



HER-STORY

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 21: 8-21; HEBREWS 11: 1-3, 8
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

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INTRODUCTION

Samantha: Abraham didn't know where he was going?

Marcia: He sure didn't have any trouble telling Hagar where she needed to go.

Katie: Is it ok to be disappointed in the heroes of our faith?

Samantha: Is it ok to be disappointed in God?

Marcia: This story seems like the last kind of story we need right now—we don't need another reason to wonder where in the world God is.

Samantha: Have you ever felt hopeless?

Marcia: What if there is no such thing as home?

Katie: What if I feel alone the rest of my life?

Samantha: We live in a world where we are so estranged from each other that we can think community is optional and we can see other human beings as expendable.

Katie: There are Hagers all around us—but we don't know their names, we give them names we are more comfortable with and names we can pronounce.

Marcia: Every day we send Hagers away without water, without food, with their children in tow.

Samantha: They are told their bodies don't matter, that they pose a threat just by being who they are.

Katie: We live in a time when Hagers are throw-away people.

Marcia: And maybe even you and I, maybe even we, know what it feels like to be afraid that you don't really matter, that we might even be outside the reach of God's grace.

Katie: Sometimes it feels like God is far away from this world.

Samantha: In times like these, we need a witness—we need someone to help us.

Katie: We need someone to remind us not to lose hope

Samantha: ...to not lose faith.

Marcia: ... to not feel unloved. We need to let the Hagers of the world tell us their story. We need to let her-story be at the center.

Katie:

Her name is Hagar and her story is radical love. As a tear ran down her face, she felt her cheeks warm. She thought she should be used to it by now. After all, this was her world—the only one she had ever known. She had spent her entire childhood watching Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, sell her friends into slavery. She knew her time would come soon, too. She was a little girl with dark skin whose name didn't seem to matter.

Raised in a world where her voice was a burden, her wishes were irrelevant, and her life was insignificant, this little girl knew that if she wanted to make her own name one day, she would have to love herself enough to fight for it. If she wanted to be part of God's great story, she would have to write her chapter herself, maybe breaking some rules along the way. Every action, every word, every facial expression would matter. In a world where even her body was not her own, this little girl deemed herself worth the fight because her God loved her by name—no one else had ever done that.

With God, she was seen...really seen. With God, she was not expendable. She was beloved. As she grew older, the fire *inside* of her began to burn even *brighter* than the fire *around* her. She started to feel like she had a name. So, instead of giving into the delineations of her oppressive world or giving up altogether, this little girl was brave. When everything around her was encouraging her to close the book, she chose to turn the page. And then one day...she was given away to another name...Sarah.

Sing Sanctuary:

Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true
With thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary, for you

Marcia:

It's not so much trust I navigate each day in this household. It's risk.

There is no trust when you are the handmaiden of a woman like Sarah. There is waiting, watching, responding, reading her expressions, her posture.

I have watched her face grow more disdainful of my Ishmael as he delights in his young brother Isaac.

Isaac loves to play with his big brother. My Ishmael's shoulders have grown broad and strong enough to carry Isaac on adventures always with Sarah surveillance, always with her scrutiny.

Isaac loves to play with my son. They share a father, they share a similar gate, a way of moving around, a way of exploring the world.

But I know my son must be more cautious, more calculated—he must learn to watch the signs of lines crossed, of displeasure, or worse yet signs of hatred.

I have washed Sarah's hair, her clothes, and the crevices of her body. I attended her in childbirth; I wiped her brow and calmed her when the labor gripped her body—a body way past its childbearing days.

And I comforted Isaac those first several days of his life—Sarah exhausted, overwhelmed by this mantle of motherhood that she had not expected.

I have done my duty to care for Sarah. But I do not trust her. I do what I need to do. I say what I need to say.

And I know she watches me—and she sees Abraham's pride in his older son, my son, Ishmael.

There is talk of God's favor—of who the true son is—the one who will be the carrier of God's promises for a family, a nation.

They speak of God like a benefactor, like a man who chooses favorites and forgets about everyone else. That is the world the patriarchs have taught us to see. But, you can't see the God I see in my life and believe that God feeds the power of the fathers. I have felt a Holy tenderness, I have felt the fidelity of our God—abiding with me, teaching me to see tiny openings where joy can shine through in a moment, even if fleeting.

God teaches me how to find life in this place. God teaches me how to believe in how I am made—fearfully and wonderfully made. God abides with me in the anguish of my position in this household whispering to me about freedom, about the promise of a different world for my Ishmael.

God teaches me the sensations of gentleness, of survival, of imagination in this cruel world. God teaches me how to believe. God teaches me how to sing.

Sing Sanctuary:

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Samantha:

In the wilderness, there is no road map
No bright signs marking the way forward
No hand leading you through the unknown
When the sun goes down, you can get lost
Your faith can sink deep into the dirt
The warmth of the daylight can swiftly slip away
The sounds of unknown creatures can echo all around
The wilderness, is not a friend

It is lonely and unsettling
It is bitter and unbearable
It is dry and thirsty
The wilderness threatens and attacks
It strangles and blinds

It makes you forget
Provokes you to lose your footing
To lose your way
To lose your grasp on hope
To lose your sense of God

Hagar and Ishmael are a long way from home
Not their home of course, not any sort of a home that they can claim as their
own,
But the place where they had dwelled for so long
that place that had given them a roof to ward off the rain,
food to keep their bellies still,
and some semblance of security that they would live to see another day.

There is no justice in the wilderness.
And no water to quench the palates of a dying mother and son.
The tears of Ishmael break her heart.
Has God abandoned them both?
Is there no hope in sight?
And yet, Hagar had tasted wilderness before.
She knows about survival.
For her, hope in a God who delivers is not simply a fleeting or comforting
thought--it was only way to go on.

The Bible tells us that she sits opposite her boy
– looking him in the eyes as he cries out in thirst.
The Quran tells us that she cannot sit still
– but runs between two hills seven times in a desperate search for renewing
water.
And then a mother lifts up her voice.
Crying out to her God, our God
Refusing to die.

“Do not be afraid” says the Lord.
Hagar’s eyes are opened
And there is fresh rushing water
Water to quench palates
Water to save lives
Water to promise more than tomorrow,
but tomorrow into tomorrow.

This is the water of a great nation of Hagar’s descendants:
a fruitful Arab nation, a faithful Muslim community,

the promise that even in the depths of the wilderness,
God will always be there.
Hagar tells us so.

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CONCLUSION:

Samantha: Love

Katie: Faith

Marcia: Hope

Samantha: You won't feel like this forever.

Katie: You have a home in God.

Marcia: You will find a path.

Samantha: There are times when we are troubled by our faith, troubled by our community, even troubled by our God, but our faith teaches that even in the most bewildering wilderness, God refuses to let go. God insists on calling us - to more.

Katie: God's love for Hagar is strong. Through her faith, she recognizes her own self worth enough to keep fighting, enough to live fully.

Marcia: Faith does not mean our lives will bear the marks of the world's favor. Even God's blessing is not the same as favor, as wealth, as power. Faith is making life from where you are and having the eyes to see God's fingerprints there.

Samantha: Our faith in God overcomes hopelessness. God's devotion to us can overpower wilderness. God sees us, finds us, understands, reaches out, reaches in.

Katie: Sometimes we just need to survive; to be reminded that someone knows us by name.

Samantha: Sometimes liberation is stirring underneath the surface, yearning for us to grab hold of it.

Marcia: Sometimes vitality can gush into our lives - even from a rock in the desert.

Katie: Her-story, Hagar's story, amplifies the nature of God's power--it is responsive, it is intricate, it is faithful--but it is not about dominance or control.

Marcia: God is not the great puppeteer in the sky choreographing our lives. Providence is a golden thread that stitches our lifetimes together with a tenderness that knows us enough to provide us with what we truly need, and far more than what we can ever imagine.

Katie: Our work is to remain open--like Hagar,

Samantha: Open to the beautiful, threads of God's healing, refreshing power that give each of us a story and all of us a story. We don't just have a story. We have a responsibility.

Marcia: Because if we listen to Hagar, we know that God is stirring in our midst creating sanctuary where God's love can grow.

Congregation Sings Sanctuary:

**Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true
With thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary, for you**