

SCRIPTURE:

Genesis 16:7-13:

<sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup>And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” <sup>9</sup>The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.”

<sup>10</sup>The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” <sup>11</sup>And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. <sup>12</sup>He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.” <sup>13</sup>So she named the LORD who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?”

Romans 8:18-30:

<sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup>We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

<sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

SERMON: “Hoping against Hope” The Rev. JaQuan Beachem

I recognize the density and the heaviness of these Scripture passages, and I wrestled with them. I invite you to wrestle with them as well, and to journey with me as we unpack these texts together.

So here we are in the first Sunday of Advent! We have been for some time now what the liturgical calendar refers to as *ordinary time* and now we are entering into *a time of anticipation*, also known as the Advent season. What are we anticipating, you may be wondering? We are anticipating a birth! Yes, we are anticipating a birth that is immaculately conceived! Now, we will get to that birth soon enough, as we work together over the next few weeks. But today I would like for us to take our time as we anticipate.

As we look to the birth of Immanuel, as we look to the coming of a Savior, I would like for us to take some time in the book of Genesis with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael. Let us see what we might discover together as we collectively reflect on HOPE and Hagar’s story.

As I begin, still being in the week of Thanksgiving, I would like to offer some gratitude, gratitude for the womanist theologians who have shifted my vision and created more room for my theological imagination. The works of matriarch Delores Williams, Rev. Drs. Emilie Townes, Wil Gafney and Eboni Marshall Turman, as well as my womanist sisters and colleague friends who are journeying with me as I prepare to preach the Word.

And this morning, I would like to speak to each of you a message titled “HOPING AGAINST HOPE.”

Has anyone ever looked around and thought “God, where are you?” Or said “God, what is going on here? What are you working out?” Or perhaps you’re familiar with the musical “Miss Saigon,” and you’re like soldier Chris, belting out “Why, God? Why?” in search of some reprieve.

Hoping against hope. Perhaps you’ve been on your way to work in the morning and the document that you needed was left on the counter. You were already running a little bit behind, but you had to turn around? Hoping against hope, you were hoping you would make it in time to work. Maybe you were awaiting an important phone call, for results of some kind. Or perhaps you have recently received some discouraging news. Maybe just this week you were preparing an item for a family gathering, and you had invited folks to be served at 2 pm, and it is now a quarter to 1 and the recipe says that it needs at least 90 minutes.

Hoping against hope. Maybe you have been called outside of your name or wronged by another? Have you been there? Our protagonist in this story Hagar has. I think that Hagar can provide us some insights on how we might move when ordinary time ends. Yes, Hagar, the banished one. Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden to Abram and Sarai. Before Sarai conceives, Hagar is selected by her to bear Abram an heir. I am sure you can imagine the tensions that could have and did arise during this dynamic. Even still, Hagar conceives. The text tells us that Hagar was dealt with harshly. Maybe someone here has been treated harshly.

It is with this conception that Hagar finds herself with her back against the wall. This was not necessarily new territory for Hagar, given her status in her society. In a moment, Hagar cannot find any solace in her situation. And so Hagar chooses to run away. In a season of deep despair, Hagar runs, seeking an otherwise, an alternative. Hagar turns to the wild, hoping against hope.

We meet Hagar here this morning. We meet her at a fountain or a spring on her way to Shur. Shur is said to be at the northern border of Egypt, said to be somewhere in the Arabian Desert. When Hagar finds herself in a place where it seems like God has forsaken her, where society has turned its back, Hagar attempts to return to her home in Egypt. Hoping against hope.

Some of us have been hoping against hope for the last 20-some-odd-months. Others of us have been hoping against hope our entire lives, given our bodies and context.

Last week, a jury declared Kyle Rittenhouse not guilty. This week, on the 24th, the three white men responsible for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery were found guilty. I heard this verdict in the car with my mom, actually, in Georgia.

Mothers know how to hope against hope. Hagar, just when all appears to be lost, encounters an angel of the All Seeing God. Hagar encounters the Faithful One. Let's remember her context. Hagar is in the middle of the desert, with child, on the verge of death. And it is in this moment that Hagar is instructed to return to the place that she had just escaped. Maybe you were like me when reading this text, and you may be thinking "Wait a minute! Huh, God? You are all knowing, right? So, you must know what Hagar had just been going through!"

As Dr. Gafney shares in her exegesis of this text, this response from God was not the most welcome. However, with some deeper engagement with the story, a little more wrestling, one will find some hope in the story. For Hagar does not return as she left. Hoping against hope.

Hope is active. Hope is a discipline. It must be practiced. There is also at times a bittersweetness to hope, because the path to hope is not always laid out clearly for us. At times, it can appear easier to simply submit to the woes of life, to systems and rules.

Our Romans passage reminds us that hope that is seen is not hope at all. I would say that Ahmaud Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, knew this. Justice, per se, may not have been served this week, nor healing. Because Mrs. Cooper-Jones had to march, she had to speak up and protest and gather the masses for the trial of her son's murder to even be heard. I note personally that my abolitionist imagination does not place hope in a carceral system. That said, Ahmaud Arbery's mother knows, as the Romans text reminds us, that good does occur for those who love God. The first thing she said after the verdict was "Thank God." For she even did not anticipate that this day would come.

But for those who are hoping against hope -- ones who find themselves with their backs against the wall, those who may have others depending on them, those for whom giving up is simply not an option -- Hagar's story provides some hope. Hagar, here in the middle of the desert, encounters an angel, and is nourished and encouraged by the angel's words. Hagar is provided a new vision, an inspiration to carry forward.

Hagar names God in this encounter. What agency for a slave girl, right?! With a word from the living God, Hagar is granted the strength to hold onto her faith. Hagar is granted the strength to muster hope in a context that appears to be hopeless.

Again, Hagar does not return to Israel as she left. Hagar has a shift in mindset from one of scarcity to one of abundance. An abundance by way of the blessing she has conceived. Hagar is reminded that she does not have to be bound by the despair of her world, and that her lineage is destined for greater! As my mom often says, Hagar knows that her latter will be greater than her former! I share that with you as a word of good news, as we continue to hope against hope.

Hagar left the household of Sarai and Abram because she was not living a life that allowed her to fully embody her purpose as a child of God. Hagar's initial decision to leave her harsh environment was for her to get some space and room to discover hope comes. Again, Hope is active, a discipline. Hagar's activity liberates her and her lineage, as her action allows her the capacity to rediscover her personhood, her agency, her divinity.

Theologically, I believe that we are called to co-create with God in this world. Prior to her wilderness experience, Hagar was not fully allowed to do such things. And in order for Hagar to fully realize her calling, she needed to remove herself for a season from her context. Perhaps you've had an encounter or a season where you needed to take a respite and a break elsewhere in order to come back to the situation with fresh eyes, with revitalized hope.

Hagar, when she left, was not in a healthy place emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Some among us in this holiday season may know a similar place. Hagar's wilderness experience allowed her time for a recalibration, to drink from the fountain of the Living God. Hope seemed to be nowhere to be found before God intervened. And God met Hagar where she was, down in the dumps, depressed, malnourished, exiled. God meets Hagar in the middle. Therefore if we need God to meet us in the middle, God will also do so.

With God, Hagar creates a home within herself. Attempting to get to the home she once knew -- Egypt, Hagar becomes a home within with God. A beacon of Hope. El-Roi, The-God-who-sees Hagar, calls Hagar to life, life anew and life abundantly, in her time of despair. Beloved, I encourage you not to let go in times of despair. I encourage you to instead let go and let God! Let go and let Church. Let go and let Community.

Hagar in this story needed to live so that Ishmael could live, for legacy and love. I would like to note also that the blessing here does not lie in Hagar's motherhood alone. Each of us here are *birthing* something for the enacting of the kin-dom. Offspring is not the only way to bless the kin-dom. The hope that Hagar finds is passed on to Ishmael her child, and his lineage, that inspires him to a place of royalty. And in Hagar's case, she needed to live in order to birth a future, the future of nations, to bring royalty into the world.

I wonder what you might be birthing in this season. What God may be attempting to bring forth out of you for our world today. How are you *mothering* in this season, or parenting in this season? What are you imparting into our world and passing down to the generations to come?

Hoping against hope. Hagar saw God and remained alive. This is crucial! This encounter reveals that God is on the side of those on the sidelines, the oppressed, on the side of those who are struggling in life's journey, on the side of those where all hope appears to be lost. This is crucial because God reminds us that even when a society or system may say no, not yet, God says "Yes!" Hagar reminds us that we ought not look to man for what God can do. Hagar, the Mother of Nations.

Now, Hagar's story also displays that God's "YES" may not always come in the shapes and forms that we anticipate. I mean, shall we recall or look ahead to the way in which God came into this world? Immanuel, Jesus, in a stable!

Hoping against hope. We cannot manifest hope on our own. This church community has been investigating together what the church is for. I look forward to being caught up on your conversation. That said, I think that the church is called to inspire hope when those in our world may feel that hopelessness abounds. I think that the church ought to serve as a reminder of the power of El-Roi, the God who sees. So let us start seeing, seeing one another, seeing our neighbor.

Hope must be cultivated. Once cultivated, hope must be shared. This Advent season we see that hope can also be inherited as children of God. We are called to reach out to those who may be having a hard time, seeming to exist in a place of hopelessness, not able to see the light. The church, and those of the church, ought to see those who may be down and out, looking for solace, and provide a home away from home. The church ought to be seeking to uplift a world, as Stephen Sondheim wrote, where no one is alone as one goes *into the woods*.

Some of us, like Hagar, have found ourselves hanging in the balance. The church, I think, is here to provide a faith community as we endure the highs and lows, the mountain tops and the valleys, the wilderness experiences of life.

I will not claim to know exactly what you may be experiencing in your life at this time, beloved. That said, may you be encouraged by a God that sees you, by a God that is faithful, and by a community that claims to be on the side of justice with the God of hope.

May Hagar's narrative provide to you, too, a light of hope, hope in this wilderness of verdicts and variants.

May it be so. Amen.

*Our guest pastor: An advocate & artist born and groomed in the suburbs of Atlanta, JaQuan Beachem is a 2021 Master of Divinity graduate of Yale Divinity School. Rev. Beachem, who was ordained on November 21, is serving as the Director of Community Development & Spiritual Formation at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale. In their leisure, JaQuan enjoys jamming out to music, honing his yoga practice, tasting a new recipe, and noticing things bloom! Rev. Beachem will lead worship services through Advent.*