

Invisible: the Original Super-Power

From Genesis 16 and 21

Do you know this experience? You're in a meeting with other people, and you're brainstorming about something, or trying to solve a problem; and you suggest something or offer a piece of information that you think will be helpful; and the discussion goes on without much notice until someone else says the same thing you just said, and everyone pays attention to what they just ignored when it came out of your mouth? Brilliant! Of course! That's it! And you want to say, "I just said that exact same thing."

I bet most of us have felt that frustration. It happens often to women, especially younger women, in the workplace. But it also happens to older people. It happens to people of color. It happens to parents while they're trying to save their teenage and young adult children from having to learn things the hard way. It happens all the time. You might say it's just an everyday frustration that comes with human interaction; don't over-react. But it's also a signal that there's a power differential in the room, that some people's voices are heard more loudly and clearly than others'. That we're not listening to everyone's voices equally.

What happens to the person who spoke and is not heard is that he/she feels invisible. To not be heard is also to not be seen. We actually do have the power to erase one another.

Some people's thoughts and opinions and stories matter to us; some people's don't. This is how every group—nations, religions, companies, even families—define themselves and how they reinforce their boundaries. *Our* children's school pictures hang on our walls. The stories we remember and tell again and again are the ones that made *us* who we are.

Our religion is no different. We tell stories about how God saved 'our people' as though Egyptians and Canaanites and Babylonians and Pharisees were there simply to be moved out of the way. But here's the amazing thing about this epic story that holds the tradition of our faith: if you listen closely, you can hear that there's another thread woven through the plot. There are stories in here from outside the fold. There's a faint but persistent story line running all the way through this narrative, in which God seems determined to be present to people that the faithful have cast out, or made enemies, or turned away from. Made invisible.

Hagar was an Egyptian slave who belonged to Sarah, wife of Abraham. Abraham, you may remember, is the first person of faith in the whole biblical story. He shows up in the very first pages of Genesis. Abraham and Sarah lived many hundreds of years before Moses comes into the picture. Later in the story, it's Abraham and Sarah's great-grandchildren who would go and settle in Egypt; it was *their* descendants who would walk to freedom through the Red Sea. But already, in Abraham's and Sarah's story, that comes generations before that exodus, the stories of Egyptians and Israelites are intertwined.

The first time Abraham appears in this story, God promises him that he and Sarah will have descendants—children—even though they were already old and they’d been unable to conceive. ‘I will give you not just one child, but many,’ God said to Abraham.

*I will make of you a great nation...
all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.*

But now, years had gone by since that promise was spoken, and still there were no children. Sarah was long past the age for bearing children naturally. Both of them were sure they’d heard a promise, but maybe they should help it along, they thought. So Sarah ‘gave’ her maid Hagar to her husband. If she couldn’t bear Abraham’s child, maybe Hagar could.

Pause here. If you grew up Christian or Jewish, you’ve heard this story before; so maybe it’s gotten soft on your ears. But let’s pay attention here. This is the story of the founding of all three major monotheistic religions of the world. In it, a powerful woman offers her husband the night-time use of her foreign servant. Today that sounds like sex trafficking. It’s at least got a Thomas Jefferson/Sally Hemings kind of echo. Morally suspect at the very least. No doubt *not* what God had in mind when he called Abraham into service. Abraham and Sarah took God’s promise and jammed it into the power they held as people of wealth and privilege. I’m pretty sure I’ve done the same thing. And this is what I know from my own life: that God seems to find a way to work with even terrible mistakes, our most reckless decisions.

To Abraham and Sarah, Hagar was invisible; slaves always are. She was no more than an empty container for the child they were sure they were supposed to have. And Hagar did get pregnant, just as they’d planned. But even before her child was born, the whole situation began to feel to Sarah not like an answered prayer, but a rebuke. Hagar “no longer respected her mistress,” the story says. Well, maybe that’s because her mistress forced her to sleep with her husband. Or maybe it wasn’t that. Maybe Hagar loved her pregnancy. Maybe she irritated Sarah by humming sweet songs under her breath. Maybe every time Hagar straightened her back, her round belly was annoyingly visible under her baggy clothes. Any one of those things might have seemed to Sarah like a taunt, a painful reminder that it was not she who was pregnant.

The story reads like Abraham couldn’t be bothered by these temperamental women. “This is your problem, not mine,” he said to Sarah when she complained. “Fix it however you want.” And so she did; she treated Hagar so badly that Hagar ran away—not to a safe place, but to the desert. Even the harshness of sun and thirst seemed less threatening than Sarah’s resentment.

And like a shepherd who leaves the rest of the flock go out after the one lost sheep, God found Hagar there, at a spring—where there was just enough water to keep a pregnant woman alive. ‘Go home,’ God said to her. ‘You need to go home and have your baby. I’ll take care of you, even there.’ And so, Hagar went back. When her child was born, Abraham named him Ishmael.

I imagine it was an uneasy peace that settled in that house. It lasted until finally Sarah too had a son. Isaac’s birth was glorious, an answered prayer, a sign that God had not forgotten the promise made a long time ago! And it was a mess—because now there were two children in that house; the second one clearly the child of God’s promise; the first, the child of a slave woman, no longer needed. Invisible.

This time Hagar didn't have to run away. Sarah wanted her out of the house, this other woman and her illegitimate child. And so Abraham regretfully packed a little food and water for Hagar and their son, and *he* ushered her off the property, out into the desert.

The water and food ran out, of course; and Hagar ran out of hope. She gently laid her son under the shade of a scrubby bush, and she walked away. Better for each of them to die alone. This dark-skinned, foreign-born, slave woman would die as she had lived: invisibly. A small, peripheral character in the story of a great man, in the founding of a great religion.

Only that's not what happened.

Abraham's God came and found her again. God saved her, the story goes, and God saved her son Ishmael, opening Hagar's eyes so she could see a well filled with fresh water. They drank from it; they lived, Hagar and Ishmael both. But I want you to hear a couple of things that happened on the way to the end of this story.

- In just the chapter before this story starts, at a moment when Abraham despaired that the promise of descendants would ever come true, God took Abraham outside and said to him, 'Look up at the sky. Try and count the stars. You can't, can you? That's how many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren you will have.' Now, in this story, the first time Hagar was out in the desert, while she was just pregnant, the God-messenger said to her, "I will give you many descendants; so many, you couldn't even count them." The same words, the same promise, to Abraham and then to this Egyptian slave woman: I will give you more descendants than you can possibly count.
- When God called Abraham the first time, God had said: 'Go where I tell you, Abraham. *I will make of you a great nation*, a blessing to all the families of the earth.' Now, in this story, years later, when Abraham knew he'd have to make Hagar leave for the sake of peace in his household, when he knew he was about lose his son Ishmael, God came to Abraham again. "I know you have to do this," God said to him, "*but I will make of Hagar's son a great nation too.*" The same promise. God did not choose to bless the son of one mother and discard the son of the other. I will make of each of them, God said, *a great nation*.
- And then, at the moment when all seemed lost, when Hagar wept with grief as her son cried hungry and thirsty, where she had left him to die, God's messenger came again. 'Don't be afraid, Hagar. *God has heard the boy's cries.*' Another echo, this time an echo forward—to a burning bush in Egypt, where the voice of God would speak to Moses. '*I have heard the cry of my people,*' God said to Moses. 'Come help me free them.' God hears the cry of *all* people who suffer. Babies, adults; Hebrews, Egyptians.

These kinds of parallels in the Bible are never casual or accidental. They're meant to be paid attention to. Ishmael did become the father of a great nation, just like Abraham's other son, Isaac. He too had twelve sons, just like Isaac. We don't tell the stories of Ishmael's twelve tribes so much, but Muslims do. Hagar is the matriarch of Islam, just like Abraham is the patriarch of Judaism and then Christianity.

There's a place in this story, out in the desert, where Hagar names God. This Egyptian slave woman who has been used and abused, and then cast out by the people of God, is the first

person—the only person—in the Hebrew Scriptures to give God a name. *El Roi*, she names him. The God who sees. The God who sees everything, everyone.

That Hagar's story is included in this long and complicated narrative we call *Scripture* tells us something. It tells us that God's plot is bigger than the small stories we tell to make ourselves feel special. That God sees not only holy people, but real people—perpetrators and victims, powerful people and the ones they use up and throw away. The people in this story are not always faithful; sometimes they take matters into their own hands and then screw them up. The people God loves are not just the chosen, golden-haired children of a promise; they're the children of outsiders, people who head in different directions, speak with different accents, tell different stories.

And it tells us one more thing that maybe we need today most of all: that even when all seems lost, when the plot-line looks like it has gone hopelessly off-track, God can take our small human stories and reshape them, into a sacred narrative that includes every last and lost and forgotten creature on earth. No one is invisible.