

"The Spirit of Subversion" by Pastor Leah Rosso

Genesis 21: 8-21

June 21, 2026

As we jump in to this story from the Bible this morning, I want to remind you of the context, just a bit. Genesis is the first book of the Bible when God creates everything; then God sends people out of the garden; and after several stories of all kinds of trouble, including Noah and the flood, God formulates a new plan and chooses Abraham and Sarah to be God's people. God tells Abraham and Sarah that their descendants will be more than the stars and that the whole world will be blessed through them. No pressure, right? Just the whole world.

So maybe it's not surprising that Sarah panics. We already know that she laughed when God said that she was going to have a son, because she is getting on in years and it is past her time for childbearing. So instead of wait for whatever plan God has, Sarah takes matters into her own hands and convinces her husband Abraham to have a child with their servant, Hagar, and soon Ishmael is born: son of Hagar and Abraham. But God didn't promise to bless the world through Abraham and Hagar; God had chosen Abraham and Sarah. And after a long time of waiting and fretting and implementing other plans, Sarah gets pregnant and she gives birth to Isaac, whose name means "laughter." You might think that they name Isaac laughter because Sarah is finally able to laugh at herself and see how meddling in God's plan was not needed. But unfortunately, beneath that laughter, there seems to be a whole lot of shame. Because as soon as Isaac is weaned, which means he is old enough to inherit wealth; Sarah turns on Hagar. Hagar is a reminder of Sarah's failings. She is a reminder of her husband's intimacy with another woman. And, since Ishmael is actually the first born son, Sarah feels threatened that he may inherit what she understands as Isaac's inheritance. So Sarah convinces Abraham to throw Hagar and his own son, Ishmael, into the wilderness— a place where there was little hope of survival on your own.

Are you uncomfortable yet? Because I am. You may not know this about me, but I'm not big on drama. Even as a Mom of three teenage girls, I have little stomach for drama - especially drama that ruins peoples' lives. I want our Biblical ancestors to be Christ-like: to embody love and forgiveness and patience. I want God to pick people who will not do these ridiculously harmful things— people who will trust in God's plan; will follow God's way; will repent when they mess up and then will deal responsibly with the consequences

of their actions. I want them to be so much better than me! So much better than the world I find myself in!

A few years ago at our MN Annual Conference of the UMC, they started incorporating TED Talks - short talks that people give about a topic that they know a lot about. And this past week one of our colleagues, Rev. Chris Carr who is a Deacon in the UMC, shared a TED Talk about fear and security in the church– which is the area he works in. When people are afraid, he said, there are basically three responses to that fear:

- 1) Avoidance: not dealing with what we're afraid of
- 2) Fortress-building: building walls around us to keep out what we fear, but also ends up imprisoning us in that fear.
- 3) Counter threat posture: Dehumanizing someone we blame our fear on or finding someone to blame for our fear and making them less than

In this story, we see all three. First, we have avoidance. I think it's very plausible that Sarah was trying to avoid her biggest fear when she created this plan and manipulated Hagar. Month after month passes and Sarah doesn't see how she is ever going to get pregnant. Sarah is afraid that God is wrong; that she can't get pregnant; that her body is going to continue to fail her; and so in order to avoid that fear, she implements her plan with Hagar - have a son who's not your son so that you don't get disappointed or let God down.

Then, when that doesn't work out, Sarah turns their home into a fortress– she closes up the walls and sends Hagar out of them in order to squeeze Ishmael out of his inheritance. It's not enough to have God's promise, Sarah feels the need to send Hagar and Ishmael away, even though it is a death sentence for them.

And last but not least, Sarah is able to get away with all of this because of counter threat posture: Hagar is an Egyptian instead of a Hebrew; she's a servant; and she's a single woman in a situation with no power, especially now that she has moved away from everyone she may have known before. So it's not hard for Sarah to dehumanize her and her son, convincing even Abraham that he should not intervene.

The church fathers through the centuries were utterly embarrassed by these stories, and some even tried to get rid of them. And plenty of people today tell me that they read these stories and don't know what they're supposed to get out of them. We expect, I think, for

the people of the Bible to be polite and kind and live good moral lives. We expect them to be better at facing temptation and dealing with trauma than we are. But that's not at all how the Bible is written.

In her book, *Consider the Women*, Debbie Blue writes that the Hebrew Scripture often embodies what she calls a **spirit of subversion**. “[The Bible] barely gets down its dominant narrative before it starts to undermine the tyranny of a single story. It doesn't suppress the possibility of opposing narratives. It plants the seeds for them.”

So we, as people, as the church, *can* choose to only focus on Abraham's obedience to God, how he dropped everything to move his whole family to a new land; how he trusted God to give him a son; and how, in a scary story about a journey that Abraham and Isaac took up a mountain, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to God but God stops him just in time.

But there's also this counter narrative happening at the same time. A story about how real people hurt one another; how we often turn from God when we respond in fear; about Abraham's failure to protect his own child; a story about the resiliency and courage of a woman named Hagar *who also has a relationship with God*. She too moves to a new place and a new land, though without getting to choose to do so; she too has a son, although without getting to choose it; and then there are two times she finds herself in the wilderness outside of her community based on people's actions that are beyond her. The first time, she calls out to God and in their interaction, as God is moved to help her, she names God. Did you know Hagar is the only person in the Bible to name God? She names God “El Roi,” “the God who sees me.” And then when she is thrown out, in the story we heard this morning, she is overcome with despair and she leaves her child in the shade once they run out of food and water because she can't bear to hear him cry. In many ways she is asked to sacrifice her son; but once again God sees her, interacts with her, and walks with her.

You see it is exactly stories like Hagar's and Ishmael's that let us know that God cares for all people, not just the powerful or the main characters or even the people telling the stories! The Bible has a talent for revealing all of the flaws of its heroes and also making unlikely people into heroes. It describes in great detail the organizing of the priestly order, the government, and the patriarchy; and then it immediately also tells the stories of

corruption; the prophets who spoke out against the centralized power; the counter narratives that show God at work in multiple different ways.

Thousands of years after Hagar was brought to a new land and treated as less than, people from the continent of Africa were kidnapped and brought over to this land without their consent; bore children without their consent; were often then torn from their descendants time and time and time again. And despite the fact that the white people offering them a Bible were using it to keep them enslaved, they read and heard stories like Hagar's; like Moses who brought his people out of slavery; like so many stories in the Bible where God sees those who are harmed and those who are oppressed. If that's not a true miracle, I don't know what is. You see one of the amazing gifts of the Bible is that it's terrible propaganda. There are hundreds of stories about God and they don't all match; they don't all follow one narrative; they don't all agree with each other; and that is the wisdom of those who wrote down these stories – that they did not get rid of the stories they disagreed with, or were embarrassed by; they didn't try to clean up their heroes or hide the faults of those who were in power. We get to see ourselves in the Bible – sometimes in ways that are comforting and sometimes in ways that challenge the very systems we have built. And we also have to wrestle with stories where we don't see ourselves and instead we have to see others – our neighbors, our enemies, our friends, those who are strangers – and realize again and again that God loves all of us and calls us to love one another.

We are living in a time when people are not only tempted to, but are erasing important stories of the people in this land. Some states are taking away history that makes them uncomfortable because they don't want to talk about the genocide that happened to native people; don't want to teach about the history of slavery; don't want to tell the stories of encampments of Japanese people during World War II, don't want to see that we are still putting families and children in cages and detention cells just because our government changed the rules for immigration overnight so they can fortress up and dehumanize our neighbors.

And then on Friday, I heard someone say "Happy Juneteenth" to greet someone they were meeting, and the person said, "What's that?" And I remembered that it wasn't too many years ago, when I asked the same question. We honor and celebrate Juneteenth, the day that the Union Army finally got to the last slaveholding part of our nation in Texas, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed – 2 years when those

who were enslaved were actually legally free. We celebrate Juneteenth as a day of freedom, when our country was first freed from slavery; and we remember because it's important to see how severely entrenched slavery was economically, culturally, religiously because it still affects us today. It is still connected to the way people in power are using the Bible to justify their own greed and power and to legitimize white supremacy today.

Which is why stories like Hagar's need to keep being told. Her story is deeply uncomfortable because injustice should feel uncomfortable. We need to be uncomfortable with our history and the sin of our present in order to live into a different future. We need to keep faithfully telling our stories, past and present, that show the diversity and complexity of our lives and our God; we need to remember that indeed our God sees those who are oppressed; hears those who cry out; and calls each of us to do the same. Because in Christ, as Paul proclaimed, there is no Jew or Greek; no slave or freed; no men and women – we are all one in Christ; we are all God's children; we are freed up to worship our God who is love and to love our neighbor.