

Banishment
Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf
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This is a story about banishment and exclusion and how it never works the way we think it will. Scripture chose to tell this story not through villains who we can imagine we don't have anything in common with, but through the heroes of our faith - the beginning of our faith. Abraham and Sarah are the ones God chose. The ones who said yes when God said "go," who packed up everything familiar and walked into the unknown on nothing but a promise. We admire them. We claim them. They are, in a real sense, us.

And they do something wrong. There is no other way to put it. What they do to Hagar and Ishmael in this story is wrong. They banish them into the wilderness where the odds are likely they will die and they do it out of fear, jealousy and cowardice.

But let's back up a moment and make sure we know how we got to this place. The story starts 10 chapters back when God chooses this childless couple, Abram and Sarai, as the couple who God promises to make a great nation from, to bless them and to bless all the families of the earth through them. They pick up and move as God instructs, and they wait. And they wait. And nothing happens. No child is conceived.

Sarah out of impatience and perhaps despair, takes matters into her own hands. She offers her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to Abraham as a concubine so that Sarah might "build a family through her." Hagar is property who has no say in the matter. Abraham agrees and Hagar conceives, and then, as one might predict, tension erupts. Sarah treats Hagar so harshly that Hagar, while still pregnant, runs away into the desert.

An angel finds Hagar there and tells her to return. And here — right here, the first time Hagar appears alone in the wilderness — something remarkable happens. The angel makes a promise: her son will be great and wild and free. Free — not a slave, like his mother. So she goes back, and gives birth to Ishmael.

Years later, when Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 90, God renews the covenant, changes their names and promises again that Sarah herself would bear a son. Abraham laughed in disbelief. Three divine visitors later appear at Abraham's tent and repeat the promise — and overhearing, Sarah, laughs too. But not long after, Sarah miraculously conceives and gives birth to Isaac.

Which gets us to today's story when Ishmael is a teenager and it is Isaac's weaning celebration. Sarah sees the teenage Ishmael mocking or playing (the Hebrew is ambiguous), and demands Abraham cast out both Hagar and Ishmael. The text says Abraham was deeply grieved. He loved Ishmael. This was his son. And yet — and here is

where the story gets even more complicated — God speaks to Abraham and says: *Listen to Sarah*. God instructs the banishment. God is somehow a part of this terrible decision. And we are going to see how God will still work for good in this terrible decision, but still, it can be hard to understand why God allows it to begin with. Honestly, I don't know why God does this and I think we have to struggle with it. Perhaps it is because God knows God will make something good out of it (which we'll get to in a bit) or God knew after they took matters into their own hands the situation would never be sustainable. But, whatever the reason for God telling Abraham to go ahead, Abraham does. They send Hagar and Ishmael away and as far as we know, that's the last they ever know about them. Maybe they think the banishment has worked. It certainly leaves Isaac clear to be the heir. But, the rest of Genesis continues with more stories of family hurting each other and fighting and sometimes banishing each other, so it isn't like banishing Hagar and Ishmael wrapped everything up in a neat bow.

We can not like what Abraham and Sarah have done and still be able to muster some empathy for them. After all, I imagine most of us know what it is to be jealous. To lack courage. To be afraid. To let our emotions take over and cause us to make a decision that will hurt others. Sarah and Abraham are real, flawed people inside a real, flawed family system. What they do flows not from some abstract evil but from something far more recognizable: *feelings*. Fear. Jealousy. The desperate need to protect what they love, even at someone else's expense, even at the expense of the banishment, exclusion or harm of someone else.

We can certainly see this still being one of humanity's greatest struggles and we don't have to work all that hard to come up with examples of Hagar's in our time; to answer the question who today is being banished and excluded? By who and why?

For example, in this Pride month we can certainly see in just a few quick statistics how members of the LGBTQ community deal with banishment and exclusion. Did you know that forty percent of homeless teenagers in this country identify as LGBTQ and point to that identity as the main reason they lost their home? Forty percent. That means tens of thousands of young people who are living their own version of Hagar's story — sent into a wilderness, water running out, wondering if God is anywhere near. Many of them were sent there by people who believed they were doing the right thing. Who thought the banishment would work.

But, again and again, scripture tells stories of a God who goes to those who have been banished or excluded and loves them. Again and again in scripture, God stands with those who have been sent to the wilderness. Again and again, we see a God who can take banishment or exclusion and turn it into something totally different. If you were

raised in a tradition that emphasized that to be faithful requires drawing some strict lines around who is in and who is out, this God may seem strange to you.

But perhaps you have had your own experience of being Hagar or maybe you can sit in empathy with Hagar long enough to know just what a gift it is for God to show up in the wilderness and tell you you aren't alone.

Because while God told Abraham to go ahead with the banishment, God refuses to leave Hagar and Ishmael to die there. There they are - lost in the desert of Beersheba, their water gone. A woman who has been enslaved, abused, raped, and now banished is watching her son die of thirst. They are lost and utterly alone in the wilderness and Hagar must have believed she was at the end of a difficult, unfair life and the freedom that had been promised to her son would never come to be.

And then an angel calls to her, again. This time, the angel points her to a well that was right there in front of her. In her despair, she hadn't seen it.

God found her in the wilderness. Hagar went into the wilderness scared and rejected, but God found her. God gave her what she needed to survive – opened her eyes to the blessings in the wilderness – a well. Then the wilderness became a place where she didn't just survive but where she built a new life. But the story doesn't stop there. God takes it even further. God turned the whole story upside-down. Hagar and Ishmael go from banished and excluded to being blessed by God with the same blessing God gave Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael will also be the father of a great nation. Ishmael will get the same blessing as Isaac after all.

And in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hagar and Ishmael's story ends here, but in the Islamic tradition, the story is just beginning. This moment — Hagar alone in the desert with her child — is not primarily a story of abandonment. It is a story of *purpose*. Hagar's desperate search for water becomes the origin of the well of Zamzam which still exists as a holy site of water today. Her running between the hills of Safa and Marwa is re-enacted by millions of pilgrims every year in the Hajj. This is just the beginning of Hagar and Ishmael's new life, new blessings like how Ishmael is an ancestor of Muhammad's. The wilderness did not diminish them. It was, in the Islamic faith, where their story truly began.

This is good news because just as we know what it is to be the ones who exclude or banish, we also know what it is to be in the wilderness thinking we may never find hope again. And some of us who have been to the wilderness, have had dark and difficult moments, or years, also know what it is to experience God showing up and being able to suddenly or even slowly find hope and purpose again. Sometimes we can even see good

that has come from our time in the wilderness or look back and see the places God was there with us even when we couldn't feel it. In the case of many members of the LGBTQ community, it is in the wilderness where many have found new chosen family and connection. It is in the wilderness where they have found the beginning of a new chapter, a new purpose, a new beginning to a life where they are loved for who they are.

And yet — we must say this, too. Not all find their way out of the wilderness. Not every story ends with the well. Not every wilderness becomes a sacred site. There are people who were sent away by their families and never found their way back. Who sat with their water running out and no angel came — or none they could hear. We do not get to paper over those stories with easy hope. We have to be willing to sit in that wilderness too, at least for a moment, before we talk about wells. There are too many unnamed Hagar's to count in history. And while we believe God goes with all people into the wilderness, we also know they do not all always find a happy ending. It is certainly true for all too many LGBTQ people who have been sent away by families, by churches, by communities.

So how do we respond?

We start by looking honestly at ourselves. Where have we — perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of jealousy, perhaps out of the perceived desperate need to protect what we love — sent someone into the wilderness? It may not have been dramatic. It may have been a silence. A door quietly closed. A comment left unquestioned. A lack of welcome and one fewer place set at the table. A church that said, in a hundred subtle ways: *you don't quite belong here.*

We get honest about how grief and love do not automatically produce courage. Knowing better does not automatically make us do better. Abraham was grieved, the text tells us. He loved Ishmael. And he sent him away anyway. That is why we need more than good intentions. We need communities that hold us accountable to the promises we make — including the promise that in this place, no one gets sent to the wilderness.

And then we try to be honest about who is still being sent to the wilderness, and commit to being people who go looking for wells. Not just finding them for ourselves when we are lost, but pointing them out to others. The angel didn't dig a new well for Hagar. The water was already there. What Hagar needed, in her despair, was someone to say: *open your eyes. Look. It's right there.*

Sometimes that is the whole of our calling. To be present enough, paying enough attention, that we can say to someone who has been cast out and is losing hope — *there is water here. There is life here. You are not as alone as you feel.*

This Pride month, may we be a community that does not send people into the wilderness. And for those already there — may we be the ones who walk toward them, not away. Who point to the well. Who stay until they can see it themselves.

Because that, in the end, is what God keeps doing in this story. We think banishment and exclusion will work a certain way- that it will put an end to something or protect us from something, but God keeps showing up where the excluded are. Finding the ones who were sent away. Refusing to let the banishment be the final word.

The wilderness is not the end of the story. Not for Hagar. Not for Ishmael.

And not for anyone God goes looking for. May we have the courage to join in the search and eyes to see the well.