

The week before lockdown began, the first week of March, I was in Montgomery Alabama. I was there for the annual Glide pilgrimage that addresses the legacy of slavery and America's enduring racial inequality. It was a mixed pilgrim group – racially, religiously, some very middle class, some unhoused. We visited museums, talked about our experiences, sang together, wept together, and got completely soaked in a classic southern thunderstorm together.

The place we visited that hammered at my heart most was Bryan Stevenson's National Memorial for Peace and Justice. This is a memorial to every person killed by lynching in the United States – over 4000 people, children as well as adults. It is both a beautiful and a gut-wrenching place, lives remembered and honoured with a beauty that condemns the ugliness of their deaths. And what hit me hardest was reading some of the names – the ones whose surname was the same as mine at birth – Clark. Not because I could claim them as my kin but because these were people who had been owned by those who shared my name. My Clark ancestors were white working and servant class, not slave owners, but that does not absolve me from my guilt in being part of a system that said that White lives matter and that Black lives don't.

Sarah said to Abraham: 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' Here, the Sunday after Juneteenth, we are confronted with the reality of slavery at the heart of our sacred scripture. Here Sarah, herself part of a people who were liberated from slavery, stands on the other side. Here she speaks for slave owners across the centuries who have failed to see that other mother's children are as valuable as their own. Here Sarah is part of my story – part of the story of privilege that belongs to women as well as men because of their race and economic status.

But I don't want to focus on Sarah today. I want to focus on the other woman in the story – Hagar the Egyptian, the one who was cast out into the wilderness, the one who lifts up her voice and weeps in despair. Hagar was the slave woman purchased by Abraham and Sarah to bear children for Abraham when Sarah was believed to be barren. She was, in other words, trafficked and sold as a sex slave. Her very name shouts out her 'otherness' and lack of value – Hagar in Biblical Hebrew means 'alien' or 'foreigner'. This is a name given to her by those who own her not by the mother who bore her.

The wonderful Biblical scholar Wilda Gafney in her book *Womanist Midrash* – a source this sermon draws on strongly - tells us that this is not the only tradition of Hagar's name. She figures prominently in the Islamic tradition and there her name is given as Hajar. This name has beautiful potential meanings from 'Splendid' to 'Nourishing'. Here is a name that speaks of the worth that belongs to each human creature. Here is a name that says this woman is her own person, a beloved daughter of God, not a possession. This is what I will call her in this sermon from now on.

I want to take us back a few chapters in Genesis to the place where we first encounter Hajar. At this point Sarah is angry with Hajar because she feels insulted by her attitude – she expects her slave to treat her with respect – and so she beats her viciously causing Hajar to flee to the wilderness. Here Hajar is again at the point of despair and here again God comes to her. God tells her that she and her son are in his care, that she will be the mother of a great nation – the first divine annunciation in the entire Bible. And even more extraordinarily than that - Hajar is the first human being allowed to name God. The first human being in the whole of our scripture who names God is a slave woman – the most powerless of human beings in every hierarchy of the time.

And the name that Hajar gives to God is El Ro'i, God of seeing, interpreted by Gafney as meaning 'Have I seen the one who sees me and lived to tell of it?'. God sees Hajar. God sees her as a human being of meaning and significance, as one who has the right to name the divine as it appears to her, as one strong enough to encounter the living God and to continue living. She is the one who is promised life not only for herself but for her children and her children's children. And in the second encounter we heard today Hajar's identity is affirmed as a beloved champion of God's purposes: no one's property, no one's slave.

Juneteenth celebrates emancipation in the United States, and reminds us that none are free until all are free. It reminds us of a historical recognition then that no human being should be another person's property. But the next step was never taken. The step of seeing the children of freed slaves as equal to the children of those who owned them. The step of hearing hard truths and seeking reconciliation through justice. The step of making Black Lives Matter a reality rather than an essential rallying call. The step of reparations.

And, especially among people of faith, the step of listening to the names that Black voices are giving to reality and to God. If all you read in theology or fiction or news articles are the writings of white men then you are not learning the full truth of our world or of God. If you are not hearing womanist voices naming God then you are not hearing a crucial part of how God names Godself. We need to know the God Hajar named – El Ro’i – the one who sees the reality of injustice and oppression; the one reveals divine reality most clearly to those on the underside of power.

There is work for us to do. To wrestle with the Biblical texts that speak casually of slavery and mastery as in our gospel reading. To wrestle with the parts of ourselves that would abuse any power we have been given. To wrestle with a system of endemic racism that still causes mothers to fear for their sons’ very survival. This is holy work, work given to us by God and breathed through with God’s Spirit. This is work we can do, aided and blessed and led by El R’oi, the God who sees.

Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.