

Open Our Eyes

Sermon 65 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 5, 2020

Genesis 21: 8 -21 | Psalm 86: 1-10, 16-17

In 1998, Jim Carey starred in the award winning film, *The Truman Show*. In the film, Carey plays Truman Burbank - an insurance adjuster whose entire life has been captured on film. Living on a TV set, his entire existence is built on a fabricated foundation in which all variables can be managed. From the bus that drives by on his way to work, to the weather patterns, Truman's life is predictable, steady... and completely false. Everybody in the whole world knows it, except Truman. As his life goes on, actors play the key roles in his life: friends at school, love interests, family, food—truck operators... everyone playing a tidy role in a tidy world. Outside the enormous set, where Truman lives his life, the whole world watches their TV screens. In diners and living rooms, they watch with bated breath - just like I will tomorrow night when the season finale of the Bachelor airs - they watch as Truman makes critical life decisions, celebrates birthday, and lives his whole life on the big screen.

But what could possibly be so interesting about an “ordinary” life in a staged world?

... In a moment of honest confession perhaps we might need to admit that we all find the idea of order and control over the circumstances of our lives sounds kind of nice...

We all want to believe that if we make good decisions, save enough money, and take care of our parents as they age, that all will be well in the end. And so we construct our lives around what we know. We know that if we make good grades we can go to good colleges and get good jobs. We know that if we work hard, our bosses will take notice. We know that if we don't break the law, we won't get into trouble and if we always tell the truth, everything will work out in the end.

These are the stories our mamas told us when we were babies and these are the realities we've bought into. We have to. Without them, our world is chaos and our best laid plans can blow up in our faces at any moment. So rather than subjecting ourselves to the reality that things may not be as tidy as we'd like, we buy into myths and stories about the world that reflect our experience.

Abraham and Sarah were no different. Remember their story? Abraham, the father of our faith... The great Patriarch who, despite his righteousness, has trouble conceiving with his wife, Sarah. Sarah was equally frustrated knowing that despite their best efforts, things did not go as planned. Sarah creates a plan in which Hagar, her Egyptian servant, will bear Abraham's child. According to the plan, Hagar's child is to be the one God promised to Abraham. But after he is born, Sarah learns that she, herself, is pregnant at 90 years old! And as time goes on and the second child of Abraham is born, things began to change. Like most of us, Sarah and Abraham were people with resources. They owned land, livestock, servants - and we see in today's reading - There was an inheritance to pass along to the children. Especially the first born. These are not bad things in and of themselves, but by nature of their wealth, Abraham and Sarah had resources to which Hagar would have no claim. All of that changed when Ishmael, the first-born, came along.

While Hagar's captivity certainly was not desirable, there were some provisions in the law that would allow for Abraham to give Ishmael, two-thirds of the inheritance, by adoption. This would not directly change Hagar's situation, but it would mean that Ishmael had a better future. The text says that one day Sarah saw Ishmael "playing" with Isaac. The Hebrew includes a little play on words here...

At best, the playful interaction between the boys may have been perceived by Sarah as the two young boys interacting as equals. This was slightly problematic for Sarah because it might have elevated the role of her servant, Hagar, and given her a little more power in the household.

Another option in the Hebrew is that Sarah perceived Ishmael as trying to take Isaac's place in the family. Which meant he would receive a larger inheritance than her own son, Isaac. Sarah saw Isaac as the true first-born of Abraham. And she saw the child of her servant as the competition. We feel for Sarah because her worth in the world hinged only upon her ability to provide a son to her husband. And this provision did not arrive for her until she was well past the typical age. Of course, you remember when Sarah learns Isaac is coming, she laughs! Ninety year old women do not bear children! We feel for her because when we look at her character we see a woman who has all of her hopes wrapped up in one child. An improbable hope that came at the last moment, who will hopefully inherit his father's wealth and, in turn, care for his mother in her final years. Now as she looks upon her promise playing with Ishmael, she is overcome with insecurity and fear. Blinded by this fear and insecurity, Sarah demands that Abraham cast Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham and God, concede to the insecure wife and in no time, Hagar and Ishmael are expelled from Abraham's household, and sent into the desert with meager provisions.

For many of us, this is where our knowledge of Hagar ends. We know that she was the servant of Abraham and Sarah. We know she is the mother of Ishmael, and we know that a great nation – and a great religion – did come from her line, but really, our knowledge stops here. As Hagar is cast out into the wilderness empty handed. Just as she disappears from the Hebrew Bible in Chapter 21, she also tends to be obscured in the Christian tradition. In most commentaries it is disappointing to find that the authors often found ways to justify Abraham's expulsion of the first-born and his mother, saying that somehow, some way, Abraham's actions were justified because he was acting in accordance with God's plan for Isaac.

How did they not see?

When I shifted my research to commentaries written by women and people of color, I found more than I could read about this mysterious woman.

—The first to receive a promise from God that a nation would come from her line.

From Phyllis Tribble to Delores Williams to Miguel De La Torre... they all see something powerful in Hagar's experience of slavery, unsolicited surrogacy, economic paralysis, and finally in her unwanted wilderness. These scholars identify with her and see things that at first, I could not see. Tribble sees a servant woman, violated, abused, and sent out to her death – without a man or a God who cares enough to intervene. Williams sees an African woman, strong and without many options. A woman who has given up and turned away from her child as he dies in the desert...

crumpled over in pain and waiting for death to arrive. And De La Torre sees a migrant, single mother, left with no other option than to wander through the desert, knowing there is not enough water for them to survive.

Recognizing the blindness of so many people over thousands of years, reading Hagar's story makes me wonder about what and why it is that we cannot see.

And then it hits.

Just like Jim Carey's character, Truman Burbank, so many of us are living in worlds built on half-truths and false-securities. And these foundations are constructed in ways that keep us feeling safe, secure, and strong. Brené Brown calls these our bunkers. In her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, she says: *Huddled behind the bunkers, we don't have to worry about being vulnerable or brave or trusting. We just have to toe the party line.* (59) These bunkers, Brené describes, are built to make us feel and believe that we belong. Defined by common values, political parties, economic situations, and life experiences, we gravitate toward people who share our beliefs and ideas about the world. We feel safe, surrounded by those who agree with us. The problem is that without those who see through a different lens, deeply rooted in our bunkers, we fail to see the world in all of its true complexity. From these places of safety we create simple solutions to complex problems and we double-down on their viability and validity. It's easy to believe our lies when we are surrounded by our own cheerleaders. And, it certainly feels a lot better than braving the wilderness alone and without the protection of our bunkers.

Abraham and Sarah believed that God would make good on the promise to make a great nation. And when it seemed impossible, they took matters into their own hands – abusing and taking advantage of Hagar. One whom they found outside of their bunker. Once the reality of God's promise came through Hagar and then again through Sarah, they couldn't see that God's abundance was enough for both boys and both women. So again, they took matters into their own hands and forced their kindred into the desert with her young son – a promised child of God.

What they failed to see is that sometimes God's promise does not come in the ways we might imagine. Sometimes the way things ought to be is built on more than the supplies we find in our own bunkers. And sometimes when we see one nation and one path forward, God sees innumerable options and possibilities. What we fail to see is that God is bigger than the boundaries of our bunkers. In Abraham and Sarah's failure to see, they put the lives of Hagar and Ishmael into jeopardy. In their failure to see they secured their own futures and left the rest to the wilderness.

Sometimes opening our eyes is incredibly painful. Sometimes it hurts because it calls us to question everything we have ever known.

When Truman Burbank finally sails to the edge of his reality and finds the door that leads to the outside world, he is overwhelmed by fear, pain, and anger. And he has to make a decision about whether or not to leave behind the world he'd always known. Stepping out can be hard. Stepping

out can be scary. We know that we will be affected by the realities made known to us when we ask God to open our eyes and lead us into the wilderness. When light shines into once-hidden places, we see the parts of ourselves that need some work. In these moments, we may feel things like shame or guilt over things we have but did not ask for, or about things we did in moments of weakness, or even about things over which we had no control.

Like Hagar in the desert we begin to feel like our water has run dry, and there is nothing to left to carry us through the journey. So we put our hope and our promise with Ishmael, we turn our backs because we cannot handle the truth... and we walk away... ready to give in and give up. Brené would say that this is a cop out. Failing to engage is not only failing to see, it is choosing not to see. It is being offered a fuller picture, a more holy glimpse, and walking away because it seems too hard, too messy, or too risky.

Luckily for all, Hagar's story does not end in despair. The moment the water in her skins runs dry, the God who saw her in the wilderness a few chapters earlier hears the cries of her child. And when God hears Ishmael, God sends a messenger to Hagar with a reminder of the promise, and a challenge to move through her fears and her vulnerability. In that moment, there in the wilderness God opens her eyes; and where before there was only sand and hot sun, now there was a well of water.

Stepping out is hard and it is scary. Stepping into the wilderness of this world will be painful. because It often brings us face to face with shame and guilt we didn't even know we had. When we find the courage to own: our pain, our shame and our guilt, then we encounter the God who opens eyes in the wilderness and shows us a way forward.

If we step into the wilderness and allow God to open our eyes, we may begin to see that: there is pain, there is brokenness, there is chaos everywhere we turn, but if we allow God to open our eyes, we also begin to see that there is water, there is healing, there is reconciliation, and there is freedom for all of us... each and every one.

Amen.