

Arise Mothers!

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Please pray with me. Merciful and compassionate God, we welcome your Spirit into our midst this morning. Move among us like a gentle breeze. Grant us wisdom in the study of your word and world. Amen.

On January 25th, at 4:10am, Myles emerged into the world, weighing in at 8 lbs 3 oz. He was bigger than I expected and more beautiful than I could have imagined. They tell me his head was kind of cone shaped from four laborious hours of pushing, but—it's funny—his little head looked perfect to me. I've heard that the birth of a first child is also the birth of a mother. And so Myles and I share this birth date and the indescribable experience of one being becoming disentangled from another...the birth of a child and the birth of a mother.

In the days following this miraculous birth, I discovered that there's a viciousness to mother love. I spent hours gazing at my baby's tiny body, and I knew that this little being had a hold on me in a way that no one else did. What I wouldn't do—what most any mother wouldn't do—to ensure my child's safety and well being in the world.

What can be said about these sweet beings who enter our lives, toppling all that we thought we knew about ourselves and the world? I believe the bodies of babies hold the blessings of mothers, the prayers of grandmothers, the breath of our ancestors. And so they call forth the best in us. They remind us that we are beautifully and wonderfully made. They remind us of our hopes for the world. They remind us of the sweet goodness harbored within the human spirit. We look at our babies, and we long for peace. I believe mothers all around the world do this.

Yet so often our hopes are hijacked by our fears. Deep within the mother-soul is the dreaded fear of losing a child, a fear that Hagar comes to know well in our text this morning. We also harbor that parasitic fear that had a hold on Sarah. We fear that our children's lives will lack abundance. And sometimes we allow these twin fears, rather than our hope, to dictate our living, as these women did. Such fears conceal a basic truth about ourselves: that we exist in relationship with all of creation (not just those who look like us, not just those who reside within our borders). God birthed this earth and all that is in it and God proclaimed, "It's good!"

Alice Walker says it another way: "It is always us and only us that we wound when we harm another. There is no way to be separate from the rest of creation. We indulge the fantasy of being separate to our own peril."

And more specifically, I might add, to the peril of our children.

Perhaps one of the most pressing questions we can consider this Mother's Day is whether mothers will identify with mothers across battle lines, borders, and the boundaries of neighborhoods and school systems and denominations. Or will we instead choose fear of the "other?" Will we embrace our commonality as women, as mothers, as people who long for peace? Or will we prosper the

systems of inequality and violence into which our children are born by competing for a seat at the table of power? What will we teach our children about community and competition in this world? These questions hover between the lines of the stories of Hagar and Sarah that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. Can Sarah and Hagar be reconciled? Is there an option for our children other than a competition over resources? Is there another ending than some inheriting riches and others being sent to wander in the wilderness? Where's the good news in this story, the good news in our story?

Years ago, I heard the tale of two pastors' kids on the playground, talking about their folks. The little girl said, "...and you should hear my daddy preach! He can preach one thousand different sermons on just one Bible verse." The little boy responded, "aw, that's nothing. My mama can preach on one thousand different verses of the Bible and preach the same sermon every time." I want to confess this morning, that I sometimes feel a whole lot like that little boy's mama...the kind of preacher who can preach on one thousand different texts, but preaches the same sermon every time. Because the heart of the gospel is the same good news in just about every story in the Bible. The heart of the gospel, as I understand it, is Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor, release of the prisoner, recovery of sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed. The heart of the gospel is love of God, self, neighbor, and enemy. The heart of the gospel is Easter joy—the good news that we believe in a God who is always birthing new life out of death.

So I hope you won't mind this morning if I don't equate mother's day with flowers and chocolate and Hallmark cards. I think we honor our mothers, and all of those who raise us up in the way we should go, when we acknowledge the true complexities of motherhood and family. And so I chose the stories of Sarah and Hagar for us to consider this morning, imagining that somewhere in their stories we will stumble upon some good news befitting this special day.

We enter the story midstream. Last week in our congregational forum, Mahan Siler compared our congregation's story to a rushing river that we each enter into at a unique bend. But the water that rushes to meet us...the river that comes from upstream, that is a part of our story too because it feeds our bend in the river. And so our stories are a part of the same river as the stories of Sarah and Hagar. And their stories do not begin here in this text we read this morning.

We enter the story midstream. Sarah has already been through agonizing years of longing for a child. You know the story. As Sarah aged, she carried a profound grief in her spirit, because she wanted so badly to have a baby. The text doesn't tell us whether she experienced the baffling grief of miscarriage, a grief so many anonymous mothers bear silently because we don't talk much about miscarriage publicly. The text doesn't spell out the panicky anxiety that must have washed over Sarah as she aged, wondering who would care for her in her old age in a society that denied women inheritance rights. But I imagine those experiences and emotions must have inundated Sarah, until she came to the bitter crossing where hope gave way to disappointment.

Yes, we enter this story midstream. Sarah, in her grief, has already made the difficult decision to “give” her slave Hagar to Abraham for the purpose of bearing his child, a child Sarah adopts as her own. We skipped over the early years when little Ishmael grew from an infant into a child. We miss Sarah’s joy at first steps and first words. We miss her struggle in co-mothering this child with his birth mother, Hagar.

Some of you will disagree with me, but I think it’s important that we acknowledge these parts of Sarah’s story on Mother’s Day. Because there’s a complexity to motherhood. There are those among us who have known Sarah’s longing for a child. There are those among us, like Sarah, who are adoptive parents. In fact, when we talk about mothers, it seems important to acknowledge the diversity of those we honor with this title. There are our birth mothers, those courageous women who carried us for long months and birthed us into this world. There are adoptive mothers, who welcome us into their lives with extravagant hospitality and boundless love. There are stepmothers who nurture blended families with grace. There are grandmothers, who mothered our mothers and who continue to offer more wisdom and care to our families than many of us know. And I believe we also ought to acknowledge those stand-in mothers who nurture our spirits and guide us through our wanderings in the wilderness. In truth, many of us are not raised by one mother, but by a circle of women...some related to us by blood, and some who are not. Some who we call “mama” with affection, and some who we call by different names.

I believe the stories of Sarah and Hagar speak to the complexity of motherhood. Sarah and Hagar share a distinct irony. Sarah, who hoped and plotted and planned, becomes pregnant quite unexpectedly. Hagar, on the other hand, becomes pregnant according to plan, but the plan is not her own. Theologian Delores Williams says, “For Hagar, motherhood will be a coerced experience involving the violation of her body over which she, as a slave, has no control.” There are so many unanswered questions in this story, so much room for theological imagination. Did Hagar love, or even like, Abraham? Was she pleased or paralyzed at the prospect of having a child of her own, though the choice to do so was not her own? How did she manage to share her child with Sarah, a woman of a different social status and nationality? Was she worried or relieved when Sarah herself became unexpectedly pregnant?

Though the text doesn’t offer us too much insight into these pressing questions, we can rest assured that relationships in the days of Hagar and Sarah were every bit as complicated as they are today. Dare we mention on Mother’s Day that some of us have had rocky relationships with our mothers? Or that some of us grieve because our mothers are no longer in our lives?

As for Sarah and Hagar, a complicated plan to give Abraham children became more entangled after the birth of Sarah’s son, Isaac. Rather than claiming her adopted son Ishmael as her own, Sarah worries that Ishmael will stand in the way of her son’s inheritance. Her concern for security provokes her to declare: “that slave woman’s son will never share the inheritance with my son.”

Like many of us, Sarah feels threatened as a woman in a patriarchal world. Her response to a world which denies her power, however, is not to transform the broken system. Perhaps she feels it is unchangeable. Instead, she uses the privilege of her nationality and social standing to control and isolate Hagar. Sarah's chosen course of action does indeed secure her power, but it does nothing to change the fact that her granddaughter will face relative powerlessness in a patriarchal world. Sarah's course of action does nothing to mend the split among women of differing classes and cultures.

Sarah, of course, is not alone in her decision. Sometimes, we too are shortsighted. Sometimes we too exchange the struggle for true peace with a temporary security upheld by brute force. We want to feel safe. We want our children to inherit all that we imagine they are entitled to in this life.

Hagar's story is quite different than Sarah's. Cast out with her son and a skin of water into the wilderness, she faces that fear that all mothers dread—the death of her child. And it's here in the wilderness that we stumble upon the good news. Have you experienced the wellspring of God's grace in the parched landscape of the desert? Have you noticed that the wilderness is the place where God is often found? As she wails the mournful cries of a mother, God comes to Hagar. And like a mother, God comforts her. God whispers promises of good things to her. God leads her to a wellspring in the wilderness, and Ishmael is restored as water passes his cracked lips. He too, like his half brother, will become a great man and the father of a nation; a nation which eventually, they say, produces the religious tradition known as Islam.

Sarah and Hagar remain unreconciled. And I believe that until mothers gather together across the boundaries that divide us...until we dismantle the systems that deny our families real security, Sarah and Hagar will remain unreconciled.

The truth about Mother's Day is that it was never about flowers and chocolate and Hallmark cards. Mother's Day was founded upon the premise that women can link arms and call for the ultimate reconciliation—an end to war.

Julia Ward Howe inaugurated the first Mother's Peace Day in 1870 in response to the carnage of the Civil War with this moving proclamation:

"Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
'We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.'

From the bosom of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with
Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe out dishonor,
Nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil
At the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home
For a great and earnest day of counsel.
Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace...
Each bearing...the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God -
In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,
May be appointed and held...to promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace."

Well said, Julia Ward Howe. Perhaps when we are able to live into this—when the women of many nations and classes and colors converge to call for peace—perhaps then Sarah and Hagar can be reconciled. That's the greatest hope that I can impart to my child this Mother's Day. The good news, my friends, is that our God goes before us into this wilderness. Our God waits, like a watchful mother, to comfort us when we lose our way. Our God promises that restoration is possible and leads us beside the still waters. Thanks be to God. Amen.