

This reading is something I've come back to a great deal within the last year. It is not a story spoken of often or well known, and Hagar is not a name recognized amongst most people. She was a maid to Abraham and did as she was told by Sarai who, at this point in the story, could not have children. When Hagar became pregnant she perhaps took pride in this which angered Sarai who says God will decide who is right, but is told by Abraham to decide for herself. She then treats Hagar poorly enough that she flees. So pregnant and with nothing Hagar ran into the desert to escape the abuse.

The desert- wilderness- within the Bible is where we are met with our antagonists- our struggles. The wilderness asks of all those in it to have faith and to hold fast to their convictions. It does so with Christ as he is tempted by Satan, just as it does with Hagar here.

So, Hagar felt completely alone within the wilderness- wandering until an angel appeared to her. Notably, she did not fear this angel. Many are told "do not fear" when an angel approaches, but here there is no terror. She did not flinch at the prospect of meeting God in the wilderness, she only answered simply and calmly. So within the reprieve of a spring she was told to keep putting up with her mistress' abuse as Hagar will get her desire for a family despite the ills at home and that her dedication will not be meaningless.

In this it is not only her dedication to Abraham, it is also to her son and to God. It is not the dedication of a single monumental moment, but one that asks of her something every day- to remain faithful and strong within her love of her son and God. Hagar is later named "Keturah"- which is rooted in the word "bound" and "dedicated".

With Sarai, Hagar did all she thought she was supposed to do- she listened to her mistress and got punished for it. This is the opposite to God: within the same moment as he says to submit to the mistress, he says he will give Hagar progeny too numerous to count- the Abrahamic wish. She wanted a family, so she will have it in multitudes. He will be with her as she goes back, but she will be doing it with her own renewed strength and dedication. Important to this though is that she is walking back towards a kind of pain.

We often focus on wanting to be rid of pain, to expunge it completely from ourselves, for those we love, and for the world. Of course we do, it's pain- the etymology of which comes from French- "peine"- originally meaning "the suffering of Christ"- which is a fun bit of trivia I bring up in more contexts than I should.

Naturally, when I see Ella sick I wish I could take it from her. It's uniquely heartbreaking to hear a child's confused voice wilt as they don't understand the

illness that afflicts them. But even when we understand it better as an adult, the pain remains. Yet here, God does not ask for pain to be understood, nor does he simply remove pain as we know he could. He gives it purpose and says he will be there with you.

With her son within her, Hagar was told to face what made her flee once more but with the certainty of God beside her. He promises to be with her during this pain, and he tells her to name her son Ishmael: meaning "God hears". Once again she did not balk, and she named God "The one who sees me". This is the first time in the Bible that God is given a name- and it is not by nobility but by a literal outcast at her lowest moment in life.

So what is the lesson of Hagar? I held onto her in my head for so long. I prayed over her constantly- reverberating in my head daily was "the one who sees me"- how beautiful of a thing, how tender and full of love. In that moment whilst alone she understood God's love- to be seen is to be felt, understood, perceived as a whole and not just a summation of parts.

So, one late spring night I was out on my porch thinking it over. I was praying on repeat about Hagar: asking what it all meant for her and her son. So I sat with her beside me, her tears, her isolation, her dejection and loss of purpose. What did it mean? What was her wilderness? In my praying I came to an, what now feels an obvious answer: That we are most intimate with God while alone. Within this intimacy is where the soul and body align. It is easier to be vulnerable when the only company is the spring water reflecting you back onto yourself. There was no other noise, no distraction, no reason to hide- Hagar was just there looking back at herself honestly before speaking with God.

When praying in isolation we are forced to look inward. God asks "what are you doing here"- of course God already knows. He knows why she is there, but yet he asks from a place of compassion. Hagar could have answered dishonestly or hidden afraid of her own reflection, but she gave the truth simply. Hagar's wilderness was that she was not acting within her higher power, within her soul, nor with God. And in the spring with God, she received the volition- the ability to act righteously- she needed to go forward for herself and her son.

In the end Hagar says that first God saw her, then she saw him. In this I think she must have felt a kinship of the child within her: she sees, understands, and loves Ishmael first before he can see, understand, and love her. This is the relationship of a mother to her child, and of God to us all.

Let us pray.