

Proper 6A: Truthful Origins**June 14, 2020****The Rev. Scott Walters**

There's an old framework for preaching that says a sermon should be "three points and a poem." I prefer the "one point and a pet peeve" model. So, today let's start with the pet peeve: the lectionary. For those who don't know that word, the lectionary is the cycle of scripture readings we use in Sunday worship.

Now, hear me out. I have been a staunch defender of the way our lectionary takes us through both testaments of the Bible over the course of three years. It keeps preachers from cherry picking their favorite passages, even if we do get pretty nimble at ignoring or explaining away what slips through our censors.

In our lectionary, there are actually two tracks to choose from for our Old Testament readings. And Track One leaves out entirely the story of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to three strangers under the oaks of Mamre. How can this be? There will be no children of Abraham, if this first child of Abraham and Sarah never comes to be. Well, there's Ishmael, whom we'll come back to in a minute. But *neither* track tells us about Hagar and Ishmael.

But Track Two, which your Calvary preachers prefer because it does include more of these old stories... Track Two may do even more violence to meaning of today's reading, as it lifts it carefully out of its context, scrubbing it clean. It makes ninety-year-old Sarah's laugh at the news she would soon be pregnant the only moment of dramatic tension, culminating in Yahweh's gentle finger wag at her denial, "Oh yes you did laugh."

It reads like the comforting fable of George Washington and the cherry tree. A story that contains a minor ethical lapse that actually serves a prettified myth that explains nicely why we're the good and trustworthy people we know ourselves to be.

My pet peeve is that nothing could be further from the origin story of the Hebrew people, which is our origin story as Christians as well. And the one point this sermon will attempt to make is that it is dangerously unfaithful to the witness of scripture to sanitize our origin stories. The Bible, as we've received it, will have none of that.

So, let's take a few minutes and set our reading in its context, shall we? I should warn any small children or people of generally weak dispositions that we are going to be talking about the Bible this morning, ok? There you go. You've been warned.

Maybe we should go back three chapters to Genesis 15. For it is here that Yahweh tells Abram to cleave in two a three-year old heifer, a goat, a ram, and some birds and to separate the halves of the animals. Abram is driving away buzzards from the carcasses as the sun goes down, and a deep slumber and a dark dread comes upon him. God tells Abram that his offspring, which he's been told will be as many as the stars of the heavens, will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years, but the nation that enslaves them will suffer judgment. And one day — 400 years in the future, mind you — one day Abram's offspring will have a home.

The problem is that Sarai and Abram still have had no children and are getting on in years as chapter 16 begins. So Sarai tells her husband to have a child by the Egyptian girl they have enslaved so that the promised lineage will go on. And Ishmael is born to Abram and Hagar.

Maybe it's not surprising that some jealousy and generally unhelpful family dynamics follow. Sarai torments Hagar until she and Ishmael flee into the wilderness, where an angel meets them at a spring, and tells them a great people will come from her offspring as well.

In Islamic tradition, Hagar builds a well at this spring and the holy city of Mecca grows up around it. Which I tell you only to emphasize again that this is not just one moment among many in scripture. It is an origin story that reaches deep into all three Abrahamic faiths.

In chapter 17 the covenant is formalized. There are the requisite circumcisions and Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. And when Abraham, who is now 99 years old, is told that 90 year old Sarah, will bear a child, he falls down laughing. Father Abraham, you see, was the first to laugh at God.

Such is the immediate lead up to Abraham sitting by the flap of his tent in the heat of the day, when three strangers approach and a flurry of hospitality follows. Abraham offers water for their feet. Sarah takes her best flour and makes cakes. Abraham runs to his herd, takes a choice calf, tender and good, and gives it to his servant to prepare and serve to the guests with curds and milk. And while the men are eating, Sarah listens in and laughs her own laugh at the news that she'll bear a child in her tenth decade.

This is the story you just heard. It is the model for hospitality to strangers that the writer of Hebrews will hold up centuries later as an enduring responsibility of Jews and followers of Jesus alike: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

But do you know what happens next? And by "next" I mean, do you know what the very next verse after God's, "Oh yes, you did laugh," to Sarah is?

"Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. And Yahweh said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...?'"

That's right. The promise to Abraham and Sarah is a stop along the way to Sodom and Gomorrah. Cities that have attracted God's attention because of their depravity. Maybe you remember that God does not hide what's about to happen. And Abraham nervously but passionately negotiates with God, eventually extracting the promise that if there are even ten righteous people in the city, it will be spared.

So, it is the same two angels who accompanied God to Abraham's tent who walk on to Sodom where Abraham's nephew Lot is "sitting in the gateway." It's worth noting that the construction of the phrase in Hebrew is identical to Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent a few verses earlier. Like Abraham, Lot welcomes the strangers. He begs them to stay in his house and not in the city square. Like Abraham and Sarah, he offers water for their feet and provides a meal, if only one of unleavened bread. But "the men of Sodom, young and old, all the people to the very last man," the text says, surrounded the house and demanded that Lot send them the strangers to be raped.

I put to you that it is a measure of the depravity of subsequent generations that we came to associate the word Sodomite with anything other than the rape of strangers.

Commentators over the centuries have said the fact that Lot will then offer his own virgin daughters to the mob in exchange is a measure of how sacred hospitality to the stranger was in that time. But Robert Alter finds this explanation too pat. The text lets the horrific details remain, undiluted. And after the city is reduced to ash, and Lot's wife to a pillar of salt, he is hiding out in a cave, where he unwittingly, if drunkenly, takes the virginity of the daughters he would have offered to the mob. As if even threatened traumas can stay alive in families in horrific ways.

Why this long, gruesome digression if this sermon was to have just one point? Well, because there is a lot of smug modern moralistic distaste for the barbarous religion of ancient people. "How can it be," many a good Episcopalian has been known to ask, including this one, "... how can it be that these terrible stories got left in our scriptures?" And left, not off in the forgotten rant of a minor

prophet, but right in these hinge moments in our origin stories. Is it just as barbarous for Christians and Jews to keep reading them? To keep passing them on to our children even?

I'm sure it can be. But this Christian has begun to see them differently. This very sheltered Christian is coming to believe that there was a bravery in those ancient Hebrews that we cherry tree people have got to learn.

Think about it. It was 2018 when Monticello finally added an exhibit that told the fuller story of Sally Hemings. That's 192 years after Thomas Jefferson died and 20 years after a DNA test confirmed a high probability that Jefferson fathered one, and possibly all, of Hemings's children. All of which seemed to be a poorly kept secret, at best, during their lifetimes.

But the Hebrew people wove jealousy and betrayals and violence and incest into their founding myths from the beginning. At least in their scriptures and ours, they didn't pretend to be the heirs of angels. But they didn't disown their forbears either, which some people might happily do of Jefferson. We'd like to make him only a monster, which allows us to pretend we are not the children of his deep sins and of his shimmering ideals.

There is a problem in us when we remove the trauma from our founding stories. There is a problem in us when we tell sanitized, cherry tree versions of our history or when we deny that we are the heirs in the deepest of ways of very flawed and sinful people. And the problem is that we can't deal with the trauma in our lives today when we pretend its roots are only in the day before yesterday.

Resmaa Menakem is a trauma specialist and therapist who is applying the emerging brain science around trauma to racial realities as well. He says there is now evidence that trauma can travel through as many as 14 generations and will show up in the bodies and the limbic systems of people who have no conscious idea of what's formed their deepest responses to the world. No idea, perhaps, of what's formed their responses to the strangers who show up in need of hospitality, especially when the cultural obligations to care for the stranger have begun to erode. And, to be clear, by "them" and "their" I mean "us" and "ours."

When we don't tell the truth about our history, like a carefully excerpted story from the Bible, our present traumas have no context. And, as Resmaa Menakem says, "Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture."

In other words, until we can tell the brutally honest truth about ourselves and our histories, as our scriptures so often do, we will continue to pretend that the trauma we've endured or inflicted has a short half-life. We will keep our sanitized origin myths intact by explaining sin in terms of an individual personality, in terms of one family's unfortunate traits, in terms of a culture that, for no explicable reason to us at all, grows enraged, destructive, even violent.

But, friends, our scriptures model another way. A braver and more truthful way. And to believe the stories of the Bible are inspired and sacred is to believe they still bear a wisdom that can heal and redeem.

It is the complicated wholeness of scripture that bears its redemptive power to the complicated whole of our lives. And when we place our lives in their truthful context, maybe we can then take up the practices that actually can turn our histories in the direction of healing. Practices like an ancient, divine command to look past my fear of those who are strange to me and offer sacred hospitality, trusting that an older story has brought all of us to this moment and made us who we are. And in that offering, in that trust, maybe even my scarred and sinful heart can begin to truthfully heal, and pass on a little less of the old trauma it still carries to the world.