

**Isabella Baumfree was a Dutch-speaking African-American woman born into slavery in rural New York in 1797.** Isabella, also known as Belle, endured great misery as a young female slave, but even in the midst of it, she grew to be a woman of great faith. She regularly built a temple of brush in the woods, an old African tradition, and there she communicated with God as if God were a familiar presence. She was forced to marry another slave she did not love and she bore five children. Isabella had worked tirelessly for her master, John Dumont, for 16 years, when he promised her her freedom. After the master reneged on his promise and refused to let her go, **Isabella listened to God when God told her to walk away from slavery.** With her youngest baby, Sophia, in her arms, 29-year-old Isabella left Dumont's farm in 1826 and walked to freedom.

She found her way to the home of a white couple, who took her and her baby in. While there, Belle learned that her son Peter, then five years old, had been sold illegally by Dumont to an owner in Alabama. Belle took the issue to court and, after months of legal proceedings, got back her son. **Isabella Baumfree became one of the first black women to go to court against a white man and win the case.**

**In 1843 Isabella had a pivotal experience with God.** She sensed the Holy Spirit's call to change her name from Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth and to embark on a mission to travel, and preach for the abolition of slavery. Through the decades that followed she would become a seminal voice in the fight for freedom for all African-American slaves alongside other significant abolitionists like Frederick Douglass. **She would also work with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, bringing her own unique and needed perspective as a former slave to the fight for women's rights.**

Nell Painter is a biographer who wrote this of Sojourner Truth:

*“...the force that brought her from the soul murder of slavery into the authority of public advocacy was the power of the Holy Spirit. Her ability to call upon a supernatural power gave her a resource claimed by millions of black women and by disempowered people the world over. **Without doubt, it was Truth's religious faith that transformed her from Isabella, domestic servant, into Sojourner Truth, a hero for three centuries at least.**”* [BEAT.]

**I begin with this story because it has a lot of resonance with another story we're going to look at today.** We've been exploring over the last couple of Sundays, stories that come to us at the very beginning of the Bible, starting with the opening chapters of Genesis. We looked at creation, and a couple of weeks ago, Rabbi Dorothy Richman led us through a story of the Tower of Babel.

Today, we're continuing the series as we enter a new part of the narrative, a section where the storytellers seemed to be shifting from a more primordial mythic kind of storytelling to more of what we might think of as a historical narrative, as the authors begin to tell the story of particular people that gave rise to the Jewish nation and faith. **The shift happens around Genesis 12, when we meet the man we'd come to know as Abraham.** He is the man portrayed as the father of the Hebrew people, through which would eventually come Judaism, and by extension, Jesus and the early church. But rather than focus on Abraham himself, the character we're going to zero in on is a woman found in the Abraham narrative. But before we look at her, we need to understand the context in which she appears.

**You may know the story of Abraham.** Initially Abram, he was a successful businessman, a man of wealth and prestige in the great metropolitan city of his time, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram was married to a woman named Sarai; she was known for her remarkable beauty. The one thing this couple, in many ways an “it” couple of their day, seemed to lack was children, and in the patriarchal culture in which they lived, this lack was a major deficit. But by the time we meet them, the couple is advanced in age; he is 75, she is 65, and likely they have long since given up on having children of their own.

It is to this successful, but childless, business man that **the God of the Hebrew People, eventually known as Yahweh, speaks in Genesis 12.** God tells him to go, to take his family and move to the land that God will show him. This God promises to make his family into a great nation which will bless all the peoples of the earth.

And so Abram set out on his great journey to Canaan, the land of promise, inspired by the word from this deity Abram had encountered, **which carried in it implicitly a promise to receive the one thing he lacked, children.** Through trials and setbacks he, his wife, their servants and livestock all made it to Canaan, but the promise that Abram received from God remained unfulfilled. The years advanced and advanced and yet Sarai’s belly lay flat; her body, barren. Still, God continued to speak to Abram and tell him that his ancestors would number more than the stars in the sky.

And it is here that we pick up our story in Genesis 16. Let’s read the first six verses.

***Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and 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.***

***3 So, 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.4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then 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!”***

***6 But 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.***

Alright, we’re going to stop there to consider some of what we’ve heard. So in this passage a new character enters the scene; **a slave-girl named Hagar.** Who is Hagar? In the story itself we see that how you answer that question might depend on your perspective. To Sarai and Abram she is merely a slave. They never once refer to her by name. Sarai simply calls her ‘my slave’. **To Sarai, she is not so much a person as a possession, and at this point in the story, a very important one.**

Historical evidence shows us that Sarai’s suggestion to Abram was very much in keeping with the norms of the day. Free women of means who were unable to bear children of their own often gave

their slave girls to their husbands as surrogates to bear their mistresses children. Sarai could be considered the mother of the children. The slave would have no legal rights to them, they would be Sarai's children as if she had born them herself. If any of you are fans of Hulu's *Handmaid's Tale*, this may sound familiar. This story is the template essentially for Gilead. **So to Sarai, this slave girl is merely a means to an end; a way for her to finally have a family.**

But Sarai and Abram do not have the only perspective on this young woman. From the first, **the narrator gives her a name, "Hagar"**. By doing so, the author is reminding us that despite what Sarai and Abram might think, this young woman is more than simply an alternative womb for Sarai. **She is a person with a name and a story of her own.**

**Hagar, the slave girl, is given to Abram.** He sleeps with her and she conceives. And as her belly begins to grow, so does her value in the household. This young woman is now more than a slave, she is carrying the child of the household patriarch. **Likely for the first time in her life, Hagar is given attention and status; people notice her. Hagar feels proud, less like a slave and more like a free person.** At least for these nine months this child is hers and no one can take that away. The text says "she began to look on her mistress with contempt". Hagar begins to see herself as an equal, perhaps even Sarai's better because she is giving Abram what Sarai never could. This perceived lack of respect is infuriating to Sarai. She runs to Abram complaining and asking him to put the slave in her place. He weakly gives Sarai permission to do just that and her treatment is harsh enough that, despite the danger that could come to her and her unborn child, Hagar runs away.

And this is where the story takes an especially interesting turn. Reading on:

***<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"***

***"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.***

***<sup>9</sup> Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."***

***<sup>11</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her:***

***"You are now pregnant  
and you will give birth to a son.  
You shall name him Ishmael,  
for the LORD has heard of your misery.***

***<sup>12</sup> He will be a wild donkey of a man;  
his hand will be against everyone  
and everyone's hand against him,  
and he will live in hostility  
toward all his brothers."***

***13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.***

***15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.***

OK, before we move on, we're going to take a moment to define some of these names because they lend some insight to the story. The first is Hagar. **"Hagar" means "one who flees"** which ends up being appropriate. Then there's Ishmael, the name God instructs Hagar to name her son. **"Ishmael" means "God hears"**. The name that Hagar gives to God is **"El Roi"**. **This means "the God who sees me."** And finally we have the name of the well, **Beer Lahai Roi which means "well of the living one who sees me."** Interesting, huh?

So what's happened here? Hagar ventures out on her own into the desert, the desert between Canaan and Egypt. Now this is a dangerous proposition for a number of reasons. **First of all, she's heading out on her own: a pregnant woman in a desert.** This is not a hospitable place to maintain a pregnancy. Furthermore, **she is risking even worse treatment as a runaway slave if she should be caught.** Slaves in that day were often branded so that if they tried to run away they could be returned to their owners. Any free person who was caught harboring or even assisting a runaway slave was to be executed. Any free person who helped return a slave to his or her owner would be rewarded. So it's quite possible that Hagar would have been unable to hide her status as a runaway slave, and even if she was not branded, she was a single, pregnant young woman with no means to provide for herself or her unborn child. **However you look at things, Hagar is in a desperate, impossible place.**

But there, in the desert, Hagar the slave girl **had an encounter that changed her story.** The text says she met the "angel of the LORD". ***Who is the angel of the LORD?***

There are actually a couple of interpretations of this phrase. Some Biblical scholars think she saw an **actual angel who is there to communicate with her on behalf of God.** But others have reason to believe that rather than one of God's created beings, **this is actually a manifestation of God's very self; what theologians call a "theophany"** - God in some sort of human-like form. Essentially, some Christians understand this to be a pre-New Testament appearance from Jesus himself. Whoever it is, this being clearly communicates directly with Hagar on behalf of Yahweh, the God of Abraham.

**God's message to Hagar may seem strange in some ways to us, even cruel.** The being encourages her to return to Sarai and submit to her. How can this be God's best for Hagar? Isn't this returning Hagar to her place of neglect and abuse? The oppressed returning to the oppressor? Yet we also know the desperate nature of her circumstances. **In the present circumstances, choices between bad and worse, return to her mistress was the safest option both for the safety of Hagar and her child.** So while God asked Hagar to do that which seemed confusing, even painful, **God also assured her of God's provision for her. She wasn't going back empty handed.** She was going back with her own covenant from the Divine. This divine being spoke to her of the child she

would bear. **God pointed out that this would be *her* son, that through him, *her* descendants will increase, not Abram's and Sarai's.** That is an important point. That is something she has not yet encountered. **One who sees Hagar not as a womb, but as a mother.**

Further, God painted a picture for Hagar of who her son would be. While we may find the imagery strange in our contemporary context, essentially what God was communicating was that **Hagar's son Ishmael would have the freedom that she so desired.** Remember Hagar's name meant, "one who flees". It reflects her desperation to risk everything in order to secure freedom for herself and her unborn child. **God's message to Hagar assures her that her son Ishmael and his descendants would not be slaves like her but would live free, on their own terms.** They would not put down or oppressed by others. This word was a word of great hope to Hagar, and so she did what God asked, despite the humility and courage it must have required. [BEAT]

So as we consider the story of Hagar the slave girl, who lived nearly four thousand years ago, what messages might God be speaking to us through her story today? I'd like to suggest a few.

First, the story of Hagar reminds us that **God sees the people that others refuse to see and listens to the voices that others refuse to hear.**

Hagar was less than a person to Sarai and Abram. But God, the same God who made Hagar, who made Ishmael, *saw* them, *cared* for them, *heard* their cries. This is what was so moving to Hagar. **This God was not just the God of the wealthy male of privilege, Abram. This God saw *her* – the invisible one; regarded by the others around her as just a collection of body parts - a container for someone else's dreams.** Think about it: she was a woman, a foreign woman of color, a slave reduced to such little worth in her culture that she was not even given the right to nurture the child she was forced to bear for the man she was forced to sleep with.

But **what an unjust, broken system calls acceptable, God does not see as just.** God would not let Hagar's cries, or the cries of her child go unheard. God responded to his daughter in an intimate way. **In Genesis 16, Hagar became the first person in the Bible after the fall from the Garden of Eden to see a manifestation of God with her own eyes.** It is right that she should wonder at the fact that she has now seen God. But just as wondrous, she marvels at the fact that **God has seen *her*.**

In that moment, Hagar gives this God a name. To her, this is not "Yahweh" or "the Lord", the transcendent being above all. **This is "the God who sees me."** This is the God who sees the invisible. The God who sees the poor. The God who sees the outcast. The God who sees the oppressed. **And not only does this God see, but this God *draws near*.** This God brings comfort to the comfort-less. This God brings hope to the hope-less. And while, on the surface, Hagar's circumstances may not have changed, in an instant, everything has. Because she has seen her God and she knows this God has seen her. [BEAT]

**Some of you have heard me tell my story maybe more than once, and for those who have; I ask your grace as I tell it again, but I also know a number of you haven't, so I'll share a bit. I grew up in Southern California, uncommitted and unexperienced in any real way spiritually. And then through some miraculous-to-me encounters, I came to faith in Jesus in the late 90s as a**



college student in Chicago, pursuing a degree in theatre. It changed the trajectory of my life. I felt like an unlikely Christian who didn't fit in traditional church structures in so many ways, but who couldn't deny the healing power I'd experienced encountering the Divine in Jesus, and I longed to be a part of creating spaces for others like me to have their own encounters.

Over many years, I came to believe that my longing to cultivate these spaces was ultimately an **invitation to pastor a church start-up in Berkeley California that would welcome all kinds of people, including being fully LGBTQ inclusive**. By 2013 I had moved cities to train on staff under another female lead pastor while I was having babies and attending seminary. I was a year from finishing my degree and from our hoped for move to California to begin the work of starting a church. I had been preparing for that project for over a decade. I felt ready. I went through all of the assessments needed in my denomination of churches to be blessed as a church planter. As a woman, I was counter-cultural, to be sure, but my denomination was encouraging. I'd passed the assessment with flyer colors. In fact they wanted me to be the face of female church planters - the model our movement would learn from. I was really hopeful about what was to come.

But then the conversation about how the churches in this movement would handle LGBTQ inclusion began to happen publicly in ways that made it clear that pastors like me, who wanted to start inclusive churches, who hoped there was room in the movement at least to agree to disagree about the issue, **would not be welcome to remain a part of the greater community**.

Things came to a head during an exchange at our denomination's national conference. **I was face to face with the person who held all the power to bless me to move forward with this group of churches that had become my family, or to end that possibility. And as I sat down with him, I felt as if the Spirit of God was remarkably close**. I felt like the Spirit brought me out of myself, and I was watching this moment from the ceiling. I saw from above this man and and I in our little chairs in this church lobby, with God saying. "Be aware Leah. This is a significant moment. This is the moment you're being kicked out of this movement. He may not say the words, but that's what's happening right now." And it was. That was the moment that I was told because I couldn't come to a theological agreement with church leadership about gay Christians, this was no longer my family. It was the moment I was told that I had to decide "if this was the hill I was willing to die on" or not. And as I stood my ground and committed myself to what I could not deny that Jesus has been calling me into for over a decade, it was the moment the bridges were burned and I could no longer go back. **To the community that had been my home - my perspective was now irrelevant. My journey was dismissed. My voice was silenced**.

In that season, **the pastors in my home church, where I was on staff, who were still supportive, had been exploring a newer prayer model called "Immanuel Prayer"**. The premise is that Jesus was given the name "Immanuel" in Scripture, a name that means "God with us". Immanuel Prayer considers in **what ways Jesus might actually show up in the landscape of our every day circumstances**. It's a prayer model centered in memory. One recalls a memory in prayer and asks Jesus to reveal where he may have been or what he may have been doing when that event took place. A couple of months after my grand showdown and expulsion from my movement of churches, **I was deeply grieved and depressed**. But in that season, my friends prayed with me, and in my mind, **it was as if Jesus showed up in that memory. What he was doing surprised me**.

I saw a picture of myself sitting in the chair, being mansplained and berated by this person of power. My head hung low, I was fighting back tears of anger, grief, and shame. **But Jesus did not show any of that angst. Instead Jesus was calmly and coolly kneeling on the floor behind me.** One of his hands was in the small of my back. The other hand was doodling in the carpet.

This picture reminded me of **a moment in the Bible when Jesus shows up for a woman who is being unjustly targeted in order to entrap Jesus.** As her accusers bring her to Jesus, enraged by her participation in an adulterous relationship, calling for her stoning, Jesus calmly doodles in the dirt. He doesn't engage with their anger. He calmly defuses it by revealing the weakness of the **accusers**. And he refuses to condemn the woman, serving as her defender instead.

In this moment, **Jesus powerfully revealed to me that in that painful experience when my humanity was unseen,** when my personhood was unacknowledged, when I, like the woman brought forward for stoning, or like Hagar, was used and discarded to serve another's agenda, **Jesus was with me.** Jesus saw me. Jesus heard me. Jesus understood what was happening and was not rattled by the false accusations.

**All of us, in some way, have had moments like Hagar.** All of us have had moments like the woman accused of adultery. Sadly, because of different experiences of marginalization in our culture, some of us have had many more of them than others. **But all of us at some point or another suffer the tragic affects of brokenness that have caused us to feel isolated, alone, misunderstood, unloved.** Whatever the circumstances in our lives, we all have places we need to hear this truth: **God sees you.** Hagar reminds us that in those experiences, God sees, God hears, and God draws near to us to reveal God's own self to us.[BEAT]

The second important lesson from this story is that **God brings redemption and healing, even to the consequences of injustice and brokenness in our world.**

Hagar's story was not supposed to happen. Slavery is not supposed to happen. Mass incarceration of people of color is not supposed to happen. Bankruptcy from medical bills: not supposed to happen. Over four years of contaminated water in Flint, Michigan (and also in Oakland, by the way): not supposed to happen. The trauma induced by separating children from their parents who are simply trying to bring their kids to a place with greater safety and security, that is **not supposed to happen.** **Whatever cultural justification Sarai and Abram might have offered, whatever laws they thought they were observing, *did not make their actions right.*** God did not call Abram and Sarai to Canaan for this. God's intention was to work the *miraculous*. God intended to build a nation through Abram, not by Sarai's strategies, **but through God's mighty power.** God had *promised* again and again that God would give Abram children, but Sarai blamed that same God for withholding children from her. "You see that the Lord has prevented me from having children," she told Abram. It's as if she was saying "If God can't fulfill his promises then I'll have to help him along."

This story echoes one told only 13 chapters before, and in that narrative echo the storyteller implicitly lets us know **that the choice here is not good.** A wife begins to question God's care and provision; she offers her husband forbidden fruit. He takes and eats. And in that act of rebellion, perfect community with God is broken. Like Eve before her, Sarai offers her husband an opportunity to take

their fate in their own hands. Like Adam before him, Abram is easily persuaded, and broken relationship with God bears negative consequences.

But miraculously, **that's not the end of the story**. In the future, Abram and Sarai will be given new names. They will become Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish faith and by extension the Christian church. In thirteen years, ninety year old Sarah will bear her one hundred year old husband a son named Isaac. God will display God's glory, even through those who doubted it would be done. And that's not all.

The casualties of Sarai and Abram's grave moral error will not simply be collateral damage. **God intervenes on behalf of those who, through no fault of their own, become tangled in the web that Sarai and Abram weave**. God brings hope, freedom, and redemption to the slave named Hagar and the baby named Ishmael.

**There's an epilogue to the story of Hagar**. When Hagar returns to Abraham's home something shifts. Her story has changed. She bears a son to Abram and he is beloved and cared for by his father, **but he is never given to Sarai**. He remains Hagar's son. Thirteen years later, when Isaac is finally born to Sarah, Sarah once again is overcome with jealousy and fears that Ishmael will inherit alongside Isaac. She drives the two of them away, but now Ishmael is old enough to survive alongside his mother and help provide for her. Hagar and Ishmael are miraculously met and cared for by God once again in the desert, and they finally achieve as a family the freedom Hagar longed for for so long. Tradition in the Muslim faith even believes that Hagar's family line became the Arab people, and devout Muslims honor her as the matriarch of their faith and ancestor to the prophet Muhammed. For Hagar and Ishmael, **God delivers on God's promises, and to the consequence of sin and brokenness, God brings real redemption and healing**. [BEAT]

**Finally, the third takeaway I believe God has for us, is an invitation to lift up the stories of God's encounters with those on the margins**. That means at times both having the courage to tell our own stories, as well as honoring and amplifying other's stories, particularly of people suffering oppression, and God's solidarity with them. We must tell these stories even when, and perhaps especially when, the inclusion of these stories complicates our narratives.

Remember, that **when we say our sacred texts are divinely inspired, most of us don't mean by that that God dictated a book word for word for humans to write down and then worship as the words of God**. We mean that the Spirit of God was present in a process that the community of God engaged in over centuries, of collecting and writing down a number of stories, poems, songs, letters that tell the greater story of our faith. What's fascinating, and perhaps points to the hope that God is actually alive and indeed involved in this process after all, is that our narratives are messy and they includes stories like Hagar's.

**Winston Churchill famously said "History is written by the victors."** And when we look at the ways we tell our grand stories of cultural identity, of nationalism, that is often true. White supremacy has long been the filter through which our own nation has told it's story, as European immigrants shaped a narrative that celebrated their own "manifest destiny" in their "New World", and repressed the stories of theft of land, and genocide, of indigenous people and the kidnapping, enforced



enslavement, rape, and torture of persons from the African continent. **To tell the stories of both starkly alongside each other has been too complicating, and the filter of suppression of narratives continues in full strength today.**

But here in the ancient stories of our faith, Hagar's story is included, despite the fact that it **doesn't make the patriarch of the Jewish faith or his wife look very good.** It would have been a cleaner narrative for Abraham and Sarah for Hagar's story to be forgotten or minimized. But the fact that it's here, means that the community of God at some point heard this story, and **they sensed the Spirit of God in it's truth.** They recognized it's importance.

**How did this story come to be included?** We must assume that, if this story is based on any historical truth, it began with Hagar herself finding a safe place to share her story. There were no witnesses to the encounter she had with the theophany in the desert, *she* was the witness. At some point *she* found a safe community of people to share her story with, and they recognized the weight of it, they felt the Divine voice within it, and they themselves shared the story. Over time it became part of the narrative - a complicating part, to be sure, but a necessary one that reminds us that our leaders, even those we gratefully owe our heritage too, and desire to honor, are also flawed human beings. Our leaders make mistakes that have severe consequences. They participate in systems of oppression that harm real people. **And again, and again, God sees the suffering that those with power and privilege are often blind to, and God accompanies the Hagers, the women threatened with stoning, the Sojourner Truths, all of us who find our stories threatening to be silenced, and the Spirit brings redemption and the grace and empowerment to let our stories live.**

**What story do you need to tell?** What story do you need to amplify? What would it mean, Haven, for us to be a community that lives into this part of the heritage of the people of God: creating a safe space for these complicating stories to be told, to be lifted up, and for the Spirit to be heard in them? **This, Haven, is what I believe we are being called to fiercely pursue: cultivating the safety, openness and discernment needed to allow these stories to be an important part of the narrative of faith we are telling as a community.** My hope and prayer is that as these stories come forward, as they're shared and honored, each of you, like Hagar, will have your own wondrous experience of being seen and heard and known by the Divine, **leading you yourself to declare "I have seen the God who sees me."** Amen.