

Rev. Lacey Hunter
The Community Church of Sebastopol
June 21, 2020
Text: Genesis 21:8-21 & the radical legacy of Juneteenth
“I Go to Prepare a Place for You”¹

This Friday marked the 155 anniversary of Juneteenth. For those not familiar with this day, Juneteenth celebrates when, two years after emancipation, the declaration of freedom finally reached Texas and the last enslaved Black people were legally freed. It feels Spirit-led, that the story of Hagar’s escape from slavery happened to fall in the lectionary on this Juneteenth weekend, just as our country is asking the question, “What does freedom mean?”
(@osopepatrisse)

As with any story that we are encountering, it is important to notice who is telling the story and whose voices are missing. In school I heard the story of emancipation from the voices of white politicians, as if Lincoln created freedom. But Black people had been preparing a way, had been singing and running themselves to freedom everyday until their power became so much that the empire could not look away. It was the enslaved Africans who taught the abolitionists and the whole country what freedom meant. It was those who were enslaved who showed us that people cannot be owned and that none of us are free until all of us are free. Long before the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th amendment, Black people in this country were drawing on their internal strength, on webs of connections and a mutual relationship with the stars and the flowing rivers, to get free.

Much like how this country’s history has been told by white people with the power to dominate others, we too have heard the story of Hagar as told by her enslavers. We have been told that her enslavers — Sarah and Abraham — gave her freedom. We have been told that in the wilderness she and Ishmael almost died and to survive, she relied on Abraham and Sarah’s God, the same God who was used to enslave her. But I want to suggest to us today that this story is not Hagar’s story, just like the freedom of Black people 155 years ago, and today, doesn’t only exist if and when a white politician declares it so. What if we did not tell the stories of how privileged people pretend(ed) to be Gods with the power to grant or not grant freedom, but instead told the stories of resilience, power and joy that flow through oppressed and marginalized people and lands, preparing a way for God’s true, beloved, kin-dom? Hagar went and prepared a place for freedom in the wilderness. If we imagine the story as told by Hagar, what might we learn about the meaning of freedom for today?

It was my preaching professor, Rev. Dr. Donna Allen, who taught me to approach scripture by paying attention to whose voice is telling the story and whose voice is missing. In this passage from Genesis, Rev. Allen pointed out that if we read this story on the surface as it is presented to us, Hagar serves as a prop used to show how God’s promise is fulfilled in Abraham and Sarah

¹ This sermon was written in prayerful collaboration with the wisdom, stories and visions of Rev. Dr. Donna Allen, Dr. Sharon R. Fennema, Minister Marvin K. White, the motion picture “Harriet,” Angela Davis, Patrisse Cullors-Brignac, Adrienne Maree Brown, Ella Baker, Corrina Gould, the Movement for Black Lives, the Education for Liberation Network and Critical Resistance Education and Abolition Collective, national Juneteenth port shutdowns, and so many peoples’ marches that reveal again and again that we have the power to create the kin-dom.

and their son Isaac. But that isn't Hagar's story. This is a view of Hagar from Sarah and Abraham, told for their descendants, the nation that grew out of God's promise to them through Isaac. Rev. Allen reminded us that Hagar was a freedom fighter like Harriet Tubman was a freedom fighter. Like Harriet, Hagar got herself free and brought others to freedom with her. Today, I am inviting us to encounter Hagar's freedom story so that we might better know and understand what freedom means.

It is said that Harriet Tubman's last words, at the age of 91, were, "I go to prepare a place for you." I wonder if a similar prayer ran through the veins of Hagar as she picked up her baby, Ishmael, and ran from Sarah and Abraham, out of captivity and into the wilderness. At this point in her story, Hagar had already survived a great deal. As an Egyptian she was taken into a land not her own, her body treated as property used for profit and to carry her enslaver's baby and legacy. But the truth that people cannot be owned lived in Hagar's bones. It was when Abraham, her master, threw a feast for his and Sarah's son Isaac, that Hagar saw the writing on the wall. Her and her son's usefulness to their enslavers was disappearing. And she knew that when she and Ishmael were no longer useful, their lives were worthless to her enslavers. She saw the look in Sarah's eye; Hagar could feel her disdain and the way she wanted to make sure that her son, Isaac, got all of the love, attention, and inheritance that his privilege afforded him. Hagar knew how dangerous a protective woman with power who felt afraid could be. So she started to make plans to go.

She started collecting food and water, waiting for the right time to go. Gathering up enough for the journey, she made a plan to run to the wilderness of Beersheba, the wilderness known as "the well of an oath." There she knew she could trust the promise of mutual care that would connect her feet to that soil as they moved towards freedom. She remembered what her ancestors taught her about living in right relationship with the land. She remembered which plants carried water, sustenance and medicine. When the time was right, they would run, trusting in the land's commitment to new life. A commitment that would hold and sustain her baby boy and would quench their thirst, just as it had so many times before, for her and her ancestors.

Just as Hagar carried the wisdom of her ancestors in her bones, she also had seen Ishmael's descendants, she knew that a future of freedom was meant for him, a future where he would grow and flourish and know his belovedness fully, and she knew she had to get herself and him free.

In the wilderness of promise, Hagar sought out a clearing where she could encounter the holy one. There she laid down her son under a bush that he might be restored by the life-giving medicine these plants could offer. In the clearing she sat and began singing every song of freedom she knew by heart, every prayer of freedom that lived in her bones. As she sang, everything of freedom flowed through her and from her, like a spring of living water – all her ways of surviving, all her joy, all her hope – swept up her son into this freedom. Freedom became the very salt in their sweat, the saliva in their throat, the water in their veins. Made of the very stuff of freedom, even as every power seemed to be working against their surviving and thriving, Hagar and Ishmael were sustained and created a new and great nation.

Do you believe this unfolding story of Hagar? Can you imagine this retelling or does it feel fanciful and impossible? Is there a part of you that is saying, “Pastor Lacey, you’re just making things up now. That’s not the scripture.” If any part of you feels challenged or uncomfortable with this story, I invite you to lean into that feeling, because church, the movement for freedom that rose up in Hagar is now rising up in our streets, jails and hospitals. Today, we have the opportunity to encounter freedom as it is unfolding. Will we turn our attention to the voices preparing the way, the ones who can teach us what freedom means in this moment? We can begin that turning right now. We can turn towards Hagar and witness an internal power dwelling deeply within her. We can learn from Hagar how to live as Beloveds, created and formed for freedom. We can be guided by Hagar, as we create God’s kin-dom on earth, just as Hagar created a new nation in the wilderness.

I believe that the continuing protests and the struggles of this moment are asking us to listen differently for what freedom means. On this third Sunday of Pentecost with the power of the Holy Spirit breathing through us, in this 155th year of emancipation, and in the days of COVID, how will you/we keep the stories of freedom that are being told in the streets, in the jail cells, in communities of Black and Brown kin ever before us? How do these stories change us? What do they require of us? Because Beloveds, we are not yet free.

How does the story of emancipation change when we hear it from the voices of over two million people, mostly Black and Brown, currently enslaved in prisons and detention centers throughout this country? Will we accept slavery by its current name, “criminal incarceration,” or will we listen for a different story and be part of preparing a place for freedom? In the unfolding story of abolition, may we turn our attention to witness the freedom of God’s incarnational covenant, that God dwells in flesh and no God-flesh can be disposed of, caged or owned.

How does the story of COVID and returning and reopening change when we hear it not from the voices of governments or corporations, but from the Latinx community here in Sonoma County, a community that makes up 75% of COVID cases in the region? How does that shape our decisions and impact our lives? Will we accept those deaths and the economy that causes them as normal, or will we listen for a different story and be part of preparing a place for freedom? In the unfolding story of sheltering-in-place and not returning, may we hear the invitation to prepare a way for a new economy where all of God’s beloved ones are free.

In this moment, these stories are inviting us to shift our attention, to listen for the freedom that is already being created by those who are marginalized and oppressed, to bear witness to their brilliance, resilience and power and to come along side and support their vision. This is how we will know what freedom means. In the words of Angela Davis, “[We] have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And [we] have to do it all the time.” So church, can you hear freedom calling from across the river, across the tracks, down the road, behind the bars? It’s calling you to answer, to keep on keeping on, until we feel it in our bones.