

A TALE OF TWO MOTHERS
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
June 14, 2020
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

“Blessed are the meek,” Jesus says, some two millennia after the expulsion of Hagar into the wilderness, “for they shall inherit the earth.”

If this is true, our matriarch Sarah has missed the memo.

She thinks *she* has inherited the earth. Or, in keeping with her patriarchal culture, that her son, Isaac, has. “The son of this slave woman,” Sarah insists, “shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

To be sure this is quite the inheritance that Sarah expects for her son. In the culture of Canaan of the time Sarah and Abraham are quite wealthy. Sufficiently wealthy, we might say, to divide their estate in half and still offer both sons a thriving future.

But Sarah will have none of it. Jealous and vindictive, haughty and hateful, Sarah claims it all for her child. And casts out the child of another.

For African-American women, you might imagine, this “Tale of Two Mothers” hits a bit too close to home. Even though “race” as a social construct will not be invented for another three millennia, and slavery in the ancient world is quite different than what slavery becomes in the Americas, there is no mistaking the parallels of Hagar’s experience with that of African-American women. “Ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation,” says biblical scholar Renita Weems, pretty much sums up 400 years of white supremacy over black women and their children.

And yet ...

“All Mothers were summoned,” the Black Lives Matter sign has declared these past two weeks, “when George Floyd called out for his Momma.”

The response has been emphatic.

Mothers of all races and nations, biological and adoptive and spiritual mothers, the daughters of Hagar yes, but even many daughters of Sarah, have heeded the call. It is too early to determine the outcome of that rising. But early signs do offer hope: maybe, just maybe, please God, this time might be different.

In the past two weeks we have seen the white woman bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington reframing any controversy over political presence at her church buildings back onto the issues of racial justice.

In the past ten days we have seen white businesswomen in Louisville, Kentucky calling for justice for Breonna Taylor and challenging systemic racism in their own corporate climate.

And just yesterday, we saw the white woman police chief in Atlanta stepping down from her position voluntarily, in order to allow a fresh start in building trust between police and community.

Journalist Matthew Yglesias has gone so far as to call this response of we who are white to our racist inheritance “The Great Awakening”: a kind of parallel to the Great Awakening of the 1800s that influenced the

abolitionist and women's suffrage movements. The hope is, of course, that similar sweeping change may be coming in our time.

Which leads us to the church. Our church to be precise: Shepherdstown Presbyterian. Where the powerful work of our Adult Education and Social Justice committees have placed racism and white privilege at the center of our own "Great Awakening."

It has been hard.

Un-"white-washing" our history to admit we were a slave-holding congregation. That our beloved Meeting House - that we miss *so much* right now - was constructed by slave labor. That we were a confederate hospital in the civil war. That our session voted to expel the freed slaves who remained after the war.

This is the inheritance of racism we have received at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church. The one we did not ask for. The one we do not want. The one we benefit from. The one we have to figure out what to do with.

When we in the church have to figure out what to do, we go back to our Scriptures, with a prayer for God's will to be revealed. So let's go back to Sarah and Hagar. And the God who has promised "a great nation" to both of their sons. And consider the blessing of Jesus for them, and for us.

"Change your way of life," Jesus insists in his time and today. For the reign of God ... the Great Shalom ... the Peaceable Kingdom ... the Beloved Community *has come near!*"

In this reign of God, Jesus says, in this Great Shalom, "the meek" - or in a more accurate translation: those who have been without power - Jesus insists, "*shall inherit.*" Not just in a metaphorical sense, according to the Gospel of Matthew, but in a literal, physical, *financial* sense.

The wrongs that have been done against you, Hagar, Jesus says, the inheritance that has been stripped from your children, is all about to be made right. And not just right but *better*. Your resistance, Hagar, your survival, Hagar's children, through the divine crucible of the wilderness, Jesus says, has made you particularly qualified to inherit the earth. Because you know the good thing you are receiving, through having had it taken from you.

And now for Sarah, Jesus continues, and your children with a stolen inheritance, he laments, all hope is not lost. It is possible for you, in the Great Shalom, which is coming near, you, too can inherit. *If* you change your way of life. *If* you open your mind and your heart to the new thing God is doing. *If* you repent. And then *repair* (and yes, that means reparations) the damage that has been done.

Which becomes our charge today, friends. In our congregation. In our denomination. In our nation. To truly repent for and repair the damage that has been done from 400 years of white supremacy.

God has brought about this *Kairos* moment, this Great Awakening, to give us one more chance to get it right. To go back to Sarah and Hagar and learn together how to share the great blessing of God's inheritance. As mothers of all of God's beautiful beloved children.

Amen.