

11/28/21 Sermon by Rev. Andi Fox**Genesis 16: 7-13; Luke 1: 26-38**

It's a new church year. Advent is here, yet again. Some years I don't feel like doing Lent, but I never don't feel like doing Advent for some reason. This Advent our church is doing something a little different. We're going to be using a new translation of scriptures and a new lectionary to choose our scripture readings from. We'll be using *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church Year W* by Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School. Prof. Gafney is a Black womanist theologian who has dedicated her work to lifting up the voices of women in scripture. She has found that many people--both lay and clergy--don't know a lot about the women we have in scripture--women like Hagar who we'll talk more about in a little bit. Prof. Gafney published *A Women's Lectionary* to help all Christians hear the voices of women more clearly. There's more information in this month's newsletter which will be emailed out in a couple of days.

Mary, of course, is an amazing woman who we hear about a lot in Advent, and she stands among many, many other women in scripture. Mary isn't the only woman to be told by a messenger of God that they would have children. Hagar is the first woman in scripture to receive such an announcement, as we read. Hagar's story is complicated. She is a slave to Sarai and Abram who later are renamed Sarah and Abraham. I'll be using the names Abraham and Sarah since that's how they're better known. When Sarah can't conceive she gives Hagar to Abraham as a concubine, which is a sentence that deeply disturbs me. Hagar becomes pregnant, and the text says she 'loses respect' for Sarah. We don't know what that means. We don't know if Hagar actually disrespected Sarah or if Sarah's jealousy got out of hand. This is a time when women were defined by their ability to have children, and Sarah wanted to have Hagar as a surrogate

birth-giver for Abraham's children. I just don't know what Sarah thought was going to happen. Wasn't this what she wanted, Hagar to have a child so she could have a child? Whatever the reason, Sarah treated Hagar badly enough that she ran away. And, surprisingly, God then speaks directly to Hagar in a physical and most likely emotional desert.

The words of God are not what I want them to be. God sends Hagar back to suffering at the hands of Sarah and Abraham. But God makes a promise to Hagar--a promise that is very similar to the one She made with Abraham. 'You will have so many children they won't be able to be counted. Name your son Ishmael which means "God hears" because God has heard your mistreatment.' This says to me that even in horrible situations hope continues, which is certainly easier to say from the outside. Then something important happens, Hagar names God *El-ro'i*--the one who sees. This is the first time in scripture that God is named, and an Egyptian slave woman is the first to do it. God stands by the marginalized, and the marginalized come close to God.

Being seen by God can be liberating spiritually. It can also lead to turning your life upside down like it did with Mary. One of the things Advent tells us about is that God is involved in history because God is involved with people. We know that God stands with the marginalized, and it matters that women receive promises from God. God became the marginalized in Jesus Christ. Philippians says Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." We can't forget how incredible that is. But that means God has to work within human boundaries like sending a woman back into slavery to save her life. I don't think slavery is something that God takes lightly, and it's not something Prof. Gafney takes lightly either in her translation. She wrote in her introduction to *A Women's Lectionary* that she knows American readers will read the word 'slave' with the context of how slavery worked in our country, and she says that she wants us to struggle with that specifically because the Bible

was used to uphold American slavery. Even though slavery has worked differently at different times, slavery still means the total control of the person who was claimed as property. For birth-givers that sometimes meant the children they bore during their time in slavery would be kept as slaves even if they were freed. So Jesus taking the form of a slave? That's God working within our boundaries. It's our job to push those boundaries so God has more room to work. It's also our job not to forget history, not to forget what God has done through Her people, and not to make the same mistakes.

Theologians have talked about God as the Divine Midwife, helping to bring hope into the world. Extending this metaphor, we are then the birthers of hope. Being hope-birthers is not a gendered job. We are all bearers of hope in this world. It's a little weird for me to say that because I'm a loving auntie, not a birth-giver. Sometimes it's hard to be a woman without children in the church. A quick story, back in seminary I visited a church for a class project. I didn't realize that it happened to be Mother's Day. When I walked in, a teenager handed me a carnation. She said "Happy Mother's Day." I tried to hand it back and said "I'm not a mother." She replied, "It doesn't matter. You will be." I looked at the male friend I was visiting with who was also in the class, and he just started laughing. I was so mad. So if you're like me and have chosen not to or you can't birth children, please understand this hope-birthing is a metaphor. Even in scripture passages where women are mainly judged on being child-bearers, God sees them as complete people. God considers them as divine conversation partners worthy of making promises to and worthy of speaking to directly.

Where do we find hope in our world? That's an incredibly personal question, I think. Hagar and Mary found hope in the words of messengers from God. I do find hope in scripture, of course; but I also find a lot of hope in music. I have a musical memory, so a lot of times if I want

to remember something I need to set words to music. As I was working on this sermon I learned of the passing of Stephen Sondheim, the incredible composer and lyricist who wrote some of my favorite musicals. You may know his work from the lyrics of *West Side Story*, the comedic work of *A Funny Thing Happened on The Way to Forum*, the haunting melodies of *Sweeney Todd*, or the epic *Into The Woods*. I first heard *Into The Woods* as a middle schooler listening to a classical radio station because you know I was that kid. Every week they would play an entire soundtrack to a Broadway musical without interruption. I became obsessed as only a pre-teen can. The library had the recorded Broadway stage show on VHS. I almost wore it out watching it. I was excited when the Disney version of the movie came out in 2014. It was pretty good, but nothing matches the original. Reading about the life and career of Stephen Sondheim, one of the songs from *Into The Woods* floated through my head. “Someone is on your side. Someone else is not. While we’re seeing our side, maybe we forgot. They are not alone. No one is alone. Hard to see the light now. Just don’t let it go. Things will come out right now. We can make it so. Someone is on your side. No one is alone.” The song sums up much of where I get my hope from. Obviously you can interpret the song however you want, but I believe it is God who is on our side. No one is alone, even in the most difficult of times. No one is alone. This is the good news of Advent. Amen.