

WORSHIP SERVICE JUNE 21, 2020

MORNING PRAYER – CALEB YODER

God our Father,

Who created all we see, who knit each of us in our mother's wombs and chose to give us birth,

We praise your name, for each of your great works.

We embrace this day as a new and fresh gift, a new beginning.

As surely as the sun rises to shine upon the fields and dispel the mists of night,
we pray for your light to shine on our souls and dispel every impulse and thought that is not from you.

We are grateful for this time of wheat harvest. It is a reminder of your faithfulness to provide for our needs.

We pray for all who are involved in the work of harvest – keep everyone safe and in good spirits.

We are thankful for all of the activities of summer, especially enjoying the first garden produce.

We also know that we have not left the pandemic that grips the world. For many of us, our routines and plans are still turned upside down.

More now than before, we are aware that the coronavirus does not affect all of us the same.

We pray especially for those who are at higher risk for serious illness and must still keep isolated in order to stay safe. We pray for your Spirit of encouragement to touch those who feel dismissed and alone during this phase of "opening up."

We continue to pray for residents and employees of nursing care facilities as they continue to take many exhausting measures to help prevent incidence of Covid-19.

We pray for those struggling with anxiety, depression, or loneliness whether because of the challenges created by the pandemic or other circumstances.

Help us to let go of our unceasing and often unhelpful thoughts to notice your strength and life that is always with us. Help us to know how to reach out and befriend one another.

Merciful God, we forget our fragility, and when we become aware of it, we are scared.

Help us to remember that our worth and the significance of our lives is kept safe in your love.

We pray that you would continue to show Alexanderwohl how to be a community of shared faith, belonging, and connection in a challenging time that challenges how we do church.

We also pray for our nation and for the world as tensions continue in the struggle for equity and respect for all.

We lament how little our country and the church has moved toward racial equality.

We lament the lack of safety that people of color experience on a daily basis and that people like me can hardly begin to understand.

We lament the grief of all the families impacted by lives unnecessarily lost to police shootings.

This is a moment in which the church has been confronted with the systemic sin of racism.

We confess we struggle to understand all that is going on and to understand history. We feel defensive.

We ask ourselves, “have I done something racist?” or “what can I really do to help?”

Racism is one of the powers and principalities in our world, and whether we mean to or not we have participated in this power.

For this we repent, and we ask for eyes to see the way to freedom in the Gospel of peace alongside sisters and brothers of color.

Spirit of truth,
only you can drive out the evil powers that not only grip our world but that infect us as well.

In these times of so much upheaval, give us discernment.

Help us to accurately recognize both systemic sin and sin within our hearts, so that we can be set free.

Holy Spirit of fire and change,

Be poured out on us so that we can be changed people,
with the strength and wisdom to plant the seeds of your justice in our world.

Help us to discover the peace you opened up through Christ and to live and share the peace of Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen

SERMON

Genesis 21:8-21

Lois Harder

The problem of the other child

You may remember that last fall Caleb and I did a series of sermons on looking at particular biblical stories through the eyes of the women in those stories. On the other hand, last October might seem like ancient history – so much has happened in our world since then! We began that series with the story of Hagar. I decided to return to this story this morning and look at it again - from a little different perspective.

One of the challenges of the times we’re currently living in is to try to see and understand life through the lens of people with black and brown skin. To state the obvious, this is a special assignment for those of us with white skin! For example, I know that some of my black colleagues read and understand the biblical story of the Exodus as a parallel to their own story of enslavement and of God leading them through that wilderness to the promised land of freedom.

To read that story through their lens is to understand that they feel they're still in the wilderness – still moving, as a people, toward the land of Canaan, but not there yet. For those of you who read *The New Jim Crow*, you may remember Michelle Alexander making the point that the “war on drugs” followed by mass incarceration of black and brown people (mostly men) became a new form of enslavement after the Civil Rights movement. And now we've moved into the era of the Black Lives Matter movement in which yes, ALL lives matter, but all lives don't matter UNTIL, specifically, Black lives matter. And so... in the interest of educating myself to be in solidarity with my sisters of color, I began to wonder how this story of Hagar and Sarah looks through their lens.

I leaned heavily on two books that I will reference. The first is called *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* by the Rev. Dr. Renita Weems. The second is titled *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* by Dr. Wilda Gafney. These women are both African American scholars, educated and active in teaching, preaching, writing and consulting broadly across the U.S. I also learned a LOT from a lecture I listened to on youtube called *The Hope of Exodus in Black Womanist Theology* by Dr. Andrew Prevot. All of these resources are listed in the bulletin if you'd like to check them out.

So, in this sermon I would like to share with you *some* of what I've begun to learn about *some* of the ways that *some* Black pastors and preachers understand the Bible. Let's see how many times I can use the word “some” in one sentence! I said it that way very intentionally – because I only have time to share SOME of what I've started to learn about SOME of the ways that SOME Black colleagues read the Bible. Black people, like all other people groups, are not a monolith – they don't all think or believe alike, of course. But it seems to me that if we're going to try to begin to understand one another, Black people and White people, for people of faith to start with how we understand the Bible might be a good starting place.

So, again, I'm simply sharing a little bit of what I've been learning recently. I'm not an expert, by any means, and I have a LOT more learning to do, but if anyone listening or watching finds this helpful or interesting, or confusing or complicated, or if you'd just like to learn more or talk about it, I welcome the conversations!

Let me offer a couple of definitions and descriptions. In the titles of the books I just mentioned, and the lecture I listened to, the term “womanist” is used. Womanist theology is a way of thinking (a school of thought) that reconsiders and revises the traditions, practices, and biblical interpretation using a lens that aims to empower and liberate African-American women in America. It brings in the perspectives and the experiences of Black women and other women of color into the conversation about theology, the study of the nature of God.

Well, one might ask, why would studying the nature of God be different for Black people (and especially for Black women) than it is for white people? As Dr. Prevot pointed out in his lecture, Black people were brought here unwillingly from Africa in chains in the bottom of ships – displaced and transported from their own land, culture, language and identity to a place of exile, enslavement and death. What they learned of the Bible early on in their time here, was that it was often used as a tool to justify their enslavement and mistreatment with verses like Ephesians 6:5

and Colossians 3:22 being taken out of context and used against them. As the decades and centuries went by, the African people, by necessity, began to acclimate and gradually to adopt some of the traditions and religious understandings of their White overlords. But if this Judeo-Christian God was a God of love and salvation, where did the enslaved, dark-skinned Africans fit in this tradition? The American system of slavery created the idea of the Negro as sub-human, a disposable item. This badly skewed the very meaning of Christianity; the African-American community had to ask the question, “What is Christianity all about?” There must be a BETTER understanding or interpretation of Christianity, especially in the afterlife of slavery.

And so, out of their own deep traditions of stories, images and songs of their own living faith came a reconsidered and revised understanding. In the last several decades this has become known in theological circles as Womanist Theology. Womanist theology has also been influenced by a school of thought called Liberation Theology. This lens comes mostly from Latin America and looks specifically from the perspective of the socio-economic plight of poor and oppressed people. So, these two people groups whose experiences definitely overlap but who are also distinct from one another have created organized, well-reasoned, published and accepted theological frameworks. And we white people can use these constructs as we try to understand their faith journeys and their experiences with God. So... Womanist Theology and Liberation Theology are terms and some new ways of understanding the Bible that I’ve been reading about.

So I decided to use the Sarah and Hagar story again because I thought some of Caleb’s excellent points in the sermon he gave on October 6 might still be in our memories and also because this is a story that is often studied and written about by Womanist and Liberation theologians – it lends itself well to helping us understand these perspectives.

I only asked Bryant to read from Genesis 21 this morning, but you may recall that this was actually the second half of the story – the first part was in Genesis 16. Sarai had willingly given Hagar to her husband Abram so that Hagar could produce a male heir, which she did, although, Dr. Weems points out that Hagar was never consulted or even considered in this arrangement. Her pregnancy momentarily changed *some* of the dynamics between the two women. Hagar became disrespectful to Sarai and Sarai became jealous and abusive towards Hagar. Hagar made a choice. She chose to run away from her mistress.

Then in chapter 21 Sarai, now Sarah, gives birth to her own son, Isaac, and orders Abram, now Abraham, to send Hagar and Ishmael away. The fact that Hagar, the slave girl and her child Ishmael are mentioned twice really brings their significance to the forefront. In Hebrew storytelling tradition, characters (and especially women) who are named carry extra importance and weight.

In Womanist or Liberation theology, both of these women might be viewed as powerless and yet complex characters, relative to Abraham. The story, after all, was never meant to focus on the women but as in all patriarchal systems, the man, Abraham was the main event. And yet, the fact that both women are named, both women are treated with some level of disdain and disrespect, both are visited by angels and by God and both women give birth to sons through whom God

establishes great nations – all of these factors lead our writers to see themselves in these women, to find themselves in these stories and thus, to find God’s love and salvation.

Black women in North America and brown women in Latin America can see themselves in this story as they read about two women of color who are set at odds against one another by a system and a culture that is designed to keep them apart, a system that benefits from their animosity, their feelings of jealousy, abandonment, the abuse and sense of inferiority that they both suffer, a system that sets up an expectation that each see the others’ child as a problem rather than as God’s faithfulness. They find themselves in the company of these women who ARE important characters in the story of God’s faithfulness to God’s people, but they are unsung heroes, the poor and the oppressed, those who struggle and whose need for God’s mercy and salvation is not some pie-in-the-sky sweet sounding poetic song but is real, it’s every day, and it’s raw.

Renita Weems writes, “For black women, Hagar’s story is peculiarly familiar. It is as if we know it by heart... it would not be totally fair to make the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarai carry all the weight of the history of race relationships in the modern world. Yet the similarities between the biblical story and the reality of relationships across racial lines among women today are undeniable. Like our own situation, the story of the Egyptian Hagar and the Hebrew Sarai encompasses more than ethnic prejudice. Theirs is a story of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation. Theirs is a story of conflict, women betraying women, mothers conspiring against mothers. Theirs is a story of social rivalry. Hence, the similarity of our stories, as black and white women in America, to the story of Hagar and Sarai warrants taking the enormous risk of opening up the deep festering wounds between us and beginning to explore our possibilities for divine healing.”

It seems to me that we are living in a time when, for a variety of reasons, the “deep festering wounds” of racism and white supremacy have come bursting into our consciousness. Our black and brown skinned siblings realize that NO ONE can be truly free until we can see God in one another and understand how God has been faithful in each other’s wilderness. The questions for reflection and discussion for our zoom call on Sunday were adapted from Renita Weems’ book.

The Board of Mission and Service as well as the Peace Committee here at Alexanderwohl is committed to offering resources and experiences that, hopefully, will help us gain some understanding. For now, they’ve invited us to watch the movie “Just Mercy” which can be seen for free in a variety of formats that are outlined in the bulletin. You can also read the book if you’d like. Then, on July 12 you’re invited to come together for a discussion about the movie and book.

There are lots of resources and ideas offered in the bulletin today as well. It’s my hope and prayer that we can move forward together, learning, listening, opening ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this time of protests, pain and opportunities. Amen.