

Call Me Hagar

Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21

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Introduction

This sermon is one of eight I am writing as part of my Ph.D. dissertation on “The Use of Feminist Hermeneutics in Biblical Preaching.” “Call Me Hagar” applies Phyllis Trible’s interpretation of Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21 as it is presented in her book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. I have preached this sermon three times. Because it deals with a difficult subject and is sometimes heard as anti-male, the last two times I preached it, I requested talk back time with the congregation immediately after worship. With my own congregation in Statesville, North Carolina, I distributed a questionnaire and response sheet for them to fill out for this sermon and the one I had preached the previous week. The former sermon also dealt with these two biblical texts, but it followed more closely a traditional historical-critical reading and interpretation. That sermon was titled “The Consequences of Faithlessness” and focused upon Abraham and Sarah’s refusal to trust in God’s promise of progeny, and the painful consequences to their own life and relationship which resulted from their taking matters into their own hands.

There is, of course, much which is not known about Hagar. My presentation of her story is not meant to be read as a factual account of her life. Yet neither is it a fiction. Each time I have preached this sermon, I have been approached afterwards by women who have shared Hagar’s experience. Her story is true in a larger sense than that of history or philosophy because her experience is the experience of so many women past and present who have been victims of rape.

Since middle-class, white Presbyterians such as myself, do not always recognize rape as something which has any reality in our own lives, I have found it important to make a connection between ancient times and the present by a brief introduction. Sometimes a few clear words to establish a context and direction can help members of the congregation listen to a word they otherwise would find too shocking to hear. I introduce “Call Me Hagar” in the following way.

“There is a bulletin board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which says, “*One in every four coeds will be raped before she graduates from college.*” When I sat down to consider the implications of this statistic in terms of my own life experience, I realized that the statistic was even higher and more disturbing. Among my own friends, family, and church members the actual figure is one in three. One in three of the women and girls I know have been raped at some time during their lifetime. That number includes a close relative, two Presbyterian ministers, and the nine-year-old girl my husband, a physician, recently treated for sodomy and rape.

Call Me Hagar

Call me Hagar. I am the mother of a “wild ass of a man” who saw me as the one to blame for his rotten little life. “If you had been prettier, shrewder, more forceful, sexier, if Abraham had loved you instead of her, I might have a place in Jerusalem now instead of living in these stinking camps that are all we have left of Palestine.”

Call me Hagar. It is my name, and I had it long before I birthed you. It is I who bore you, suckled you, loved you, put your life before my own, lifted my voice in a wailing cry I would have been ashamed to voice for myself. It is I who mothered you, Ishmael. I who protected you in my womb and on this earth.

Call me Hagar. My name was first recorded in the book of Genesis. I am the other woman in the eternal triangle that is God's little joke on the world. Call me Hagar. Even before I became Abraham's whore, I was in bondage. The paraphrased biblical texts call me Sarai's Egyptian maid. I wasn't her maid. I was her slave.

I was only eight years old at the time, a child from a large family. My father was better at marrying wives than at supporting them and the many resulting children.

"Too many children!" he would complain, "and far too many daughters!"

It was better and cheaper for him to sell us young than to keep us long enough to find husbands and provide a dowry.

My mother cried when I was taken away. My father counted the money.

Call me Hagar. It is my name. *My name.* The only thing about me which I still possess as I sit in his tent hugging my knees to my body and trying not to cry for fear I will wake him and he will hurt me again.

They had come for me early that evening.

"He's not as young as he once was," said one of the male slaves. "Maybe we should test her out for him, eh?"

"Are you crazy?" hissed another. "He's deadly serious about this offspring thing. You'd be out in the desert without a drop of water if he ever heard you'd even thought it."

They said nothing to me. They just took me to his tent with no explanation or promise. They pushed me inside and walked away laughing.

There I stood in his tent, not my lady's tent where I'd spent so much of my time over the past six years. Only he was there, sitting on a bed mat.

"Undress," he told me, and then turned from me to his God to pray for guidance and approval of what he was about to do.

I knew that men and women did things together. I had listened to the jokes and conversations around the fire at night, but I didn't know specifics until that first time. He put his hands on me, over me, pushed me to the mat, forced my legs apart and hurt me. Oh! he hurt me. My tears he seemed to disregard. My scream at the first cut of pain, he silenced with a command.

"Hush! It is God's will."

When it was over, he went to sleep. I huddled in a corner far from him, afraid to leave without permission. I took the blanket which lay on the mat to use for a cover. There was blood on it, *my blood.* I was fourteen years old.

It happened many more times. It always began with an order, "He wants you." It never began with intimacy or affection. He saved both for Sarai, his lawful wedded wife. The pain lessened over time, but it was never replaced with tenderness. He took me for his religion, or his God, not for himself. He was too pious a man to enjoy sex. Yet he had spoiled me for any other.

Men looked at me differently. Before, the slave boys were my friends. We talked with one another, helped one another with the chores. Now they stared at me with disrespect and scorn. They dared not touch me because he was their master, but they thought less of me. I had done nothing wrong; yet I was a whore.

She watched me too. Pulled tight my clothes to see if my belly was growing. At first there was no change and she was angry with me. Then my belly grew large and she got even more angry.

"It's God's will." She said through gritted teeth.

"It's God's will!" He said joyfully and ordered me to his tent no more.

I was moved to a tent away from the other slave girls. I lived alone, and I was given twice as much food to eat as I had ever been offered before.

"Is it God's will?" I wondered as the weeks and months went by. I was lonely. No one talked to me or visited me. I was a person without a place, neither slave nor free. I was the master's woman, but not the master's wife.

Sometimes he visited me. It was always brief, mostly so he could put his hand on my belly and feel the movement inside me. Outside the tent he never acknowledged me. I was still Sarai's slave. Even as the baby grew to life in my womb he treated me as Sarai's slave. Why should I be the slave when I had succeeded where she had failed?

I wearied of that tent and its isolation. I began to walk outside in the sun, to listen to conversations, and to take pride in my growing womb. If the slaves refused to talk to me, I ordered them about. "Get me more tea!" "I need honey!" "Mend my robe!" They did it. They dared not refuse, but they were not the only ones inconvenienced by my condition.

Sarai no longer called me to her to measure my stomach to see if I was sufficiently plump. She could not bear to see me or be around me. One night, the silence was broken with shouting from the tent of my mistress.

"May the wrong done to me be on you!" she shrilled as though uttering a curse.

"You told me to take her!" he yelled back.

"I gave my slave girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" she cried.

"Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please." he shouted and stormed out of her tent.

Before dawn, one of the other slave girls woke me with a kick.

"Get up," she ordered, "Our lady wants you."

"But . . . " I started to protest.

"At once! You are to help me get water, prepare breakfast as you used to do, and haul water to the shepherds two ridges over. No more lying about pretending you are better than the rest of us. Get up!"

That day was the first of many days of persecution. I was given more work than I had ever had before, and most of it was out in the hot sun, not in the coolness of my lady's tent. There was never a kind word or a smile of thanks as there had been in the old days. All I received were angry words, undeserved slaps and kicks, long hours in the hot sun with little rest and little food. It did no good to cry or protest. No one cared. He certainly didn't. He looked the other way whenever our paths crossed.

Once I heard him whisper words of concern to her. He was worried about the baby.

"She's stronger than an ox," was her reply. "All those people are. And, they breed like rabbits. You told me so yourself. You said her father sold off his children like cattle, because he had so many of them. She is different from us. The child will be fine."

I thought things might be different once the baby was born. I thought, "If it's a boy, they will treat me better." But when I said as much to one of the other young slave girls,

she just laughed and told me to talk to Mehetabel. Mehetabel was a very old slave who had been with my master and mistress when they first set out from Ur. She knew their people and their customs. When I asked Mehetabel if things would be easier for me after the child was born, she told me that any child I bore would belong to Sarai. When a woman could not have children and gave her slave to her husband in her place, any children born belonged to the mistress and were raised by her as her own. It was God's will.

God's will! God's will! How could it be God's will to take my child from me and give him to her? I would remain the slave, waiting on her hand and foot, and my child; *my* child would not even know me as "Mother!" I would not tolerate this final injustice. I would not be denied my own child's caresses. I would not give up my one chance to love and be loved.

I left the next night. I walked as fast and as far as I could. I was hot and heavy, and soon, hungry and thirsty. I kept walking. I walked until the darkness was transformed into daylight and back to darkness again. I was lucky. On the second day I found a spring of water. I drank deeply from it, then splashed my face and neck and arms and hands with it. Then I went to sleep beside it.

I was awakened by a stranger. At first, I thought they had sent someone after me, but the man said, "Hagar, slave girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"

"I am running away from my mistress Sarai," I replied.

"Return to your mistress, and submit to her," he said.

"You would send me back!" I cried. "You would have me return so she can hit me and abuse me and work me so hard when I am great with child! Why? Why must I return to suffer so? It was her command that sent me to his tent! If I return, she will take my baby. She will take my child from me as soon as it is born, and say that it is hers! 'It is God's will,' they are forever saying. Well, if you are God's messenger, and this is God's will, God is a cruel God, and I want no part of God or you!"

And the angel of the Lord said,

"Now you have conceived and
shall bear a son;
you shall call him Is'h'mael,
for the Lord has given heed to
your affliction.

He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against
him;
and he shall live at odds with all
his kin."

I didn't understand what this divine messenger meant when he said all that. It didn't make sense, and it didn't sound comforting. But I knew I had met God that day, and that God saw me as Hagar, had called me by name—something no one else had bothered to do for a long time. I knew not only that God had seen me, but that I had seen God, and still lived. If I could survive that, I could survive whatever else lay ahead.

"You are Elroi, the God who hears." I said as I pushed myself to my feet. I had run away and God had watched me go and had followed me. "You are the Living One who sees me," I repeated to myself. I had run away from present hardship, and God had shown me a future with still more hardship. God had seen me, and I had seen God. I could hardly take it in.

"Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" I asked myself as I forced myself to make the sweltering two-day walk back to the campsite I had fled four days before.

Nothing changed upon my return. It was as though I'd never been gone at all. I worked until the labor pains began. The pain was immense, but the euphoria afterwards seemed to eliminate the pain, and I joyfully learned that the wet nurse who was selected to suckle my child, so that I would not get too attached to him, had lost her milk. I would be allowed to nurse Ishmael myself.

Ishmael. That's my son's name. When I told my master about my visit from the Lord, Abraham didn't want to believe me. He said he doubted God would speak to a woman, but he named his son Ishmael as I told him God had told me.

It was while I was still nursing Ishmael that Sarah became pregnant. I thanked God for the unexpected reprieve. The amount of care and attention that woman received was incredible. Abraham was so solicitous. No request was too absurd or too impractical to be granted.

When her son was born, he was named Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah was so overjoyed at his birth that she could not stop laughing. I too was overjoyed. Sarah wouldn't want my baby now that she had her own.

I thought having a child would soften Sarah some, but no. Once she realized that my son might pose a threat to hers, she began to complain about Ishmael 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."

Abraham didn't want to do it. He didn't care about me, but Ishmael was his son. A man can never have too many sons. Why get rid of Ishmael? So Abraham did what he always did. He prayed about it, and concluded that Sarah was right!

The next morning, Abraham got up before dawn and woke us up as well. He gave me some bread and a skin of water, and took little Ishmael and me out into the desert, into the wilderness of Beersheba. Abraham the devout, the father-to-be of a great nation, left us alone there in the desert to survive or die as we might. I understood how he could do that to me. I was a slave girl of no account to him. But how could he do that to his son? So what if Ishmael wasn't his legitimate heir, he was still his son! These one-God worshippers are strange people. At one point Abraham is ready to disbelieve his God because Sarah has no children, and in another, he's willing to assume that one son is enough. He's not worried about diseases or war or death. What if one of those touches his precious Isaac?

Call me Hagar. I am the one abandoned in the desert.

Call me Hagar. I am the mother of a people who have no father they can legitimately claim. We Arabs began as people of sand desert. We are labeled survivors and thieves. Our people have been housed under the stars and guided by the sun. We have seen many civilizations rise and fall. We have been forced to watch other people come and go, and come and come, and take over our land with their machines and their technology. They outclass us and outlive us with their universities and motorcars and

electricity and nuclear bombs. We stick to the desert with our horses and our herds, our scant water and our scantier lives, but we survive and multiply while they melt without their air conditioning and Coca-Colas.

Call me Hagar. I am the silent mother of four sons, all of whom were killed during the Iran-Iraq war. Call me Hagar. I am the woman whose tongue was cut out for speaking against the Shah. Call me Hagar. I am the virgin violated by a clitorrectomy when I was thirteen so that I might give pleasure to my husband but never have any of my own. Call me Hagar. I cover my hands, my feet, my face, my body in long, heavy robes so that no man will see me and want me. Call me Hagar.

You say, I sound bitter? Of course I am. There are many who are faithful to God, yet find life a bitter habitation. Ask my biblical sisters. Ask Tamar, the daughter of King David raped by her half-brother Amnon. Ask the concubine sodomized, raped, and tortured before being cut up into twelve pieces to be sent to the twelve tribes of Judah as a call to vengeance for the wrongs done to her master in her death. Ask Jephthah who died as a human sacrifice offered by her father on his own behalf. Ask Eve if she is bitter to bear the brunt of the blame for the fall of humanity, for the lustful needs men claim are women's fault when men see one of us and want us.

Ask the ones who died at Auschwitz. Ask the Kuwaitis and the Kurds who were never asked if they wanted to be a part of the Gulf War. Ask the ones who have been cut down by the Serbs or the Croatians. Ask the third generation welfare recipient who is judged by middle-class standards she cannot imagine, much less imitate. Ask the incest survivor who can never enter a loving embrace without flinching.

You may call me Hagar. It is my name, *my* name, but you may also call yourself Hagar. For the wrongs I have endured, you too may endure.