

Are You There God? It's Me, Hagar.

Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:26-31 by Patty Friesen June 25/23

Are you there God? It's me, Hagar. Do you remember me? I've been calling to you ever since I was sent from my home in Egypt and I wonder if you've been listening. My mother was a slave to Pharaoh's royal court in Egypt and so I also became a slave in Pharaoh's court when I was young. It wasn't a bad life in the court, serving the harem, fanning Pharaoh's wives and concubines and bringing them cool drinks. We young slaves got to see the beautiful clothes the harem wore and comb their hair. We were to anticipate their every need and not speak. We went with them as they went to the temple of Isis to worship the goddess and protector of Pharaoh. My mother would ask Isis for protection for she and me as well - for all the good that did. Isis disappointed us.

Life was pretty calm and predictable until one day, a desert tribe from the land of Canaan wandered into Egypt because there was famine in their land (Genesis 12:10). Their leader was named Abram and he brought his sister Sarai who was very beautiful and they settled in the green valley with their flocks and herds. None of us knew how this would change the futures of both our peoples forever. Pharaoh invited them to his court and was so impressed with Sarai that he kept her in his harem since he believed. I was given to this foreigner to look after. I felt sorry for her. She was as caught in her circumstances as I was. From that moment our fates were bound together.

While Sarai was beautiful, she was different, spoke a different language and refused to pray to Isis. She prayed to her Canaanite God, who she called El Shaddai, the feminine term of God of Life. She said also there was the masculine term for God of all the gods called Yahweh, who had called them in a vision from their home in Babylon

to the land of Canaan and promised that they would be blessed, yet when they got there, there was famine. I wondered how she could believe in a God who had disappointed them.

Pharaoh loved Sarai and gave Abram lots of camels and sheep in payment for her, but weird things began happening in Pharaoh's court, like plagues of drought and grasshoppers and flies. Pharaoh and all of us called on Isis to help us but it was like we were under a curse. Abram would come to visit Pharaoh and ask to see his "sister" Sarai but one day I caught them kissing and told Pharaoh and Pharaoh was enraged by Abram's betrayal. Abram told him Sarai was really his wife but he was scared Pharaoh would kill him if he knew the truth. He was lucky Pharaoh didn't kill him right there and then but Pharaoh was scared of Abram and his God so Pharaoh kicked them out of Egypt and told them to go back to the land of their God.

The problem was, I was stuck going with them. I prayed to Isis to help me. "Are you there Isis? It's me, Hagar. I'm stuck with these people. I don't know their language and I don't know where we are going. All I know is that I am leaving everything I know. Help me escape or send me back to Egypt or if you can't do that - please let Canaan be not too bad."

Canaan was bad. Dusty old place with warring tribes and without the great Nile River to water it. We languished there and even Sarai missed the luxuries of Egypt. I had stopped praying to Isis who had abandoned me but Sarai kept praying to her God of Life, El-Shaddai to give her a child which I thought was ridiculous because by now Sarai was 80 years old but she said God promised a child and a promise is a promise.

Sarai and I had been close in Egypt but after a decade in Canaan, we were growing further apart. Her desperation made her depressed and angry with God and with me. I tried to keep out of her way as much as possible but she would look at me with envy and rage and I could see she was cooking up a plan and it wasn't going to be a good one. Her helplessness was making us all helpless.

One day I heard her take charge and tell Abram, "God is not giving me a child so let Hagar bear your child for me." I didn't have a say and apparently neither did Abe and I knew who would get the short end of the stick - me. Sure enough, I got pregnant but I didn't have to work so hard. I could put my feet up and relax a bit. They didn't want to lose this baby but Sarai was full of rage and jealousy and became abusive. So much for this becoming her baby - she acted like she wanted to end its life. Abe wouldn't intervene and let her do whatever she wanted.

I couldn't take her insults and slaps anymore so I ran away into the wilderness and camped by a spring of water. I didn't know if I could make it to Egypt. I didn't know what to do. I was lost and called out, "Are you there El-Shaddai, Mothering God? It's me, Hagar. An angel found me (16:7) and called me by name, "Hagar - where are you coming from and where are you going to?" I told the angel I was running away from Sarai and not going back. The angel told me to go back because God had heard my affliction and I would bear a son and name him Ishma - el which means God hears. And God would make him a great nation also.

Because God named my son, I re-named God - El- Roi, meaning God who sees me. This God belonged to me as well as Abram and Sarai. This God was both El-Shaddai – God of Life and Yahweh - God of the universe above all gods but was also

El-Roi - the God who looked and saw me and my plight. And I named the well where this encounter took place - Beer-la-hal-roi meaning The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me. I knew from my experience that God would continue to see and hear me - as a living and personal God and this spring of water would be a place I could come back to when I needed to get away. And I went back and gave birth to Ishmael and Sarai and I kept in our separate tents.

Meanwhile El-Shaddai/Yahweh visited Abram again in the form of 3 angels who had lunch with him and promised him another son named Isaac meaning laughter because both Abram and Sarai had laughed derisively at yet another promise of that. They got new names - Abraham meaning ancestor of multitudes and Sarah meaning ancestress or matriarch of multitudes. God gave them the sign of circumcision as a sign for obedience which Abraham and Ishmael and the other men participated. (Genesis 17/18)

Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah laughed for joy instead of derision. Ishmael loved Isaac like a baby brother and would play with him but Sarah's jealousy rose up again and she made Abraham kick us out to the wilderness again. I looked for the Well of Living Water but we got lost and ran out of water and Ishmael nearly died but El-Roi - the God who sees, saw and heard our cry again and there was water in the desert for us that saved our lives.

We continued to live there in the wilderness until Ishmael was old enough to marry and I got him a wife from Egypt, not from those Israelites. While we lived separate from Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac both came together to bury Abraham and

our Ishmaelite descendants served in the court of King David and still to this day consider Abraham their father. (Genesis 21/25)

I no longer ask, are you there God? I was the first person in Genesis to be encountered by a physical form of God in an angel, and the first woman to be given a promise that I would bear a son and give him a particular name with God's name in it – Ish-ma-el. (Does any of that sound familiar – like Emmanu - el?). And I am the only person in the OT to name God according to my experience of God in the wilderness. I used my personal experience with God to shape new language for God as a physical, living being who sees and hears each one of us. I adjusted my understanding of God's salvation in my experience of desperation and rejection and exclusion. (Peter Enns, Curve-ball, p. 55).

All sorts of rejected women find their stories in me. I am the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the pregnant young woman, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady, the homeless woman, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others." (New Interpreter's Commentary)

My ancient story is timeless and inspiring as we downtrodden women continue to experience and name God based on our experiences. My story continues to challenge the community of faith to respond to the Hagers of our world.

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