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Finding God in the Midst of Distress

Isaiah 44:3–5

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An injured woman was limping along the road, trying to escape an abusive situation. She wasn't moving very fast, but she was doing her very best to get away. It seemed as though everything was against her. She was pregnant, a minority person, an immigrant and a slave. How's that for being marginalized? Any of those conditions make a person more susceptible to abuse, feeling like they're not a person at all. Abused women, whether or not they suffer physical violence, are almost always subjected to humiliation, insults, demeaning. They are stripped of their self-esteem, and they end up often blaming themselves for being the cause of family abuse.

So it was that Ms. Nobody hobbled along, friendless and without resources. Unfortunately she did not have a safety plan. Every abuse victim should have a safety plan. There need to be answers to some basic questions: How can she leave a situation that has grown too unsafe? What doorway or window could she use to get out of the house? How could she send a signal to someone nearby? Where can she turn in an emergency? What phone numbers should she keep readily available?

What essentials should be kept ready to be removed hastily: drivers license, social security card, prescriptions, birth certificates, green card, cash, change of clothing, toys for the children. Does she know that she can get safety counseling from a community shelter without necessarily having to take up residence there?

All of these are parts of a safety plan. Sometimes people feel that it would be a lack of faith to make such a plan, but the book of Proverbs says, "The prudent person foresees the danger ahead and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences." (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12)

While all of these considerations are important, the abused woman of our story has none of these resources, and she is becoming exhausted. She struggles through the desert terrain until at last she comes to a well and sinks down beside it. "Hagar, slave of Sarah," a voice calls, "where have you come from and where are you going?" Suddenly the non-person has a name, and someone is demonstrating a personal concern in her.

Of course by this time you have recognized that our heroine is a familiar biblical character, a slave woman whom Abraham and Sarah had acquired during their stay in Egypt.

As it is told in the Hebrew Bible, the story is not a pretty one, with Abraham representing that his wife Sara is merely his sister and allowing her to be taken into Pharaoh's harem. In return he is showered with gifts. The Bible account lists the bartered goods: Sheep, oxen, male asses, male slaves, female slaves, she-asses and camels. That is how Hagar came into Abraham's family, listed between the he-asses and the she-asses. Her importance is no more than that of the other livestock.

As Sarah was released and the family moved back to Canaan, Hagar's value started to rise. When Sarah remained childless, she arranged for Abraham to impregnate Hagar instead. Near Eastern legal practice allowed the child of a slave woman to be claimed as being that of the mistress. So now Hagar is used as breeding property, and she does indeed conceive. Like many another expectant mother, she felt pretty smug, and that was her undoing. She got uppity.

Sarah couldn't stand it and wanted to put her in her place. She notified her husband that she intended to take the slave girl down a notch; and Abraham says, "Deal with her as you think right." Abraham, the father of our faith—consenting to abuse within his own household! How could he? This is precisely what you and I need to understand: that even very holy people can countenance domestic abuse. They're very good at looking the other way, at saying that it's someone else's responsibility. We need to look closely at ourselves and our faith communities. No one is immune, no religion or ethnicity or socio-economic class.

And then there is Sarah, the one who had devised the scheme of producing a child in the first place. How can she have treated her trusted slave woman so harshly? Of course Sarah hadn't read the reports from the March of Dimes about the birth injuries that are caused by abuse during pregnancy, but that doesn't lessen her accountability. Hagar's attitude may have been obnoxious – victims aren't entirely blameless, but that does not justify anybody abusing anybody else. Sarah's conduct can remind us that women as well as men can be abusers, and some times there is more than one abuser in a family.

Thus Hagar carries all this baggage into the desert, surely more wounded by the betrayal and cruelty than by the physical blows. How could she be treated this way when she had given Abraham and Sarah her very, very best? Again and again survivors tell us that it is the emotional and mental treatment that wounds more deeply than the physical.

But listen - some one is speaking to with respect and concern to the woman who has been trashed. There she is, bummed out in the middle of the desert, and then God shows up! It's surprising how often that happens. When your whole world falls apart, watch for God to turn up.

The mysterious voice that addresses her knows her name, her identity, and asks about her journey. Hagar now is able to name her action "I am running away from my mistress Sarah." She has taken two important steps toward her own healing. She has determined to take some action to stop the abuse, and she has disclosed her situation to someone else.

Dimly she is becoming aware that a divine being is speaking to her, and that she is being promised a marvelous destiny.

God says:

I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.

Offspring too numerous to count? But this is the promise that was given to her master Abraham. Is the promise hers as well? Can it be that she is to become a person of dignity and value?

"Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son: you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering." Ishmael – why that meant God shall hear. Does God indeed hear the cry of marginalized abused women? How loudly we need to trumpet this in our faith communities! God doesn't deny or silence or minimize or conceal when abuse occurs. God is there with the victim even if nobody else will support her.

Not only was the unborn child given a name "God shall hear" but he was given a promise. "He shall be a wild ass of a man" That might not strike us as a particularly fortuitous description, but in Hebrew that meant that he would be absolutely free. Job exclaimed "The wild ass no man can tame!" The lad was to grow up freer than free! Hagar senses that she is having an encounter with the true and living God – she has found God for herself in the midst of her crisis. She has experienced God's concern for her, the affirmation of herself as a person; and she has been given a glorious hope.

It is said that is the most basic need of abused women – to know that their lives can be different, that they can be whole persons able to live with dignity in the world. Where our faith communities often shame women who dare even to disclose what they are suffering, we find God standing by an abused runaway slave and supporting her.

Then Hagar does something that no one else in the Bible is recorded as doing. She gives God a name. Others learned the names of God, but she alone has the faith to name the Holy One. “You are el-Roi, the God of seeing” she said. And then she asked herself “How is it that I have continued to live after I have seen God?”

Hagar named the well where she had stopped Beer Lahai-roi “the well of the living one who sees me.” There are experiences that become landmarks and leave us forever changed, just as it is said that a woman who has survived protracted abuse will never be the same again. She may change for better or for worse, she may grow embittered and cynical, or she may become stronger, more mature, more compassionate; but she will not stay the same. What have we as communities of faith done to walk with her through the faith crisis, to support her in her development into the new person? Often we’d rather give her a wide berth. We may not mind if she comes to worship with us, but it’s too complicated to get involved with her.

Now our story takes a most vexing turn. The angel of the Lord, after promising a wonderful future, sends her BACK to Sarah! Why – the story just shouldn’t end this way; but in point of fact, that is exactly what happens with a great many abused women. They need to go back. In Hagar’s case she needed shelter, food, water, care during her delivery. There just were not a lot of other options. We can become aggravated after we help so hard to help an abused woman, and then she goes to her home situation. There are over fifty reasons why women feel impelled to return. As a matter, of fact, women who do eventually leave an abusive situation have usually made an average of seven previous attempts.

Hagar went back from that well with the knowledge that she had met God, with the promise that her child would be free and that she would be the mother of a mighty nation. She ran away as a nobody and came back as a somebody.

In time the child was born and was named Ishmael, “God shall hear”, and God was with both him and his mother throughout the years they stayed in Abraham’s household, until finally Sarah demanded their removal. At first Abraham vigorously resisted his wife’s insistence at turning them out, but God had other plans. “As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of

him too, for he is your seed.” (Genesis 21:13) If at one level she is being turned out, at another Hagar is being readied to meet her God-given destiny.

Early in the morning Abraham rose and gave Hagar bread and a skin filled with water and sent them away. The Hebrew verb implies that in that action he released Hagar and Ishmael from slave status, and off they go into the desert, free human beings. The sun beats down mercilessly, and the child is always clamoring for a drink. It does not take long to exhaust their precious supply of water, and now he can go no further. Hagar drags him to the shade of a bush and sits at a distance so that she will not have to see the actual death. There she lifted up her voice and wept, and God did indeed hear. An angel called to Hagar from heaven “What is the matter, Hagar? Fear not. God has heeded the cry.”

The angel does not offer warm fuzzies. “Stand up on your feet. Take the boy by the hand, for I will make a great nation of you.” Stand up when there is no longer any hope, stand up when all she can do is weep? This will be her first step toward independence and self reliance. *Stand up, Hagar, God calls you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get on with your life.* “Lift up the boy.” But there is hardly any life left in him. *Lift him up – God has a great purpose for both of you.*

As she pulls herself and her son to a standing position, a most startling event occurs. “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” The well had been there all the time, but now she has been given the ability to find it. Over and over again in the Bible, water is used as a symbol for spiritual life. “Ho, everyone who thirsts”, cried Isaiah, “come to the waters and drink.” (Isa. 55:1) while Jesus shouted “If anyone is thirsty, let them come and drink.” (John 7:37)

Hagar has found the well. She filled the skin with water and let the boy drink. Finding that well changed their lives. The biblical account does not tell us what happened next: they must have found a place with a Bedouin group in which they were sheltered and accepted – they still needed a community. The narrative notes that God was with the boy, and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. Hagar became an independent decision maker, for we read that she sent to Egypt to find a wife for Ishmael, and so the promise of a great offspring began to be fulfilled.

And finding that well of fulfillment still changes lives. Increasingly even secular agencies are recognizing that spirituality lies at the very core of a survivor’s being. It is when she can connect up with her spiritual dimension that there can be integration and healing, when she knows that

she has not been rejected by God and that she has a supportive faith community. How then do we help people to find that well?

In the first place, don't obstruct the path to the well. Women in some churches tell of how they were informed that they must stop singing in the choir or teaching Sunday School or applying for church membership until they return to their husbands. They are made to feel that they are on God's bad list, renegades of the very worst sort. They don't even feel worthy to look for the well.

A victim desperately needs a chance to share what she is going through, to be believed rather than condemned or shamed, to find herself in a caring environment. Just as God listens to victims, so should we.

We can make a positive presentation of God, not as harsh and judgmental but as compassionate, just and loving – the same God who spoke to Hagar in the wilderness. The God who sees was also the one who told her to name her child "God shall hear."

However we need to remember that we are not God. A survivor of domestic abuse is burdened with a mass of issues, and no one agency or individual is equipped to deal with the total. There is a need for safety, shelter, medical care, child care, a restraining order, food stamps, employment counseling and a host of others. Unless we are particularly equipped in some of these areas, we should stick to what we do best.

We are the experts in prayer. No one can do that better than we. We're also the ones who can love and befriend and hold hands. On very short notice we can provide food, clothing, toys, diapers, a crib, transportation, pastoral counseling and sometimes emergency funding. We can offer spiritual support and wrestle with hard questions like where is God in all of this? Why didn't heaven stop the abuse? How could someone whom I trusted so much do this to me?

We can also build a bridge to a community agency. Some religious leaders discourage a congregant from going to a shelter or receiving counseling. They fear that they will be deflected from their faith or persuaded to file for divorce. Shelters are not trying to break up marriages but to keep people safe. Both the community agency and the faith community are important, and they need to work together rather than in rivalry. "From the steeple to the shelter" is an excellent slogan. There are still angels of God seeking abused women and bringing them to the God who both hears and sees.

We are also the people who can be most effective with offenders. That's what the research shows. An offender who is referred to an intervention group by a pastor does better than somebody referred by a judge. Perpetrators who are supported by the prayer and encouragement of their faith communities do better yet. An important piece in healing lies not outside in the community but here in this very room. We can let those who have abused know that we are on their side. Not that we defend their abusive behavior – that was wrong. We can't condone that for a minute. But we are on their side as human beings. Like the rest of us failed mortals, - they have sinned. But God waits to forgive them and give them a transformed life in Christ.

We can support those who have abused as they seek to leave the old patterns behind and do the hard work of making sure that they never behave that way again. We can pray for them and with them, and walk with them on the difficult journey toward healing. We can encourage them to take whatever steps are necessary along the way to make sure that the conduct is never repeated. There can be prayer, counseling, accountability groups. And let's be consistent in encouraging the means that are available. I'm told that churches are the worst offenders in trying to get offenders excused from intervention groups. Let's not short-circuit God's means of grace.

Now this may sound completely unnecessary to discuss on a beautiful Sunday morning in church, but the truth is that abuse within the family IS our problem. Abuse occurs in Christian homes at about the same rate as in the general population – between twenty-five and thirty percent. Home can be a very unsafe place. In America about fifteen hundred women are slain each year by their domestic partners.

Last Thursday Governor Patrick issued a public health advisory to stem the rise in domestic violence-related killings. The rate has nearly tripled in Massachusetts in the last three years. The governor called for greater vigilance and effort on the part of public and private agencies; and we, a community of faith, are one of the most significant of those agencies. We can become an important voice, a prophetic voice, even though it's much easier to ignore the issue or to minimize and silence the evidence of its existence.

We can speak out to say that abuse is wrong and that it must not be tolerated within our midst. We can use the Scriptures to comfort the victim and to challenge the offender, to instruct ourselves in God's purpose of peace and safety in every home. The Bible calls on believers to follow after the things that make for peace, to deliver the oppressed from the hand of the violent. Jesus promised that once we had found the living water, it was ours to give away. "If you believe in me, come and drink! The scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow from the heart of those who believe in me." (John 7:38) Come to the waters then and share what you find. Let the grace-filled waters pour into every dimension of life.