

Calvary United Methodist Church
July 21, 2019

“El Roi” ~ the God who sees me
Marti Derr

Children’s Message:

Psalm 56:8

I invite all the children to come forward for a bit of a chat if you are brave enough. I don’t bite, I promise. I have to get the magic basket. I am going to sit on the steps too, if that’s okay with you guys, because I’m tired.

So, what are we going to talk about this morning? I want to talk about, first, we are going to talk about this verse:

You’ve kept track of all my wandering and my weeping and you stored my many tears in your bottle and not one of them will be lost. They are recorded in your book of remembrance.

So, God has like they call it tears in a bottle, He keeps track of our tears in a bottle. The Psalms is my favorite book of the Bible. It is right in the middle. If you take a big old Bible and just go the middle you will probably get to the Psalms.

So, why do I like the Psalms? It is my favorite book because David and the other people who wrote of Psalms wrote exactly how they felt. They didn’t pull any punches, they just said what they mean. And if they were mad, they let God know they were mad. If they were sad, they let God know they were sad. And I like that we can do that because you can say whatever you want to God and he’ll listen.

Sometimes we get really angry. Anybody ever be really angry? Angry like this? It’s easier to see behind us than up there behind all the lights. That’s one mad lion. And so what do you do when you are angry? Anybody yell? Hit? Stomp your feet? You are all so well behaved. No temper tantrums, huh? The thing about being angry is that sometimes rather than being angry we are actually sad. We are sad about something and it is easier to look angry and yell at somebody than it is to say: You know, that really hurt my feelings.

So, it would be interesting if the next time you get really mad, if you pay attention to it and think: Ok, am I mad or am I really sad? Because we get those things confused sometimes and unfortunately, if we are mad then we just make everybody mad around us. But if you realize that instead of being mad you are actually sad then it is easier not to hurt other people.

Now, years ago they used to have mourners who would cry at funerals. They are called mourners...people that would walk around and cry, I mean we are talking hundreds of years ago, a long, long, long time. They would be kind of paid to go to funerals and be sad. Kind of helps sometimes because when somebody really close to you dies, you kind of go numb and it’s hard

to cry sometimes for a while because you can't feel, you are so devastated. So they used to have these mourners that would do the crying at funerals and they collected tears in bottles, these long bottles. Actually they looked a little like this. So they would collect tears in a bottle to prove that they were doing their mourning right and their crying right. And that passage, that reference to tears in a bottle is in the Psalms because in the Psalms they say what they mean and they say exactly how they feel, which is why I really like the Psalms. They called these lachrymatories which is really a big word but you can just think of it as tear bottles.

And God does that for us. When you are sad, when you are mad, put probably really sad, God knows and He is aware of it and He pays attention and He feels bad with you. Doesn't always go away very fast, but He feels bad with you.

Hagar is a young woman I am going to talk about in the sermon and she had a rough life. She was young. She was not treated well and I'm sure she got very mad because some mean things were done to her and also she got sad. Both of those things, but an angel came to talk to her and really treated her very kindly when other people did not.

So, that's how God treats us. He treats us very kindly and he knows you, He knows each one of you by name and He cares about each one of you and He keeps all your tears in a bottle. He pays attention to when you are hurting and he keeps all those tears. So, I want you to think about that for as much of the sermon as you pay attention to and I realize you might want to go to sleep or something. But, I want you to remember that He keeps track of your tears, and for that, don't all attack me like a pack attack, you can each have one of these little bottles which are actually bubbles, but don't open them in church because I tried it last night and it's sealed pretty good and it spills when you try and open it.

So, take these with you, everybody grab one, and remember that this is to remind you that God cares about all of your tears, cares about all of your sadness and He pays attention to it all. Okay?

Thanks for coming up.

Message:

Genesis 16

Old Testament stories something can seem boring and dry. They are really anything but boring. It was quite a cast of characters. These people were fallible, just like we are fallible. They were flawed and we can learn a lot by examining the principles in their lives and applying them to our lives. So, I ask you to listen for some thought provoking questions and see what you can take home and learn about your relationship with God based on what we see in Hagar.

So, what exactly do we learn from Hagar and from her life? We learn that God chooses to

notice us and God chooses to communicate with us individually.

So, there are some broad themes in this story that make it really interesting: the barrenness of Sarah, use of Hagar to bear a child, surrogacy...we are going to plumb a little deeper for some other issues, but these are all worthy of a lot of attention if and when you have time.

Let's start back in Egypt many years ago. Abram and Sarai were told to leave Ur and to travel to another part of the country to set up housekeeping. God didn't really tell them where exactly to start with, so they became nomads. And on their journey, they stopped through Egypt and while in Egypt they purchased a young woman named Hagar, who became their slave. She was essentially a slave to Sarai who was her mistress. Now, there is a metaphor in scripture for going to Egypt kind of meaning doing things on our own instead of waiting for God's way to do things, so it is interesting that this takes place in Egypt.

Now, how would you feel if you were Hagar? How would you feel if you were purchased as a slave and given to somebody else with no choice about the matter? It helps sometimes in these stories to put ourselves in the position of the characters to understand more and more. So how did Hagar respond? Did she get mad? Did she get sad? Did she just suck it up and think: oh, well, this is my life now. She was very disadvantaged; very disadvantaged. She was young, she was a female in a patriarchal culture. She was a foreigner. She was an Egyptian among Hebrews. She was young among older people. She was powerless. She didn't really have a voice to speak for herself. And most of us have felt like that at some point in time, haven't we? Have you ever felt powerless? Can't do anything. When have you felt like that? How did you react? It is not a pleasant experience; not at all.

So, let's add another dimension to the story. While they are in Egypt, Abram...Sarai, by the way was very pretty, very attractive...and Abram is afraid that Pharaoh is going to want Sarai, so he'll kill off Abram so he can have the wife. We see that in other places in the scripture as well. They were a motley bunch, they really were, which gives me hope and faith that God can use any of us. So, he's passing Sarai off as his sister, which wasn't completely untrue because they were probably related to some degree. But it's interesting as the story is told that Abram is the subject of the story and Sarai is just a mere object, just an object of the story. How would she feel, being abandoned, given over to Pharaoh as his sister to save her husband's hide? I don't think that would sit too well with me; I don't know about you. We don't know how she felt.

Years passed and Abram and Sarai eventually settled, but all was not well, because there were no children. Of course, it was expected in that culture that she should provide children and in verse 3: Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her slave girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. Now, surrogacy, one woman bearing a child for another, is not uncommon in the Old Testament. It is increasingly common in our culture, but it is complicated. It is complicated. We frequently see problems with surrogacy in our culture today, but the problem here was that Abram and Sarai were getting impatient to have a child and Sarai

wanted to take things into her own hands. So, by the time she gives her slave, Hagar, to Abram, Abram is like 86 and Sarai is 75, 76. Hagar was probably between 15 and 25. Now imagine that: 15/25 being given to an 86 year old man. I don't think I'd like that. She had to deal with a lot of different things.

But, God has already told Abram that He would make a great nation of him. Now, that was to Abram, that wasn't to Abram and Sarai. This was before the covenant between God and the couple, which is why they are with their previous names. The baby was supposed to be the beginning of a great nation, but Sarai used her hand maiden to kind of move God along, get him on with the job here. This was not an uncommon practice in the culture when there was infertility. The problem is that she is finding her own way to fulfill the promises of God to provide a child. God was not leading Abram and Sarai in this effort. They were feeling vulnerable. They were feeling disappointed in their circumstances and they decided to take charge. Especially Sarai although Abram didn't exercise much thought. He kind of went along with her.

How do we do that? Do we get tired of waiting for God? Now, let's give them a little bit of slack, we are talking decades of waiting for a baby, but we do get impatient. How do we try to solve our own problems without waiting for God for the resolution? We take matters into our own hands. So, as the story progresses, Hagar does conceive but then the trouble really begins. She gets a little bit of attitude, but see she is pregnant and Sarai is not. Sarai had confirmed for her that she was the reason for childlessness, not her husband Abram. That's a bit of a ding to the ego. She may have been resentful, feeling like Hagar was more of a woman than she was. That's not an uncommon problem today with infertility, but it's not redemptive and it's not true. Sarai used Hagar to improve her own status because when Hagar could produce a child for her that would technically become her child, then her status moves up because she's provided her husband with offspring and that was her job. Women had jobs in the culture: make babies, provide heirs.

So, in a sense, Sarai used Hagar to get a better status for herself. When do you do that? When do we use other people for our own ends or to make us look better? Because these stories are timeless. We repeat these things over and over.

But Sarai's sense of vulnerability increased, obviously. That makes good sense. She got mad, maybe she was sad instead of mad, like I mentioned in the children's sermon. But she was a victim of cultural expectations, the expectation that she must produce and that was not inside her power. Perhaps it was the norm to produce heirs; perhaps surrogacy was the norm. That does not mean it did not hurt to go through that.

Both of these women were hurting in different ways, but it's easier to be angry than to admit that we are hurt, isn't it? Anything is easier than admitting our vulnerability and saying: that really hurt my feelings. Some people even pretend to be happy when they are hurt and God wants us to be honest with our feeling, to bear it all to him, but what do we do? We take the

pain of our past and we inflict it on other people. We have unresolved grief, sadness and woundedness and we inflict that on other people.

Sarai was upset with Hagar so Abram told her she could do as she pleased, which essentially means he relinquished all of his power over Hagar whom he had taken as a second wife, essentially. But in doing so, he also affirmed the traditional order of things, affirming that Sarai was his first wife and Hagar was not as important.

So, again we see the outsider diminished, discounted, disenfranchised, tossed aside. So Sarai mistreated Hagar and Hagar got a little spunky with Sarai. Neither was innocent. But Sarai had been a victim in her culture because of her childlessness and now she and Abram are victimizing Hagar and we do that. We perpetuate the problems in our culture in the way that we treat people. Neither woman was completely at fault; neither woman was completely innocent and that's the way things go in conflict, isn't it? Everybody share a little bit of responsibility for the way things go.

There could have been a bond between these two women because they were both practically powerless in their culture, but instead, they turned against each other. They could have been stronger together as can we, but they did not. They became enemies.

In some ways Abram abandoned Sarai earlier when they were in Egypt. Abram and Sarai together were now abandoning Hagar. After all, she was a slave. She was a disposable possession, not a person. She was a possession. Now, again, how would you feel if you were Hagar? How would you cry out to God? She ran away to the desert and the desert can be dangerous, it can be lonely.

Abram and Sarai abandoned Hagar, but God did not. And He does not abandon us. An angel of God came to Hagar and asked her where she was going. Now, God already knew this. He already knew where she was going. He just wants us to talk to him. He wants us to tell him what we are feeling, what we need.

You can find any number of examples in scripture of God speaking through an angel to men, but not many with women. Obviously Mary and Mary's cousin Elizabeth when they were about to bear Jesus and John, but it's not very common for an angel to speak to a woman, and yet he spoke to this one. This unimportant slave who was a foreigner, who was young, who was disposable and he told her to return to Sarai, her mistress. Now that is a tough task. Why did He do that? He did, however, give her a promise and He told her that she was expecting and that her son would also father a nation, albeit a difficult nation.

Now, he gives her a blessing and that's a good thing, but she still has this tough task of going back to Sarai. What do you do when God gives you a tough task? Do you stick it out, or do you run? What do you use in your life to run from your problems because we need to give them all to Jesus, don't we?

Through these experiences, Hagar named God. Now, again it is not common for people to give God a name, but she did and it's recorded: El Roi, the God who sees because God saw her as an individual person. That imbues her personhood. That means you are a person, not just a possession. That is powerful. She was seen as a person when others disregarded her.

How do you mark in your life when God speaks to you? How do you commemorate it? How do you remember it? I have a journal, it is getting fuller and fuller by the month where I write down things I learn from scripture, from reading, where I write down prayers, where I write down answers to prayers. I commemorate things. I can tell you about the experience firsthand in the 90s being woken in the middle of the night and reading a story and scripture that confirmed for me that I should take a position of leadership in the denomination. I remember that because it is written in my journal. I commemorate the times when God speaks. That builds our faith. That builds our connectedness to this God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

So, Abram and Sarai were going to dispose of her and treat her as her culture did, but God did not. He did not dispense with her; He gave her a future and she returned to Sarai as a human being rather than a possession. And she had an inner strength that she had not had before.

Now, we are going to make a jump from Genesis 16 to Genesis 21. By this time God has been very clear with Abraham that he will father the nation of Israel. He speaks to Abraham, he doesn't speak to Sarah. He gives them new names: Abraham and Sarah, but he doesn't talk directly to Sarah. Abraham gets it and Sarah is listening inside the tent laughing like: yeah, I am going to have a baby now? I don't think so.

Hagar is sent out again to the wilderness. This time with her son Ishmael who could have been 10, 11, 12. Sarah probably was jealous watching Ishmael and Isaac play together and worried that maybe Ishmael was going to get the inheritance that Isaac was supposed to get. Abraham was a little more hesitant this time to send them out to the wilderness than he had been the first time because this is his son, Ishmael, who is approaching his teenage years, so it costs a little more, but he did it anyway, didn't he? Just tossed him out. Disposable. Expendable. Can be dispensed with. Because God told Abraham to go ahead with Sarah's wishes. That raises lots of questions we could struggle with theologically.

And Abraham gave them food and water, a skin of water, and bread to take with them, but that doesn't last long. And then they are tired, weary and starving and Hagar puts her son Ishmael under a tree and goes some distance away because she doesn't want to watch her boy die. And she waits in sadness. And guess what? God spoke to her again. Twice, to this person who was a nobody. He spoke again and told her that she should take care of Ishmael because he would eventually become a great nation himself.

It's interesting too that Abraham and Sarah are both mentioned in Hebrews 11 as examples of great faith. This is not the stage of their life where we see the solid sturdy faith. It looks a little wonky sometimes.

Now, after this angel visits Hagar then she sees a well nearby because she has been told to take care of her son Ishmael. And it's an interesting metaphor that Abraham gave her a skin of water. God gave her a well, a whole well, to sustain her. And He does that for us. He feeds us with living water through the power of his Holy Spirit if we but learn to listen.

Hagar was a disposable possession, but God bothered with her. Why? Because He loved her. Why does God bother with us? Why does He bother with you? Because He loves you. He loves you individually. He doesn't just love us corporately as a group of humanity. He knows me, He knows my name, He knows my concerns, He knows my needs and He responds to me and He will respond to you, if we will learn to listen.

Are we prepared to recognize his voice? Hagar had the advantage of an angel coming to talk to her. Not many of us have an angel visit us to tell us what for and what's God up to. It would be nice. But our 21st century lives are crazy and chaotic and we drown out the voice of God. We drown him out.

But recognizing his voice gets easier if we would develop some habits of talking to him and listening, listening for him to speak to us. Prayer to me is like a rototiller on the soil of your soul. It prepares our soul for what God wants to plant inside of us and grow inside of us, but it also helps if we try to develop the habits we need to be attentive. It doesn't have to be fancy. It doesn't have to be eloquent. It doesn't have to sound religious. It doesn't have to be long. It's just talking with God. But more than that it is placing your soul in a place where God can talk to you and that's the part that takes some practice.

I would like to suggest two types of prayer. If you have not tried them yet, something new to try in your walk with the Lord. The first is breath prayers and the second is the prayer of examine.

The first one, breath prayers are very simple. There are sample cards outside the sanctuary that show you how you can do this if you'd like to try it. You want to choose a name for God, any name that resonates with you and your being: Holy One; Light of the World; Emmanuel; Prince of Peace; Lamb of God. For me it is Prince of Peace and it has been for a long time. And then you state your request, what you want to say or what you need in a few words. So, a sample for me, my prayer was:

Prince of Peace, bring me peace. (Inhale.) Prince of Peace, bring me peace.

There was a period of time in the 90s when this was all I prayed, at least two years. I didn't have any other words. I was in pain. I was in deep pain. And that's all I could do: Prince of

Peace, bring me peace. And I did that when I sat in the car seat and I still do it twenty years later when I hit that car seat. It is an automatic rhythm that kicks in: Prince of Peace, bring me peace. Never mind the fact that deep breathing and slow breathing helps you physiologically. It's all kinds of benefits to good prayer habits.

So, I would encourage you to think about that. It doesn't take any time. Do it while you brush your teeth, while you take a shower, while you wash the dishes, unload the dishwasher, whatever, anywhere, anytime. Just try.

Examine prayer is a prayer that often we do at nighttime. We can do it in the morning, but it's kind of an inventory of the day and it helps sensitize you to the points throughout the day where God was present and you may not have been paying attention. It also helps you to become sensitized to what might have appeared to be meaningless moments but maybe God was giving you direction.

There are several different ways you can do an examine prayer. I'll suggest the simplest form. Three steps:

First step is in the evening whenever you want to do this: what made me happy today? Where was God present today? Just mark it, just mark it in your mind. Stop and think about it in the chaos of our lives.

Number 2: What made me sad? And based on this awareness of my sadness, what do I need? What is the next step for me and what do I need?

And then the third one is: What will be your request for tomorrow? How would you like to live your life differently tomorrow?

It's relatively short. It's developing the habits, the habits and the patterns that rototill the soil of the soul, that prepare us for the work of God. How do I want to live my life differently?

God responded to this nobody Egyptian girl living among the Hebrews, a mere slave who was disposable. He responded to her and He will respond to us when we talk to him. He calls us, He woos us to a deeper relationship so that we will know him, so that we will know his voice and so that we will know his love for us. May our lives become a living prayer to God.