

She Said a Blessing!
Genesis 17:15-22; Luke 1:39-45

Origin stories matter. Because we are *storied* beings who make meaning of the world, who forge connections with one another, through the tales we tell. Stories help us to wrap words around that seemingly inarticulable experience of what it means to be human.

And of all the narratives we author, origin stories are central understanding what it means to be human *together*. Because we construct a shared sense of who we are and where we're going by remembering where we came from. Origin stories draw the boundaries around who "*we*" are and define what it means to be "*us*" anyway.

So it's no wonder that U.S. Americans find ourselves in a constant struggle over the monuments that occupy our public spaces. Or over the seminal dates that mark our nation's founding. Just glance at the questions that haunt our headlines: Does our "founding father," the slaveholding Thomas Jefferson belong in New York's city hall? Does the arrival of the first enslaved African to these shores in 1619 define our nation's story as much as its more widely-recognized beginnings in 1776?

Over the last few years, I have even heard questions like these echoed within our own community. Did our bilingual La Mesa service begin with the emergence of its Spanish-language predecessor, La Iglesia Unida? Or is it more fitting to trace its origins to the Sunday our Sacred Conversations on Race class joined our Latine members for prayer as an act of resistance against the racist and xenophobic rhetoric that defined the 2016 election season?

How we tell these stories matters. Not because there is a perfect narrative we're hoping to achieve. But because the stories we tell *tell us* who we are. Because the narratives we shape together shape the way we show up in the world.

**

It is fitting, then, that in these beginning weeks of our new liturgical year we revisit the origin stories of our faith. Advent is a season of eager anticipation as we await the arrival of Christ among us. And in our waiting, we are afforded the opportunity once again to share and be shaped by the stories at the heart of who we are.

But, as it turns out, who we are is rather *complicated*.

Along with the rather familiar New Testament narratives that will lead us to Jesus' birth, Dr. Wilda Gafney, the Hebrew Bible scholar responsible for our readings this morning, has also selected and translated the stories at the very center of our faith—and indeed, at the center of *all* our sibling *Abrahamic* traditions.

Now only in our second week of Advent, we have been introduced to the first two of the “*many sons had [by] Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you . . .*”

Despite the cute songs we learned in Sunday School, as we turn to Scripture it becomes clear that our Father Abraham's legacy is not an uncomplicated one. This is especially true when we bring the women and the first of these “*many sons*” to the center of the story, as Gafney has.

While rooted in a longstanding oral tradition, these stories of Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, God's covenant and Abraham, were written down during a particularly traumatic period of Judean history—their captivity and exile in Babylon.

In other words, perhaps unsurprisingly, the origin stories we've been reading in Hebrew Scripture are the product of a people reclaiming their sense of who they are while far away from their home.

What is perhaps more surprising is that the authors of these stories, passed down and preserved by those descended from Sarah and Abraham, leave a surprising amount of room for their ancestors' failures. That God's chosen people root themselves in a much more complicated covenantal arrangement and more transgressive understanding of divine favor than such *chosenness* might imply.

**

What we have in this complicated cast of characters is evidence of an exiled people *storying* themselves into hope. *Storying* themselves into renewed confidence in God's faithfulness in the midst of their displacement. *Storying* themselves *to* God's promises in a strange land.

And so in our story today, yes, God remains faithful to Sarai, now Sarah. Yes, God—SHE WHO IS FAITHFUL, SHE WHO SPEAKS LIFE¹—says a blessing over Sarah.

But as our text's multiple mentions of Ishmael attest, this is not a simple story of God's covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their son, Isaac.

She, God—THE WOMB OF LIFE, SHE WHO HEARS—is steadfast in her faithfulness to Hagar too. The one enslaved and abused by Sarah, the one who brought Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, into the world.

Today's text is an annunciation *about* Sarah from which Sarah herself is absent and rendered voiceless. By contrast, in last week's text Hagar becomes the only woman in all of Hebrew Scripture to *see* God.² She even *names* God in their mutual encounter.

¹ These names for God (in all caps) come from the list provided by Wida C. Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, 329-330.

² 13, *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*

How curious that these stories, meant to uplift an uprooted people, would at times make villains of their heroes and center characters you'd expect on the narrative's margins. How curious that the same SAVING GOD who would go on to deliver the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt, would first extend such extraordinary divine favor to Hagar, an Egyptian enslaved by those Hebrews' ancestors.

So, yes, we find our origins as God's people in the holy covenants established, the divine promises made, and the messianic prophecies fulfilled in these stories. We hold fast to the blessing she, God—the AGELESS ONE—spoke over us at our beginning.

But like the Judean exiles in Babylon, we must remember that God's favor never rests solely with those we've centered in our stories. We must be brave enough to write into the narrative those moments when we've confused divine favor for human privilege. When we've counted as God's blessing those spoils incurred from power and exploitation.

In light of Hagar's story, Sarah's is a cautionary tale. But Elizabeth in our gospel passage, well, she models something rather extraordinary for us today.

Renita Weems, another Biblical scholar, reminds us that (like Sarah's jealousy over Hagar) Elizabeth and her son John had every reason to be jealous of God's favor on their relatives Mary and Jesus. But unlike Sarah, Elizabeth and John recognized divine favor on another when they encountered it and even called forth blessings upon it.

She, Elizabeth, said a blessing that in turn made her, Mary, sing a song. Elizabeth made room for the expansiveness of God's favor. She, Elizabeth, Biblical scholar that she was, knew her origin story well. She knew to root herself in the blessing that our LOVING GOD spoke at the beginning of time, she, Elizabeth, must echo that blessing for another.

This, friends, is who we are. A complicated people with a not-uncomplicated relationship to God's ever-expanding covenant. A people on the journey of redemption and reconciliation. A people unwilling to shy away from where we've breached that covenant because we believe we will find God with us in the process of repair.

Imperfect as we are, friends, we are echoes of divine blessing. And we are called to speak blessings upon one another in response.

What words did she, God—MOTHER OF ALL and FOUNT OF LIFE—whisper as she breathed the breath of life into you? In other words, what blessing constitutes your being? And what song do you feel rising up within you in response?

Sing it! And go on to ask these questions of another until their song joins yours. Until we echo back every blessing that she, the GOD WHO HEARS, first spoke over all her children.

We, too, are a people exiled from the home promised to us by the JUST ONE. But if we remember the blessing from which we came, and recognize the blessing spoken over all God's children, I believe we will build a world worthy of that divine promise.

If our story starts with a blessing, may it end with a song. Amen.