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Texts: Genesis 21: 8-20; Revelation 3: 20
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The Long Way Home

The place to start is with a desperate woman, weeping. She is without support, without shelter, without food and water, without any resources to speak of. She is, quite literally, without, which is to say, on the outside of things. Her situation had always been tenuous, to say the least, subject to the mercy and whims of two individuals who understood their relationship to her in terms of ownership. Hers was a life to be consumed. Her labor was for their well-being. Her womb was for their reproduction. Her child was intended for their lineage. She had, in a very real way, always been without, on the outside, but now that status had been fully realized. Cast out of the only home she could lay claim to, she and her child had trekked through the desert until their food and water ran out. When she could not bear to witness her son's death, from lack of water, she abandoned him under a bush, and collapsed in despair. She is without. Without family, without anything or anyone to fall back upon, without shelter...just without. Broken by life, she waits for death to find her.

The woman's name, of course, is Hagar. Her son is Ishmael. Theirs is a story too often ignored in pulpits and official church theologies. The narrative arc of Genesis traces the legacy of Abraham and Sarah, whose descendants become the Hebrew people. It does not trace the legacy of Abraham and Hagar, who, conceive Ishmael together, a child that Sarah resents. And so soon after Abraham abandons her and Ishmael, the narrative does too. It's a dynamic that afflicts the writing of history and theology alike, where the vanquished, the disinherited, and the dispossessed become afterthoughts when the official narratives are deployed.

Still, her story remains, and we can be thankful that this episode remains in the Genesis account. It helps us to become aware of similar omissions and elisions in the telling of official stories. And it has allowed readers and listeners facing conditions like that of Hagar to find themselves, and to notice a revolutionary truth: while Abraham and Sarah discard Hagar, while the wider biblical narrative discards Hagar, while official church teachings and theologies all but ignore Hagar, God does not. God hears Hagar's cry in the wilderness, delivers her of her misery, and makes of her and Ishmael, the text says, a great people.

It's a beautiful passage, suggesting the alluring possibility that behind the official story, the dominant narrative of faith as written in the book of Genesis, stands a corollary faith, one that is, for the most part, unwritten and mostly forgotten. It is a theology of the invisibles and the discarded, of the neglected and the dispossessed. A theology of and for those written out of the Bible, written out of history, written out of constitutions, written out of legal codes, written out of economic structures and political processes. The official documents do not, for the most part, track those individuals and stories, but the story of Hagar and Ishmael suggests that God does.

There are more than a few avenues we might travel down as we explore the far-reaching implications of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. One possibility was suggested some years ago by Dolores Williams, in her monumental book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, mapping the experience of black American women onto the story of Hagar. If you're so inclined, it would be a powerful book to explore in this particular cultural moment, and I recommend it highly. Another possibility lies in the opening the story of Hagar and Ishmael presents for interfaith work,

especially with Islam, where Ishmael is understood to be the great forbear of the Islamic tradition. Still another would be a postcolonial reading of Hagar and Ishmael, where those two figures stand for all the formerly enslaved and colonized, together with the realization that, even at the beginning of the Bible, God is said to be present to their needs.

But it's another possibility that I'd like to fasten upon this morning. And that has to do with Hagar and Ishmael as figures, metaphors really, for the evicted, for all those who have undergone the experience of being without, tossed out of a home and made to wander another kind of wilderness. They stand as a metaphor for housing precarity, where a series of compounded circumstances usually far beyond a single individual's control, lands those individuals and their families on the street. Sometimes they wind up in shelters. Sometimes they live in cars. If they're lucky, they might stay on a couch or in a room in a relative's house. Most live at the precipice of despair, and many, like Hagar, have crossed over it. Hagar and Ishmael stand for all those who find themselves without, on the outside of things – a home, yes, but also so much more: outside of what it means to have a stable shelter on which to depend.

During the coronavirus, many of us have become acutely aware of just how dependent we are upon our homes, for the ways they shelter us from the worst effects of the plague. In the middle of the 20th century, the architect Le Corbusier stated that houses are machines for living, and I for one have rarely been as grateful for the functional machinery that is the house in which we live. For many of us, the pandemic has been a kind of homecoming, with all the pleasure and ambivalence that word implies. Those of us who can have tried new recipes and have started gardens. Some people have made dramatic home improvements; others have just been glad for a few rooms to call their own, in which to rest, eat, and yes, binge watch TV. Thanks in no small part to our houses and yards, lockdowns and social distancing haven't been wholly untenable affairs. For all the chaos, for many of us, our houses have been sanctuaries during this period.

All of which begs the question: what about those who don't have those forms of shelter? And what about those on the edge of losing those shelters? What about all the Hagers and Ishmaels out there now, dispossessed by a country with little regard for those who struggle to get by? What about all those not in some desert wilderness of a biblical yesteryear, but in the wilderness that is the United States for an ever-increasing number of people? What about the Hagers and Ishmaels that are among us, before our very eyes? Like the biblical narrative itself, there exists a tendency to get caught up in the flow of official stories and events, many of which have great import. But those narratives too often function like a departing train, leaving other stories, other realities, behind - like Hagar, like Ishmael, like so many others.

Matthew Desmond's gripping study of housing insecurity, *Evicted*, is filled with the stories of many contemporary Hagers and Ishmaels. It's a topic I've spent a lot of time learning about this summer. The stories in *Evicted* belong to a pre-pandemic world, but they expose a reality that urgently needs to be confronted right now. There is Arleen and her two boys, Jori and Jafaris, evicted from their home a few days before Christmas. There's Scott, a former nurse who struggles with addiction. There's Lorraine, who unwisely decides to hold up a convenience store when she can't pay the rent. And there's Lamar, a man who lost his legs in an accident, and who is struggling to get out of debt. Each of them has a backstory, where a major life event prevented them, eventually, from making the monthly rent. They were each evicted, and once that occurred, a cascading series of consequences followed. The loss of a home resulted in the loss of a school and a neighborhood. It resulted in the loss of possessions, like furniture and clothes. An eviction raises the likelihood of job loss. It means that you may not be eligible for public housing. Add to that list an increasing inability to pay for food, let alone nutritious

food. Then add the toll an eviction takes on a person's health. Then add the psychological and spiritual consequence of eviction – clinical depression is almost a given, and there is a far greater risk of suicide. Writing on the emotional devastation wrought by eviction, in words that could well be applied to the story of Hagar and Ishmael, a group of psychiatrists stated, "Eviction must be considered a traumatic rejection, a denial of one's most basic human needs, and an exquisitely shameful experience." Little wonder, then, that suicide as a result of eviction or foreclosure has steadily climbed over the last two decades, as housing costs in many parts of the country have soared.

Desmond notes as well that the housing crisis is expanding. During the last decade, New York City saw rates of eviction at about 80 per day. That's nearly 30,000 evictions every year. In Cleveland, 1 in 9 rental households were summoned to eviction court. In Chicago, it was one in 14. In the United States, 1 in 5 of all renting families spends half of its income or more on housing.

Let me bring it closer to home. On a recent call with an organization called Connecticut Fair Housing, I learned that in the state of Connecticut, there were 20,000 evictions every year prior to Covid. Currently, there's a moratorium on evictions until January of 2021, but that moratorium will end eventually, and all that back rent will be due. Since the pandemic, more than 200,000 households in Connecticut are unable to pay their rent, according to CT Fair Housing. That fact comes with some troubling, but all too predictable, vulnerabilities related to race. 70% of Black residents in the state of Connecticut rent their homes or apartments. 64% of Latin American residents do. Only 34% of white residents are renters. One more troubling number: 50%, (half!) of Black residents who rent in the state of Connecticut report that they have little or no confidence that they can or will be able to pay their rent when the moratorium ends. If you're so moved, you can go online to sign a petition entitled Cancel Rent CT, in order to forestall this crisis. Clearly, Hagar and Ishmael are our contemporaries. The only question is whether we'll allow the narrative simply to move on, ignoring how the story develops for the Hagers and Ishmaels, or if we'll linger with them, paying careful attention to how their story turns out.

I contend that it's worth lingering there. So far I've concentrated on the tragic aspects of Hagar and Ishmael, together with the tragic conditions faced by so many in similar circumstances. But it's not only a tragic story. It provides an alternative possibility to tragedy, for the text informs us that God heard the cries of Hagar, and sent an angel to show the way toward water. Ishmael lives, and so does Hagar. They find the relief they need, and so their story doesn't end in despair. It ends with a vision of flourishing. The catalyst, it turns out, was little more than a divine messenger, pointing the way toward a well of water.

How are we to understand that wilderness intervention? I don't wish to foreclose the possibility of supernatural interventions and angelic mediations – the inexplicably and miraculously good may well occur through, let us say, supranatural means, more often than we realize. But as often as not, if divine intervention occurs, it happens through the activity of people, and institutions. That's simply to say that if someone is to find their way to a spring of water, and if that spring of water is to lead toward a reconstituted life, it will require people to help. That's how God works, at least so far as I can tell.

That water itself represents many things, and comes in many forms. Above all, that restorative water of life would be created by providing stable housing for the Hagers and Ishmaels of the world. A home is a wellspring of personhood, Desmond reminds us, where our identity takes root and grows, where, as children, we imagine and play. As adolescents, we

retreat to a home in order to venture forth from that home. As adults, a home is a place to settle, to raise a family, and to pursue work. That kind of stability begets a psychological stability, which begets a kind of social stability, in neighborhoods, in schools, in cities and indeed, around the country. Which is to say, we need a massive national campaign to produce beautiful and affordable homes that are accessible to everyone. That's one of the reasons we here at FCCOL have been advocating for a renewed push for affordable housing in our region, and especially in Old Lyme. It's a tangible way that we could point the way toward those restorative waters.

To that end, I was recently able to tour HOPE Partnership's new affordable housing project over in Centerbrook, a 17-unit facility built above the shops and restaurants at Spencer's Corner. It was, I can tell you, one of the most, well, hopeful things I've seen in some time. The units are beautiful, the kind of places I would actually be glad to reside in myself. It didn't take long to begin wondering out loud what it would mean to pursue a similar project in the shops and office spaces along Halls Road here in town. It would be a wonderful way to inject new life into that shopping district, and it would go a long way toward opening our community to greater diversity. More to the point, however, it might be the spring of water that a latter-day Hagar or Ishmael might need.

I like to imagine projects like that flourishing in cities and towns all around the country. It won't singlehandedly solve our problems – Desmond has some other, innovative suggestions in that regard - but it can, and will, help. Imagine if housing was no longer a crisis for so many. Imagine if families needed to spend only 30% of their income on housing, rather than the 70 or 80% that many currently spend. Evictions would all but cease. If evictions plummeted, so too would homelessness. Families would be stabilized, as would the communities in which they live. So too, despair would recede, as would, I am willing to bet, the fear, the rage, the xenophobia, the paranoia, and the temptation toward unhinged conspiracy theories. Now, don't get me wrong – this is America, and those things won't simply disappear. There's a vested interest among many in maintaining the disequilibrium that many people are experiencing. Still, I continue to believe that reason and the better angels of our humanity can guide us. Strategies to secure stable and affordable housing would stabilize lives, and with stabilized lives would come a far more stable society. I like to believe that our community might play a role in bringing that about.

I'll conclude with a vision borrowed from Toni Morrison's slim, wise novel, *Home*, the story of two individuals, a brother and a sister, cut from the mold of Hagar and Ishmael, who find their spring of water. Frank Money is a traumatized veteran from the Korean War, returning to a country that would prefer he didn't exist. Cee, his younger sister, is in trouble back in Georgia where they grew up. And so he undertakes a journey that winds up looking and feeling like the Underground Railroad in reverse, moving from the North back to the South. The way is treacherous. When Frank tracks his sister down, he finds that she had been the subject of horrific medical experiments. They retreat to their home community, a place they had once shunned as narrow and small minded, and discover there a group of women who know the art of healing, and of making a home. The women welcome them in, beginning the work of nurturing Cee back to life.

Morrison writes, "Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others...their similarities were glaring. There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because there was a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. The absence of common sense irritated but did not surprise them. Laziness was more than

intolerable to them; it was inhuman. Sleep was not for dreaming; it was for gathering strength for the coming day. Mourning was helpful, but God was better and they did not want to meet their Maker and have to explain a wasteful life. They knew He would ask each of them one question: "What have you done?"

It's a vision of home, of steady and stable nurturance, of a life-giving spring of living water, that I would see reproduced everywhere. Applied to the challenges before us, it's a question we might ask of ourselves, as if before God: "What have we done - for the Hagers and Ishmaels of the world? What shall we do?"