

God Hears

The story of Sarah and Hagar is a complicated one, but not one I remember learning much about growing up. Last week's story of Sarah's being transformed into laughter by Isaac's birth is the one I knew. It's the happily ever after, or happily enough for a little while story that seems so neat and tidy. All's well that ends well, so to speak. But all is not perfectly well, nor is it the end. Earlier in Genesis, Sarah gets nervous about this promise God has made with Abraham, and with her by extension. They wait more than ten years, and still there is no baby, so Sarah comes up with a plan. Abraham can have a baby with Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman who serves as Sarah's maidservant. It is not an unusual practice in ancient cultures to rely on enslaved women to serve as surrogates, with or without their consent. The expectation is that the baby will be Sarah's to raise as her own, but that never happens. Sarah never sees Ishmael as hers. She regrets the plan almost immediately and begins to resent Hagar and her child. In chapter 16 of Genesis, a pregnant Hagar flees to the wilderness and is then sent back by an angel who insists that Hagar will be the mother of a great nation, too. Another decade or so passes and Isaac is born, and all seems to be settled for a bit. Sarah is laughing after all. [Read Genesis 21:8-21]

Names matter, in the bible and in our experience, too. I've mentioned my Aunt Judy who used to plant bulbs by flinging them willy nilly into her yard each year. My mom was named after her because she was the only person to visit my grandmother in the hospital who didn't try to tell her what to name her firstborn daughter. I think I've told you before that I came this close to being named Doris Florence for two of my great-grandmothers, but my parents worried that I might wind up being called DoFlo for short, so I'm named for a couple of Ellens on one side or another instead. Names connect us to something. Often we are named for a beloved relative who came before. Occasionally our names are unique to us. They point to a hope our parents carry, a dream and a prayer that the name we give a child will somehow remain wrapped around them long after we swaddle them or rock them to sleep. We choose a name that sounds like it might belong to a kind doctor or a brilliant chief justice or a wise researcher. A name is a gift that reminds a child and others that he is loved, that she is treasured, that he is wanted, that she belongs.

The names are significant here, too, giving us clues about who they are and where they fit or belong in the larger story. Abram means “exalted father.” Abraham can mean the same thing, but is often understood to mean “father of nations.” Sarai means “princess,” as does Sarah. Isaac means “laughter,” of course. Hagar sounds like the Hebrew word for “foreigner” or “outsider.” And Ishmael means, “God hears.” While hiding from the wrath of Sarah in the wilderness early on, Hagar is greeted by an angel who assures her that she, too will be the mother of multitudes and that she and her child have not been overlooked:

Look, you have conceived and will bear a son and you will call his name Ishmael, for the LORD has heeded your suffering.¹

Hagar finds herself in a rare group of women including Samson’s mother, Hannah, and Mary who “receive a divine annunciation of the coming birth.”² Her son’s name points to a fundamental conviction of the entire biblical story: God hears. *God hears.*

The child carries this name with him as he grows, and when it comes time to celebrate his half-brother’s surviving infancy, Ishmael laughs. We do not know what kind of laughter it is. Throughout the ages, scholars have wondered and speculated. But all the text tells us is that Sarah sees him laughing, and she wants none of it, none of him. She views this child—the one she could never bring herself to claim as her own, as a threat. Ishmael’s laughter strikes fear and panic and even anger in Sarah, the one for whom the promise has always seemed so very tenuous, and she insists that the enslaved woman and her child be sent away. She does not use their names. She wants to distance herself from them and from the danger she believes they pose to her hopes and dreams and to Isaac’s future.

In recent weeks and months and years, we have been encouraged by activists to “say their names,” meaning the names of men, women, and children of color who have been wrongfully killed. With the holy outrage that has emerged in the wake of George Floyd’s death, the list of names has grown longer. One name that was tragically added to the list in recent weeks is Tyrone Maurice Gibson. Tyrone was 14 years old when he died from a gunshot in Alison Hill. Our friend and colleague, Drew Stockstill was Tyrone’s pastor at Christ

¹ Genesis 16:11, Robert Alter’s translation

² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2004) 230.

Lutheran Church. Drew baptized Tyrone along with his mother and siblings just four years ago. When anyone is baptized, it is our custom to ask what their Christian name is. The response is to give the first and middle names, but not the last name because in baptism, we are all given a new family name, the name of Christian. In baptism we are reminded that we belong to one family. Our new name tells us and the world that we belong not simply to one local church family but to one another, to Christians everywhere across any and all earthly divides, whether that divide be race, nation, age, gender, or even the Susquehanna River. In writing about Tyrone's baptism, Drew laments that there are factors that limited the church's ability to make good on the promises made at Tyrone's baptism. Drew writes:

We could worship in solidarity with Tyrone, but the fact of the matter is that where Tyrone lived meant that his experiences and opportunities were vastly different in critical ways than many other Lutheran [or Presbyterian] youth. This is injustice. Our promise to guide and nurture Tyrone fell short. How can we guide in a community where many of us are outsiders? How can we nurture when many of us are afflicted by biases that compromise the creation of the authentic and mutual relationships required to nurture the young Christians we baptize?

Tyrone lived in a community that many in the region disparage because of its poverty. I've heard many say they'd never step foot in Allison Hill. They are scared. By implication, this means the larger church is scared to keep our baptismal promises to Tyrone and God's children like him. We hope our larger community is awakening to the contradiction that while we tell a child their life matters to God, we struggle to say that black lives matter to us in ways that will make us truly examine, confess, repent, and change behaviors and even practices and traditions that perpetuate inequality, social segregation, and racism even in the church.

Whenever I served Tyrone communion, following the tradition of my predecessor, I placed the bread in his hand and said, 'This is the body of Christ given for you. Bread from heaven because God loves you and so do we,' making the sign of the cross on his forehead, clearly visible in breadcrumbs.

A few days ago, I repeated what I had told Tyrone countless times over the communion rail, this time standing beside his coffin; the mother and siblings we had baptized, staring in stunned silence at the

grave that would soon embrace their 14-year-old son and brother. ‘Tyrone,’ I said, ‘God loves you, and so do we,’ and I placed the sign of the cross on his casket.³

Hagar and Ishmael find themselves dying of thirst in the wilderness. Sarah could not bring herself to say their names; she wants to forget them. Hagar is now free, but she is frightened, and she leaves her son under a bush because she cannot bear to hear his cries, she cannot bear to watch him die. But God knows their names, and God refuses to forget them. In the wilderness, far removed from the safety of the community, through the voice of an angel, God calls Hagar by name and points her to water, living water that saves her life and that of her child.

In recent weeks an awakening has started stirring. Eyes and hearts are opening to names we did not know, stories we might rather forget, and history most of us were never taught. It is overwhelming. I would rather look away. I feel paralyzed by the weight of history and the ways division and oppression are woven so tightly into our systems, our customs, and our institutions. I need to do something, change something, fix something, so I pray, I read books, I join discussions, I make donations, and yet I still struggle with what to do next. And then this text calls back to me: Sit with his weeping mother. Come near his grieving father. Don’t try to fix her; don’t try to brush away his anguish. Just sit with them, and pay attention, and say his name. Sarah cannot bring herself to claim him, but maybe I can. His name is Tyrone. Her name is Breonna. His name is George. His name is Tamir. His name is Ishmael. It means “God hears, God listens.” Maybe I start again by learning their names and listening to their cries as God does. It is not everything; it is not nearly enough. It is not the well of living water I long for the church to be. It is only a small drop in the bucket, but it is a place to start. *God hears, God listens.* By the grace of God, maybe I can, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ <https://www.christlutheranchurchhbg.org/post/tyrone-gibson-child-of-the-covenant>