

## **March 11, 2018 – Journey worship**

**TEXT: Genesis 21**

**THEME: Wilderness**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

A journey into the wilderness is not for the faint of heart. Reality shows in recent decades from Survivor to Survivorman paint a picture for us of the perils of wilderness survival. Regardless of how manufactured or authentic each episode is, most of us finish watching with a greater sense of gratitude for the amenities of modern plumbing for EVERY possible reason, and an appreciation for our daily bread—thankful that even in the leanest of times we can fall back on a PBJ sandwich and not have to resort to eating slugs.

The wilderness is a harsh place. Whether we head there for adventure or are stranded in the wasteland for reasons beyond our control, it is clear that time spent in the wilderness requires a person to draw upon strength, ingenuity and courage they never knew we had.

This is true whether the wilderness is one with the impassable vegetation of the Amazon or the harsh sting of the sands of the Sahara, just as it is true regardless of whether the wilderness of which we speak is a literal place or a figurative station in which our souls reside. We know the wilderness of depression, confusion, loneliness, or simply of knowing that things are not right and not knowing exactly where to start to fix them. The wilderness is a tough place to be.

Hagar knew this when she was sent into the wilderness. Hagar was a victim of circumstance in every sense of the word. In just our text for today we see that Hagar is a victim of Sarah's jealousy, of Abraham's doubt, of a patriarchal culture, even of God's decree. She is the victim of a social system that situates all power with men, and perhaps gives a little power to the women who have their ear.

Hagar is a pawn, manipulated by Sarah and Abraham for their own gain. She has no voice, no decision, no possibilities, no hope. She is the victim of a sexist and classist system which situates all wealth and property in the hands of men, while likewise permitting men to have many wives and concubines to maximize their tribe/family/...

Hagar is a poor woman forced to bear a child with her boss on behalf of his barren wife, without any agency or consent on her part. This son that she bore was to bring security—to Sarah, who would claim him as her own and through him inherit her husband's property—and to her. Yet when Sarah's own son was born, this first child became a threat. Sarah soon saw that although hers was the promised child, Hagar's son Ishmael was the firstborn, and, by rights, would inherit all of his father's wealth. So Sarah, in her fear and jealousy, drove them off—sending them into the wilderness to die. Abraham packs up a loaf of bread and a skin of water and sends them away. And God lets them go.

Hagar knew the harsh reality of human sin, of power trips, of poverty, of vulnerability. And she knew that the wilderness was worse. She knew that life in the wilderness was likely a death sentence for her and her son. And so she tucks her son away in the bushes and walks away, afraid to see him die.

Hagar soon learns something new about the nature of the wilderness—and, perhaps, the nature of God. Here in the wilderness is where God hears her son's cries (the cries of the most vulnerable). In the wilderness, Hagar hears the voice of God telling her, through an angel, that God has not forgotten her or her son. In the wilderness Hagar receives God's promise that her son will, in fact, be a great nation of his own. In the wilderness Hagar experiences firsthand God's direct provision and protection. The wilderness becomes, for her and her son, the place where they are freed from the dominance and abuse of others and able to become their own people, cultivate their own gifts, and build a family of their own.

We don't often envision the harsh landscape of the wilderness as a place of refuge, of personal growth, and of liberation. Except, if we take a closer look at scripture this paradigm is all over the place! Freedom comes for the Israelites through their sojourn through the desert. God's word is revealed to them, God's provision made known. Even Jesus' time in the wilderness fasting and praying was a time of formation and preparation for his future ministry.

The wilderness becomes, then, a place where:

- the cries of the most vulnerable are heard
- God's promises are made known
- People experience God's intimate care and provision firsthand
- God liberates God's people from broken systems that harm and put down
- The starting point for experiencing the future God desires for God's people

What if this is true for us?

As urban American Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or experience of wilderness might look a lot different from Hagar's. But many of us have had experiences of being cast aside or forsaken. Some of us have known the wilderness of classist, racist and sexist oppression. Some of us have known the wilderness of being treated unkindly, of being put down and put out. Some of us have felt confined to a place and state of being that does not allow us to flourish—because of our gender or race or orientation or class. Some of us have known how it feels to be unsafe.

Wilderness looks different for all of us: illness, unemployment, broken relationships, loneliness, depression, worry, isolation or anger. And, frankly, it is terrifying to live here. It is frightening to live amidst uncertainty, discomfort, and even danger. It's nearly impossible to plan a next move from such tenuous ground. It is not glamorous or easy. And even if we know it is a temporary station in life, we all want out. There is too much in the wilderness that is uncertain and unclear.

But this passage reminds us that there is still good news to be had even when we are spending time in the wilderness. There is still reason to hope. Here, God hears the cries of the vulnerable (Ishmael's name even means God hears). Here, God ministers to God's people—protecting and providing for their needs. Here, God frees people from burdens—from oppression, from social roles that limit, from harm, from distortion. Here, God shows the cast aside and forgotten the future God has planned for God's people. One commentator writes:

(W)hen we are in that situation; when things have gotten so dry and parched and close to death that you feel like you can't bear to watch, and you just want to walk away because watching something you love that much suffer, or possibly die is just too painful. God speaks...and tells us to hold on...and hold on tightly. We are to lift up those things that we think are beyond hope to the one who IS hope...and to be still enough to let hope touch our eyes...gently...and to follow the finger of God to life giving water that we weren't able to see before.

May we hold on, dear friends. May we hold on. May we hold on to the hope that we are offered by a God who hears us, who cares for us, who frees us from all that hinders, who positions us for new life. May hold on to our belief in God's mercy—that no one is cast aside, pushed away, or despised so much that they fall outside of God's reach. May we find hope in the one who is hope—for Hagar, for the outcast, for the vulnerable...for us.

Thanks be to God.