

Genesis 16:1-16 Sermon

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In 1997, Natalie Imbruglia wrote a song titled “Torn,” that addresses the difference between illusions and reality. She sings, “So I guess the fortune teller’s right/Should have seen just what was there/and not some holy light/There’s just so many things/that I can’t touch, I’m torn/I’m all out of faith/This is how I feel/I’m cold and I’m ashamed/Bound and broken on the floor/Illusion never changed into something real/I’m wide awake and I can see/The perfect sky is torn.”¹

This song could have been sung by Hagar. Hagar is a woman whose reality bumps up against a barely birthed illusion. In this illusion, Hagar sees the possibility for a new kind of relationship with Sarai, a relationship not based on an imbalance of power, or abuse, or hierarchy, or the “way things are,” or one that leaves Hagar bound and broken, but a relationship based on mutuality. Hagar’s illusion isn’t shared by the people around her, but it is shared by God.

We first learn of Hagar’s illusion, or vision, when she learns of her pregnancy, a pregnancy itself conceived in abuse and violence, loss of agency and powerlessness. It’s important to have some historical context here to understand how this situation could even happen. It was common in Abram, Sarai, and Hagar’s time for slaves to be used to provide children for wives of wealthy men who didn’t otherwise have children. Sarai sending Hagar to Abram so she would conceive and bear Sarai a child to call her own was part of the cultural norm at the time.

¹ Scott Cutler and Anne Preven, “Torn,” song lyrics sung by Natalie Imbruglia, Polygram Music Publishing, Ltd., 1997, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics.natalieimbruglia/torn/html>.

Pause a moment and consider how this cultural reality might feel to Hagar, even if it really was the way things were done in her time and place. Just because something is culturally accepted doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt someone or that it is okay. Regardless of cultural acceptability, Sarai's actions are ones of abuse and contempt for the very humanity of Hagar.

We first learn that Hagar does indeed become pregnant with the child who we will soon meet as Ishmael, a son of Abram who is part of God's promise for many descendants. It's at the moment Hagar discovers her pregnancy that we learn that Hagar's mistress, "Sarai, was lowered in her esteem."² Often this text is translated as "Hagar began to despise her mistress" (Gen. 16:4 NIV) or "looked with contempt on her mistress" (Gen. 16:4 NRSV). But it just as accurate, arguable more so, to say that her mistress was "lowered in her esteem."³

That's very different, critically different. Saying that Hagar is the one acting with contempt leads to an interpretation that Hagar is at fault for Sarai's abuse of her. But the text says Sarai is the subject and that she is simply lowered in Hagar's esteem, which is an interpretation that actually fits well with what we know historically. For one thing, when a concubine or servant became pregnant with a master's child, she literally would be raised in the culture's hierarchical system while the wife without a child would literally be lowered. This can be simply a descriptive reality of the way things were, rather than a commentary on Hagar's character.

But there is yet another way we can interpret this more accurate translation, and it is one where we begin to get a glimpse of the way things are in God's world. In these few words, we

² Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 12.

³ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

begin to see Hagar's illusion take shape. In this moment, as Phyllis Tribble writes, "Hagar acquires a new vision of Sarai. Hierarchical blinders disappear. The exalted mistress decreases while the lowly maid increases. Not hatred but a reordering of the relationship is the point."⁴

Hagar has actually seen a new possibility, a new story for how she and Sarai can be in relationship, how power between them can be redistributed, how they can both live life abundantly as beloved children of God. Hagar is rewriting the story. She sees a new possibility, not that Sarai is diminished but that she and Sarai are both valuable, able to live in mutual relationship with one another.

As beautifully compelling as it is, however, Hagar's illusion doesn't change into something real at this point because Sarai, from her position of power, does not accept this new vision. We are told she not only rejects the illusion, but reinforces the existing power structure by abusing Hagar terribly.

Over the years of scriptural translation and interpretation, we've tried to clean this up a bit and say simply that Sarai has afflicted Hagar. But Sarai does more than that. The harsh treatment she afflicts Hagar with is described by the same word used for how the Hebrew people will suffer in Egypt when they are slaves. The irony is not lost that two Hebrew people first treated their Egyptian slave with the same kind of abuse their descendants will suffer so terribly generations later at the hands of Egyptians. This violence against a pregnant woman is the kind of abuse that threatens Hagar's very life.

In the face of Sarai's abuse, Hagar uses the power available to her to save her life and life of her baby. She flees into the wilderness to escape the nightmare of her reality and the death of her nascent illusion. She pauses at a spring near Shur, which is just at the Egyptian border. Hagar

⁴ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

has almost made it home. And it is at this spring in the wilderness, a place of life and power and sustenance that a couple of things happen: God catches up to Hagar, God sees her, and Hagar's original illusion is resurrected to start to become something real.

When the messenger of God catches up to Hagar, he asks her where she came from. Her answer is, "I am fleeing my mistress Sarai" (Gen. 16:8 NRSV). She is no longer given by one woman with power to a man with power, subject to their whims and the way things are. She is choosing to run away from the violence and abuse against her body and her baby's body. She is no longer acted upon, but the one acting. She has fled, and I am thankful that she is free.

But then God asks her through his messenger where she is going. Hagar doesn't seem to answer that question at all, let alone with the kind of power and certainty she answered his first question. Instead, God answers that question for her. God takes over her voice.

I'll be honest. At this point, God and I are circling each other somewhat skeptically. This puts up all my red flags. I really want to hear that God is going to send Hagar on the rest of her journey safely. I want to hear that Hagar arrives back to her own hometown, lives with her family, gives birth to Ishmael and lives a long life with many children and grandchildren surrounding her, never again suffering abuse. That's what I want to hear.

But that doesn't happen. Instead of sending her on to her family and safety, God tells her to go back. That is why this text is sometimes referred to as a text of terror. God tells Hagar to go back to abuse, to violence, to her body being subject to the whims of others. God doesn't even give Hagar a reason to return. He tells her to go back and *be afflicted*. This is wrong. This makes me furious. And it should, because being forced to go back to a situation of abuse and suffering is NOT what God wants for any of us. No person should suffer that way.

It is in the midst of this inexplicable, contradictory direction that God does something else. He promises to change Hagar's illusion of mutual relationship into something real. Yes, God does this in a future sense by bringing Hagar into the covenant relationship that he already had with Abram and through the promise he makes to Hagar of her own son providing her with many descendants, but he does it more immediately, too, because while Sarai may not see Hagar's illusion of a life of mutual relationships rooted in the beloved-ness of each person, by the end of these verses God makes clear that God does see that vision. This vision or illusion isn't going to become reality right away, but God gives Hagar a powerful taste of what it will be like by himself entering into mutual relationship with her. God sees Hagar and calls her by name. Hagar responds by seeing God and calling God by name, too. El-Roi, God sees.

Do you see that? God embodies Hagar's illusion of mutual relationship so that it becomes real, even though the people around Hagar can't see that possibility. Hagar is the only person in the text who lives her envisioned reality of mutual relationship, a reality that up until now in this hierarchical and power-hungry world has been only an illusion for everyone, and Hagar is the one who lives this reality of God's world by seeing God himself and exchanging names with him. Hagar's life does not go on to look the way we want it to look, but it does go on with the promise of this new reality.

We are all invited to participate with God and Hagar in making a new world, of embodying illusions until they become reality. We have the power to choose to see new visions that privilege all people as God's beloved children with whom we can be in mutual relationship. What would it look like in your life if you entertained an illusion and embodied it?

Hagar's song needs to be rewritten: "So I guess our God who sees is right. I can look for what could be there in the holy light. There are so many things I can see. I am full of faith, this is

how I feel, I'm strong and I'm free, filled with new visions, because illusion does change into something real. I'm wide awake and I can see that God has a name and is called 'I see.'" Amen.