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28 November 2021

She Said What?

Genesis 16:7-13 | Luke 1:26-38

After hearing the familiar stories of the season of Christmas year after year, it's hard to listen freshly and without sentimentality to stories that we have learned to love. Even the especially hard parts of Mary's journey - the risks that any woman carries in pregnancy, the jeopardy of being on the road and unsheltered, her family's perilous flight to Egypt - to us, the familiar readers of well known stories, feel warm and even comforting. The quaintness of the nativity. The simplicity of the inn and manger. The appearance of angels, the promise of the coming Christ. It's all so beguiling I dissociate myself from the vulnerability of these characters. But it's important to remember the people at the heart of this narrative are very small and very real. We have the privilege to make meaning out of their experiences - but they carried the burden of living through very frightening and uncertain circumstances. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds who witnessed these events, the magi deceiving Herod. I find myself reflecting differently now on their humility and their fragility because I'm reading the story a bit differently this year.

As I wrote to you last week, we are beginning the season of Advent by organizing our readings for worship through a new lectionary. A lectionary is just a special word for a schedule of readings. We have customarily used the same schedule of readings that most other congregations follow, called the Revised Common Lectionary. But we keep noticing that the stories of women - the challenges and circumstances that women face, the particular virtues and resources that women bring, the voices that women offer - are often missing from our regular schedules of readings. There is so much about women and for women in the Bible that we miss when we are not using a resource meant to keep women in mind. So for the weeks ahead we've chosen to experiment with a new resource for congregations called *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, by the Hebrew Bible scholar Wil Gafney. We're doing this because we are concerned with the stories of women specifically. But it's more than that, too. Really we're talking about all people who are living along the margins of scripture. If men are usually at the center of the story, think about all who dwell along the margins Women. Children, who are so often the responsibility of women. We're talking about the sick, the poor - everyone so often tended to by women. We're also talking about people of color. Immigrants. So by using this lectionary, we're not just talking about putting women at the center of our church: we want to center everyone who is systematically off-center. How would we read the Bible differently if we chose to put women at the center of the story? What else would we notice? What new would we see?

The season of Advent traditionally begins with the oracle of a male prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah. But today it's an enslaved woman named Hagar who anticipates the coming of Christ.

The book of Genesis says that Hagar was owned by Abram and Sarai, who conspire to use her as their solution to marital infertility. Contemplate that for a few seconds. God has promised to make Abraham the father of a great multitude of nations. Yet that promise will be fulfilled not only out of wedlock, but through an asymmetrical and non mutual relationship. After Hagar conceives a child through this arrangement, the resentful Sarai drives her away from home. Out in the wilderness and on the run, Hagar is visited by a holy messenger, some sort of angel. This is a typical biblical scene known as an annunciation. An annunciation: meaning the announcement of God's blessing. It's noteworthy because Hagar - this enslaved woman, now bearing the first child of the great Hebrew covenant - is the first woman in the entire biblical narrative to receive such a visitation by a messenger of God. The angel assures her that the promise originally made to Abram will come to fruition through her. What Abram and Sarai have done to her is not right. Although God cannot undo the evil that they have done, the messenger assures Hagar that God has seen her pain and that God will not turn away from her experience.

Those of us who go to church around Christmastime are more familiar with the annunciation of Mary. "Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God," says the angel Gabriel. "And now, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus." The details of these two annunciation stories are so similar it gives me goosebumps. Mary was not married to Joseph anymore than Hagar was married to Abram. The prophecy that she will give birth to the Messiah is hardly more probable than the earlier prophecy to Hagar was believable. There is even in both stories the unspoken question of mutuality and consent. Hagar summoned by a powerful man. Mary's body is a vessel for an unseeable and unknowable God. A heavenly messenger in both instances translating and making sense out of incomprehensible circumstances.

I don't care how many Christmas tunes you've already heard on the radio, you can't sentimentalize Mary when her story is read in light of Hagar's story. Together their annunciation stories highlight the precarity of Mary's situation. God's presence in the lives of Mary and Hagar, writes Wil Gafney, "is evidence that God is concerned with those who are at the bottom of all the hierarchies: women, the enslaved, foreigners, and, as is so often the case, persons in more than one category, whose overlapping identities result in intersectional oppressions." These annunciation stories show God's recognition, affirmation, and presence in the lives of people who are culturally and socially obscured and unseen. People who are treated as property or kept as prisoners. Individuals who are hurt or abused by those with power. God has a special message for them, makes a special visitation to them, issues a holy and redemptive purpose for them. "Look! You are pregnant and shall give birth to a son, and you shall call him Ishmael (meaning God hears), for the Faithful One has heard of your abuse." Hagar's suffering is the summons that brings God to her. Abram and Sarai have made of this covenant something that God did not intend. They have corrupted the good promise that God made - and so God's justice is that they have not seen the last of Hagar. Yes, you will deliver a child, God says, and he will be a "wild ass of a man" to raise hell against Abram for the harm that his actions have caused.

So it's not a Hallmark Christmas miracle. An angel doesn't visit Hagar because she is special. And it's not just that God has singled her out to do something that God needs to be done. No, God is joining with her to bring justice where harm has been done. Hagar and God work together so that Abram's first born son will be a thorn in his flesh. And is that not also what we have in Jesus? A correction to the misuse of God's covenant? Mary's child making miserable those who corrupt what God had promised? A babe born in a manger. A promised boy. So cute. So innocent. Who could imagine Mary carries such a hatchet for God's justice.

So the Good News is not just that a precious child is born. The good news is that God hears. The Good News is that God sees. The Good News is that God does not turn away. That's what sustains the faith of Hagar and of Mary. These are women who can say from experience that the world brings us much suffering and that God came close to it.

The lives of these women have been touched by such evil. And so the messenger of God arrives to speak into their experience. An annunciation. "Look! The Faithful One has heard of you."

They shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.