersect for far too many people, and especially for people of color. Those enjoying such privilege are paralyzed by our inaction and ignorance; our good intentions are not enough.

As we record our service the day after Juneteenth and tape it on World Refugee Day, it seems particularly appropriate that we give attention to our passage from Genesis. It's been 36 years since Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror: A Literary-Feminist Reading of Biblical Narratives* was published. She examined in depth four Old Testament stories which depict particularly horrific situations for women. The book was brilliant and disturbing -- many of us would rather ignore these stories than look at them head-on. Trible studies the story of Hagar, Sarah's maid and mother of Ishmael--our OT lesson for today; David's daughter Tamar, raped by her brother; the daughter of Jephthah, sacrificed as a result of her father's promise to guests and not wanting to lose face; and an unnamed concubine from Judges 19, who was brutalized in an astonishingly violent way. Trible's scholarship has led to a more inclusive approach to reading Holy Scripture, a greater interest in context, and a recognition that God can "take" whatever questions we have -- indeed, welcomes our wrestling with them.

What wasn't assigned reading at my predominantly white seminary was Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, written a decade later from the theological perspective of an African-American woman with attention to traditions, practices, scriptures and biblical interpretation that include women of color and the oppression they experience from whites and also from black men. Williams writes of the "striking similarities between Hagar's story and the story of African-American women." Hagar's heritage was African. Hagar was a slave, brutalized by her owner, the Hebrew woman Sarah. The slave narratives of African-American women and some of the narratives of contemporary day-workers tell of the brutal and cruel treatment black women have received from the wives of slave masters and from contemporary white female employers. Hagar had no control over her body. It belonged to her slave owner, whose husband, Abraham, ravished Hagar at Sarah's encouragement because she wanted a child. A child Ishmael was born; mother and child were eventually cast out of Abraham's and Sarah's home without resources for survival.

In our story for today, we find what seems like a horrific example of cruelty as a result of jealousy as well as a culture in which slavery does not seem to be questioned. We do not question sufficiently slavery's legacy in the high levels of incarceration for people of color (and the loophole in the 13th amendment). Is there any way we can sanction Sarah's behavior toward Hagar and her son Ishmael? Hagar is described as an Egyptian, so she had already been displaced from her original home, no doubt against her will. Do we wish Abraham would not be spineless and cruel in giving in to Sarah's demands to send them away? Does God's reassurance that God will make of Hagar's son Ishmael a nation justify Abraham's sending out his first son and his mother into the wilderness with merely bread and a skin of water, surely to die?

And yet, we find that somehow God provides for Hagar and her son, Hagar forced again to flee and she and her son to become refugees. These bible stories are shocking for many of us; but the level of violence and cruelty is something that our black brothers and sisters confront every day. And the number of refugees today – 70.8 million – is the highest level since World War II. How is it that Ishmael's banishment leads to his descendants becoming the followers of Muhammad? How is it that the killing of George Floyd is leading to people hearing throughout the world and testifying in a new and powerful way that Black Lives Matter?

The Bible poses multiple questions for which there are no answers, other than looking back on them and realizing that God was present in situations of horror and terror. The stories from the Bible as well as from our lives today are shocking for some and, unfortunately, shocking as well as predictable for too many. Everyone at St. Andrew's knows that black lives matter – the question is, just how do they matter to us in light of the gospel of Christ – and what should our response be as individuals and as a community?

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