

God's embracing love

by Megan M. Ramer

Passage: Genesis 21:17

God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.... I will make a great nation of him.

Talk about despair. Hagar has been cast into the desert for a second time. With no food, no water, and no hope, Hagar once again encounters God, who reassures her of the promise made her before her son was born: Ishmael will grow into a great nation....

Ishmael? A great nation? Isn't the whole thrust of the Hebrew Bible story about God's promise to Abraham through Isaac? And about that great nation—the promised people eventually sent to the promised land—God's chosen ones?

But the heart of God isn't so narrow as that. From the beginning, God provides for those who get tossed to the margins of the central story. God remains passionately committed to those God's people exclude.

It turns out that exclusion is our love affair, not God's. We humans have a long history of casting out: on the basis of race, faith, gender, marital status, sexual identity. The God of Hagar dreams of the day when none will be forced to eat the crumbs cast down from the table, and each will be restored to her rightful place as God's precious heir.

John Buchanan once cautioned: "[I]n light of scripture, not in spite of scripture, we need to be very cautious about who we exclude. It is not a matter of political correctness. It has nothing to do with accommodating the easy amorality of modern culture. It has everything in the world to do with the God who surprises everybody by transcending the tradition, the customs and mores and boundaries and laws of religion and reaches out to include the outsider, the God who hears the cries of the abandoned child."

In a long and sacred tradition of women meeting God's messengers at wells, Hagar was the original woman at the well. Hagar

is also the first person in the Bible to name God. After hearing God's promise, she boldly declares: "You are El-roi," which means the God who sees.

God had earlier instructed her to name her son Ishmael, which means God hears. And God does hear. In this second exile, when their scant water supply runs dry, Hagar weeps and God hears the voice of the boy, Ishmael. God hears. God provides water, life, hope and covenant, even to these two, whom the chosen people have tried desperately to cast out.

The God who sees, the God who hears—that God meets each in her distress. Try as we might to single one out as favored and chosen, and to dismiss another as irrelevant and outcast, God's embracing love, boundless care and wide mercy will extend to all.

Thanks be to God!

PONDER:

- 1. Remember a time when you were unexpectedly or lavishly made welcome.*
- 2. Madeleine L'Engle once wrote: "If you're going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can't pick and choose who's going to be the sparrow." Which "sparrows" are most difficult for you to love and welcome?*
- 3. What gifts is the church missing when cast-outs are excluded?*

Prayer: God of Hagar and Ishmael, we are humbled that you truly see and hear the cries of all. Make our hearts tender and widen our gaze as we seek to extend your generous love and care to those our faith tradition would cast out. Amen. 🕯