

A WELL IN THE WILDERNESS

(a message delivered by Roderick D. Belin)

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. - Genesis 21:19a

“For Those Who Are Trying to Understand Black Women”

You are searching for
Trying to find
Wanting to understand
Black women?
You want to look inside
Our dreams and journey through
The dense forest of our desires?
You want to see us walk in bare feet
Through alleyways of pain, stepping
On neglect and loneliness and your
Prediction that we will bleed to death.
You want to hear us hum just hum because
We are sometimes too weary from singing
the blues to remember the words?
You want to see us in midnight lace
Stroking our men whom
You have not found whom
You refuse to understand?
You want to touch our field-heavy
Dishwater hands and trace the lines
That tell a story whose beginning
Was the beginning?
You want to know how we do it
Love
Smile
Dance
Plan
Achieve
Dream
Stay sane

And walk affirmed
In your world?
You want to know us,
Black women,
Who do it all
In spite of it all?

First:

Do you believe in miracles?

Sometimes the miracle is just surviving. To remain... when life has dealt you one severe blow after another, a succession of disappointments, abuses, estrangements and sufferings. To have staying power is the miracle. To still be... Your very existence is the means to engage the struggle, to be alive to fight one more day. To live long enough to know that your children have a future. To live long enough to have your eyes opened to see the well of water in the wilderness.

We move today from laughter and pleasure to abuse and abandonment. This is the story of a survivor. The story of a young woman wounded, bruised and chastised. This is the story of a young woman who lived a hard life, endured rough treatment and received little if any compassion. This is a story of a woman whose life no one would ever seek or desire to emulate but that millions of people live. This is the story of a woman who is not nameless, not faceless but certainly, other. This is the story of a woman who does stand for the nameless, faceless other and provides the ritual elements for their naming ceremony.

Brothers and sisters, every story has complexities. This young woman's story is woven into and unravels from the horrifying and intricate details of the Abraham family saga. This Bible story is what the Old Testament scholar Phyllis Tribble calls a "text of terror." And so, Children of Hagar, this one's for you...

- This is for those who had their bodies entered without giving permission. • This is for those who have been forced to do any humiliating thing you did not want to do. • This is for mothers who raised their children without a father present.
- This is for survivors of abuse and secret survivors of secret abuse.
- This is for folk who desired to rise up out of their conditions and ascend to a higher level. This is for those who have borne a stigma.
- This is for those who have been hated and despised by those who could not do what you could do.
- This is for those who have been victimized by the jealousy of those who had some power over you.
- This is for those who have been afraid for your children, who have lived through the nightmare that you children might die.
- This is for those who have felt like the weight of despair would crush them. • This is for those who awakened one day to find their life was completely changed. • This is for those who have served the mean and unappreciative
- This is for those who have been set upon by the powerful and malicious. • This is for those who have needed mercy and not found it.
- This is for those who have been dismissed.

- This one is for those surviving secretly under the cloak of contentment. Inoculated by excessive pleasantries and solicitousness. Or armored in the pseudo-protection of bitterness and resentment camouflaged in aloofness and supra-efficiency.
- This is for those whose joy was brief, temporary and snatched away by those who allowed their inadequacies to turn them into monsters.
- This is for those who have been used and then tossed aside.
-
- This one is for the over 2 million people forced into the slavery of prostitution or labor in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.
- This is for the 300,000 Haitian children who are enslaved in their own country. • This is for the over 17,000 slaves who enter into bondage in the United States every year.
- This is for those who resist oppression and injustice under the threat of death in Zimbabwe. Yes, This one is for Hagar and all of her children.

The story of Abraham, the story of hope and possibility, the story of promise and covenant, the story of believing and receiving, is also the story of deception and disappointment, cruelty and convenience, abuse and abandonment. The story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar is a “troubling and haunting situation [that] involves nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, progeny, and the struggle for inheritance and land.” Complexities abound in this story of the archetypal family. Days of Our Lives, Young and the Restless, Soul Food and Bold, the Beautiful ain’t got nothing on the Book of Genesis. Layers upon layers of intrigue and treachery await the peeling back of the faithful looking to see their experience made holy. Searching the pages for some recognition, some indication that the sometimes horrific details of their lives are not void of God.

That no matter how dastardly the details of the living of your days, God somehow or other is still in the midst. Why and how God allowed it to be is not yet even in the offering, I just now need to know God was there, that God is here.

So this story is for you. For you to know that your experience is holy too. You are not absent from sacred scripture. No despicable deed in your life has the power to erase you from this Bible we hold as scripture. If its out there (in the world), its in here (the Bible). Fractured and divided families characterized by selfishness and bitterness and jealousy and abuse can still be used by God. God is not looking for perfection, he is looking for obedience to His command and a willingness to go where He leads. How many folk can you think of who have done a great work in the earth only to discover that their personal lives cannot bear scrutiny. A close look at any of our lives could reveal some sordidness. Should this messiness prevent us from being used by God, from having a place in the plan of God? Should the messiness of this Biblical story sanction messiness in our lives or serve to caution us, challenge us, call us to a higher, more ethical way of being, acting, living? Certainly, this passage challenges us not to be so enamored of the promise, so enthralled by the big picture that we devastate those around us, disintegrate relationships and destroy our own integrity. You will remember that God promised to make Abraham a great nation because of his willingness to leave his family, his household, other gods, and his country and go the the place God showed to him. Abraham trusted the word of God but grieved because he did not have a son and Eliezer of Damascus, who was his

chief steward was his only heir. Then God took Abraham outside and told him, “look up into the heaven and to count the stars if you are able, for so shall your descendants be.” And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

And the Bible says that Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. Harkening back to Adam listening to the voice of Eve. 3So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5Then Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!” 6But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

God did not tell Sarah to send that innocent young woman in to be raped by her husband. She did it of her own accord. She was hasty and earthly minded. She did not know, was not attuned to the plan of God and so she made her own plan. When your plans go afoul of the plans God has for you chaos will ensue. And so Sarah had to reap the harvest she planted. Hagar did not see Sarah the way she had before after she became pregnant. I don’t know if she sought to get out of her position of servitude because she carried Abraham’s child or if she despised Sarah devaluing her and for subjecting her to sexual abuse. But Sarah then added to the abuse the Hagar had already suffered. This woman was innocent. She was an Egyptian and a slave. She was there to work, to serve. She was seeking to make a living. And she found herself in the center of sick family mess. The abuse she endured from Sarah was so severe that she had to run away.

7The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” 9The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.”

10The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” 11And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. 12He 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.” 13So she named the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” 14Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. 15Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

After this, you will remember, Sarah heard the promise of God concerning bearing her own child. She eventually did conceive and have a son. She named him Isaac, which means "laughter."

Isaac, the child promised to Sarah and Abraham, grew and was weaned. They celebrated this with a great feast. It was a great family time. There was abundant food. There was conversation and merry-making. There was a lot of fun. Isaac and Ishmael played together. All were having a wonderful time. But Sarah realized that Ishmael was playing with Isaac. They were together as equals. They were together, brothers. Sarah could not stand it. To have the son of her servant equal to her son? Impossible. And so she told Abraham to get rid of them. This was the child born to Hagar, Sarah's slave whom Sarah gave to her husband for the purpose of making a child. But now she has her own son and she must differentiate herself and her child from this slave and her child. This slave child, Ishmael the child of abuse could not inherit with Isaac, the child of laughter. This child should not consider himself worthy to really be a part of this family. Though Ishmael was the firstborn son of Abraham, his mother was a slave and a supposed rival of Sarah. And so Abraham sent them away.

I don't know how the father of many nations finds himself so emasculated that he bends to the will of Sarah. Perhaps he was still seeking to make amends for having denied that she was his wife when they were in Egypt and used her as a sex gift to the Pharaoh to save himself from death. I don't know. The Bible says however that Abraham banished his young wife Hagar and his firstborn son Ishmael into the wilderness. The Bible says that God told Abraham to send them away as Sarah had desired and that He would make Ishmael a great nation too. What continues to trouble me about this text is that no one seems to care about this young woman. God hears her cries in one instance but only responds to the voice of the child in another instance. This is a troubling passage because this woman never seems to receive comfort. In the patriarchal world in which she lives, she is only a vehicle for men and for Sarah who serves as the agent of men. All she is ever promised is that her son would become great. But what about Hagar, what about the abuse she suffered, what about the pains she bore, what about the fear she lived through. What about her humiliation? What about Hagar? What about how Hagar was devastated when she was forced to leave her home with her child of rape and enter into the wilderness, she believed, to die? What about these terrifying experiences that made up her life?

Where is the mercy?

Where is the grace?

Where is the redemption?

Where is the salvation?

Where is the deliverance?

Where is the joy?

And the Bible says that Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16Then she went and sat down opposite

him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

This is the story of a survivor. The story of young woman wounded, bruised and chastised. This is the story of a woman sacrificed for her children.

Hagar survives today to give strength to slaves, wage-earners, people who live under oppression, those whose pain seems to go unnoticed, folk who are submitted to those who treat them harshly. Hagar survives to force us to ask questions.

Hagar survives to trouble us

To remind us that we do not have all the answers

To keep us from becoming too puffed up and sure of ourselves

To unsettle us

To keep us searching in the Word

To force us to learn the meaning of sovereignty

To challenge us to stop looking for the easy or expedient explanation

And Hagar survives

To open into Holy Scriptures a path for others who have no power of their own. And yet today, I still have questions:

Where is the mercy?

Where is the grace?

Where is the redemption?

Where is the salvation?

Where is the deliverance?

Where is the joy?

At the well. The well in ancient literature is the meeting place where marriages take place. Isaac met Rebekah at the well. Meetings at wells in this literature lead to marriages. I want to suggest to you that it is at this well in the wilderness that God wed Godself to the suffering and to the poor. It was here that God joined the abused, the overlooked, the devalued. It was at this well that God demonstrated that He would be with us in our suffering, bound to the experience of the slave, the disenfranchised, the disaffected, the depressed and the disheartened.

This is the story of a miraculous young woman:

"the first person in the Bible to flee oppression

"The first runaway slave

"The first person whom a messenger of God visits

"The first to receive an annunciation, an announcement that she would bear a child and the name of the child

"The only woman to receive a divine promise of descendants,

"The only person to name God.

"The first woman in the ancestor stories to bear a child

“The first surrogate mother

“The first slave to be freed

“The first divorced wife

“The first single parent

“The first person to weep.”

And so I believe that Phyllis Tribble was infinitely correct when she said that Hagar was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.

And now it is left to the children of Hagar and Sarah to work through the messiness of our lives to find a way to be reconciled in the liberation of the oppressed.

There is no escaping the fact that God made a promise to Abraham, that God opened Sarah's womb. And yet these two folk, touched by God, used by God - treated a child of God in a very horrible way. Like chattel. Like a possession to be used and abused. We know that slavery existed then. Awful, but there was also cruelty.

...there is a danger of the blessed being abusive. not only is there a danger, there is a history of the blessed being abusive.

...those who believe themselves to have a biblical, or spiritual warrant or right to seize lands and people...

but what about moral and ethical behavior...

...look at the text...