

*“The Outcast”*

*Genesis 21.8-21*

*The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC*

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One of the wonderful ways people of faith can use scripture is as a dialogue partner. Our sacred texts are not always a guide to correct behavior, especially those that are separated from us by so many millennia as the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. (Sometimes, more conservative Christians will justify homophobia by saying that biblical models of marriage ought to pertain to 21st century models... I don't think they are remembering the practices of polygamy and concubinage that we read about in Genesis.) So, if the Bible isn't a guide for right behavior, then why should we be in dialogue with it? My answer is that it provokes the thoughts of people of faith to grapple deeply with what matters most: the important, rather than the urgent. One of the learnings I take away from our pandemic time is that we shouldn't allow the urgent always to take precedence over what is truly important...just because we are in a hurry.

When you hear this story as a 21st century American, where does your mind go when you hear about a darker-skinned foreign woman, an Egyptian, who is a slave to a man and his wife? It probably goes where my mind went, too, namely to the experience of the enslavement of African-Americans for 246 years and the subsequent experience of institutionalized racism that obviously persists today. How is the Bible a dialogue partner for us? As I began to think about the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out, I couldn't get this song out of my head:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear  
You've got to be taught from year to year  
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear  
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
And people whose skin is a different shade  
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late  
Before you are six or seven or eight  
To hate all the people your relatives hate  
You've got to be carefully taught

Those words from the musical, *South Pacific*, were written by Oscar Hammerstein in the 1940s, and they still ring true 70 years later. We are not born racist, but some of us are born into families where we have been “carefully taught to hate and fear.” And all of us are born into a society that has been “carefully taught to hate and fear,” in so many

subtle and not-so-subtle ways. My prayer for us is that we keep making progress in terms of understanding the racism that is built into our systems in the United States. Last Sunday afternoon, the Interfaith Council and World Wisdoms Project (both led by Plymouth members) sponsored a deeply moving Zoom call to listen to the voices of people of color in Fort Collins, and those of us who identify as European-Americans were invited to turn our microphones and cameras off and just listen. That is a good starting place for those of us who are white: to listen first and let it soak in. One of the examples of institutional racism that my colleague, the Rev. David Williams, brought up was pretty simple: African-Americans not getting favorable decisions or loan rates at banks, even when the “equal-opportunity lender” decal is on the bank’s window. I’ve heard more than a few stories of people who get pulled over by the police for “driving while Black.” Even something as subtle as not engaging people of color in an informal conversation happens frequently.

My friend, the Rev. Ron Buford, who came up with the “God Is Still Speaking” campaign in the UCC, says, “We’re all a little bit racist.” He even started a 12-step program at his church called “Racists Anonymous.” We may not be racists who fly Confederate flags or use derogatory terms for people of color...but we — all of us — have inbred racism. We make assumptions, hold stereotypes, have preconceived notions based on what we’ve grown up with. And it’s time — it is way past time — for us to work harder to see our own racism, whether internalized as people of color or perpetuated as white people, and to keep trying to extinguish it.

Many churches have not been true to the gospel in proclaiming an individualized salvation that perpetuated slavery early in the history of this nation and condoned and endorsed Jim Crow laws, lynching, and an overtly racist agenda in subsequent years. The split of Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist denominations along the Mason-Dixon line during the Civil War was only resolved by denominational re-union in the late 20th century, and the Southern Baptist Convention still hasn’t reconciled with the American Baptist Churches. And I won’t gloat about the role of Congregationalists in the Abolition movement, because we all have work to do in helping to examine and purge Christian racism in the American church. I hope the irony isn’t lost on you that there is not a single white person in the Bible, with the possible exception of some unnamed members of the churches in Rome or Greece.

But let’s get back to this foundational narrative in which the Egyptian slave, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, are literally cast out by Sarah with the consent of Abraham. Do you think God would actually have sent a messenger, an angel, to say, “Don’t worry about Hagar and Ishmael, they’ll have a great nation, too?” I’m not so sure...but that is how this ancient story is relayed to us. And the story doesn’t end there. God’s interaction doesn’t end there.

Hagar is the first character in Genesis to give God a name — El Roi — which means the god who sees. For God, Hagar and Ishmael and not invisible, they are not forgotten...they are beloved.

God helps to provide a way where there is seemingly no way. While Abraham sent them out with a skin full of water and some bread, God shows them a well with fresh water, and God continues to be present with Ishmael, who grows up in the

wilderness of Paran in the Sinai Peninsula, marries a woman from Egypt, and becomes the forbear of the Arab tribes.

Abraham abandons Hagar and Ishmael, but God doesn't. God sees them. There is a deep truth there. God doesn't abandon us, doesn't abandon our African-American sisters and brothers, but sees all of us through. God helps us to find a way where there is no way, to guide our feet along the pathway of justice and righteousness. Together, we must, as Dr. King said in 1963 when he quoted Isaiah, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together." It is the strength and the presence of God in challenging times that will help us to keep working for the kind of world envisioned by prophets and sages and by Jesus himself.

Just because a pandemic or another human being says that you are invisible, have no worth and casts you aside...that doesn't change God's perspective...and it shouldn't change ours. I was talking with a member of our church last week, and I said that we cannot fail to take advantage of this moment of tragedy, disruption, and distress: we must seize the moment to help continue the movement toward anti-racism.

God will show us the way toward the well where we can refresh ourselves and others so that we can keep on working for justice and peace and the realm that Jesus himself proclaimed. Are you with me in the struggle? Are you empowered by God? Then what can stand in our way?

God did not abandon Hagar and Ishmael, nor will God abandon us. Let's keep up the struggle.

May it be so. Amen.

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