

Steps and shapes beyond shadows and separations

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 June 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 4 A; Uniting Church Anniversary

Genesis 21: 8-21; Contemporary Reading: *Hagar in the Wilderness* by Tyehimba Jess

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

As I have lived most of my church life primarily in Anglican and ecumenical settings, I have to admit to some bemusement about the annual marking of the Uniting Church's founding. I guess it is partly the equivalent of the patronal festivals in other mainstream Churches. However these typically centre on a particular saint, or an aspect of faith (such as the Holy Trinity), after which a particular congregation is named, not a particular Christian denomination. Denominationalism is, after all, a modern idea, and would be a horror to our Uniting Church Reformation forebears.

Jean Calvin, for example, was seeking to reform the one universal Church of God, not to create an alternative. The great Methodist pioneer John Wesley also formed a vital and innovative new movement but never sought to leave the Church of England. That is pertinent in marking this anniversary. For it directs us back to the Uniting Church's crucial ecumenical and 'open future' charisms. These are clear in The Basis of Union, the key Uniting Church founding document. As a body, we are only one very small part of the universal Church through time and space. Therefore, rather than being yet one more denomination, we are called to help pioneer new paths of faith and relationships.

Our calling is always to be a Uniting Church, holding our structures lightly and open to new ways of being followers of Jesus with others. So how what might today's story about Hagar say to us in that? For it is certainly a powerful challenge...

Hagar's story is both shocking and also full of liberation. Like Sarah's story last week, we are invited to wrestle with the texts and discover the true, living, God beyond. On the one hand we encounter several intersectional oppressions, as Hagar experiences misuse of power, racism, sexual abuse and economic exploitation, interfaith/religious violence, and slavery. In this she represents those who have been 'other-ed' by the apparent victors of history, who have also betrayed their own best selves and traditions in doing so. On the other hand, and ultimately most significantly, Hagar represents not only survivors of such injustices but those who have discovered the true, living, God amid them. Indeed, with Hagar they name that God afresh, calling us to travel onward together.

Hagar's story helps reveal many of the shadows and separations of our human histories. Today's reading (from Genesis chapter 21 (verses 8-21) is a continuation of Genesis 16, where Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham in order to produce a child. Resentment develops between the women and Hagar runs away. She is, after all, an Egyptian, a foreigner, with no rights, or status. Asked to choose between them, Abraham sides with Sarah, leaving Hagar helpless. *'Your slave is in your power'*, he says, *'do to her as you please.'*

However, Hagar is not without comfort. Rather she is given a similar blessing to Abraham: *'I will increase your descendants so much'*, God says to Hagar, *'that they will be too numerous to count.'* (Genesis 16:10). As with many other biblical patriarchal narratives, we have aetiological, or origin, stories here, helping to explain later differences between peoples. Hagar and Ishmael's descendants will eventually flourish as a blessed people of God, alongside Abraham and Sarah's descendants. We are thereby challenged to acknowledge how the God of our Faith tradition is so much more than a God of one tribe, social or religious. Rather God seeks healing, justice and reconciliation, beyond the shadows and separations we human beings inflict and consolidate.

Hagar's challenges resonate in our own world, not least in racism and inter-religious violence, as well as sexual oppression and forms of modern slavery. It has also become commonplace, for example, to talk of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as different Abrahamic pathways. Yet inter-religious flourishing will not happen fully without engaging with the Hagar traditions, including their gender, race and colonialist implications. For whilst Hagar and Ishmael are not mentioned in the Qu'ran itself, they are certainly important in Islam, found in the Hadiths and in prayer and practice, including in a prominent ritual during the Hajj.

Race and slavery issues are also powerfully present in the continuing use of the Hagar stories. It is significant how Hagar has a very different place in white churches, where she is rarely mentioned, and in black churches, especially African-American, where she is iconic. For Hagar, as an African (an Egyptian), and a slave, speaks powerfully of liberation, emerging from a deep transformative relationship with God. Black life and theology, not least womanist, is thus typically full of reflection on Hagar. For whilst we may also identify with Sarah, and Abraham, in their stories there is also misuse of power and abuse, flowing from their privileges of race, wealth and status.

These need naming, so that God's liberation may flow freely to all. Even more importantly, we need to name and celebrate the love and power of God flowing through Hagar and people like her.

Perhaps the most powerfully expressive aspect of Hagar's story is in Genesis 16 verse 13. This follows God's promise to address Hagar's affliction, to give her Ishmael, and to nurture a great people through them. Hagar's response is to name God, which is in itself a quite extraordinary act: undertaken by an outsider, a woman, a slave. If we have ears, let us hear: it is through such people, out of their experience of God, that new living faith emerges.

Who then today, we might ask, is similarly speaking to us, naming God afresh? The name that Hagar gives God is also significant, for us all. For Hagar calls God El-Roi: *'the God who sees me'*. This has at least two key features. Firstly, as Hagar says, she has stayed alive after having been seen by, and seeing, God. In other words, God, ultimate power and mystery, does not destroy us as we share our deepest needs. Rather, God is love, strength and comfort for us. Secondly, we glimpse how redemption works. It is when we know that we are seen, heard, known, that new life comes. We know this in our own experience, don't we?

When we feel that others have truly seen or heard us, things change. Hagar witnesses to this and, above all, to the reality that, even in the wilderness - when no one else sees or hears, never mind cares – God does. Even in the most desperate of circumstances, our lives can be transformed, by that love and power.

Our contemporary reading today witnesses to this divine seeing and hearing into being. Entitled '*Hagar in the Wilderness*', it comes from Tyehimba Jess's collection *Olio*ⁱ, and is but one expression of the long and continuing African-American high valuing of Hagar. Indeed, this poem explicitly reflects on a sculpture by Edmonia Lewis, which you will find in your pew sheet. Edmonia was an extraordinary Native American and African American pioneer, who lived through the abolitionist struggle and the US Civil War, yet was effectively forced to flee, due to racism, to Rome where she became highly successful.

The sculpture has obvious ambivalence due to its original context. As the historian Kirsten Buick observesⁱⁱ, the white features of Lewis' *Hagar in the Wilderness* had to be there for 19th century white audiences. Yet they themselves symbolise the sufferings of the subjugated Hagar and women like her.

However, the figure is not cast down, or simply a mother, as in typical white portrayals of Hagar. Instead, Lewis left Ishmael out, focusing on displaying Hagar's strength, emerging out of such trials. Her hands are in prayer, and, as she is seen and heard into being by God, she takes a step forward, shaping a new future, beyond the shadows and separations of suffering. In doing so, she has both discovered God anew, and, in that strength, begun her liberation, and that of her descendants. The poet puts it beautifully:

*My God is the living God
God of the impertinent exile...*

*I've kissed the fingertips
of my dark and mortal God.
She has shown me the truth
behind each chiseled
blow that's carved me into this life,
the weight any woman might bear
to stretch her mouth toward her
one true God, her own
beaten, marble song.*

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Note well how how en fleshed, this true, living, God of Hagar is. This is not the patriarchal God, the supposed power over us, who is used to command obedience to injustice, but the power of eternal love with us to liberate all oppression. No wonder Hagar is such a powerful icon for so many black people. For as the Episcopalian priest and womanist theologian Wilda Gafney observes in her book *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*:^{iv}

I read Hagar's story through the prism of the wholesale enslavement of black peoples in the Americas and elsewhere; Hagar is the mother of Harriet Tubman and the women and men who freed themselves from slavery. I see Hagar as an abused woman. I see God's return of Hagar to her servitude and abuse as the tendency of some religious communities to side with the abuser at the expense of abused women and their children. Frequently that advice is couched as "God's will." Ultimately Hagar escapes her slaveholders and abusers and receives her inheritance from God, and God fulfills all of God's promises to her. (Womanist Midrash p. 44)

What, you might ask, is all of this to do with the UCA Anniversary? Well, it is appropriate that this event always falls close to Juneteenth, the US national anniversary commemorating the emancipation of slaves. For, if we are to move forward as a Church, and world, we need to remember Hagar, and her experience and vision of God, as a core biblical example of God's call to an open future with others.

So who then is Hagar for us today?

What are the shadows and separations with which we live?

What steps and shapes do we need to sculpt? And how will do this with other Christians and people of goodwill?

As The Basis of Union outlines, the Uniting Church does not exist except in relation to other Churches and other people, and we must always seek to transcend our limiting human boundaries. To assist with this, the Uniting Church as a whole is currently engaging in a national conversation entitled Act24 in which we are all invited to share. I hope that, after worship this morning, many of us will therefore take up the opportunity we are offering to reflect together on what vision we have for that.

To do so, we need to reflect both on our own traditions and experiences, and also on those who may be in the shadows or separated from us.

For the God of Hagar is the living God of surprises and new life, and always calling us afresh in whatever wilderness we find ourselves.

In the name of Christ, who suffers with us, seeing and hearing us into steps of new life, and sculpting us into shapes of joy and purpose.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://poets.org/poem/hagar-wilderness>

ⁱⁱ Buick, Kirsten P. "The Ideal Works of Edmonia Lewis: Invoking and Inverting Autobiography", *American Art*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hagar_by_Edmonia_Lewis.jpg

^{iv} <https://www.amazon.com/Womanist-Midrash-Reintroduction-Women-Throne-ebook>