

The God Who Sees

Sermon delivered by Rev. Kate Forer
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Scripture text: Genesis 16

When I was growing up in a suburb of Boston, I felt like everyone I knew had grandparents or great-grandparents who were immigrants. Most people were either Italian or Irish with strong links back to those home countries. As a child, I loved learning the heritage of my friends. Where are you from? we'd ask each other. And when the answer was a hometown, we'd say: No, like where are you *from*? Most of my friends had last names like Leary, Dolan, O'Reilly, or Henry or O'Hara. They went to Catholic church and had freckles.

But I didn't. My last name was Svajian. S-V-A-J-I-A-N. We didn't go to Catholic church, we didn't have lots and lots of cousins and aunts and uncles nor could we trace our ancestry back very far because most was shrouded in mystery.

We weren't Irish or Italian. We were Armenian.

I am the granddaughter of an Armenian immigrant and a genocide survivor.

Not everyone is aware that there was a genocide in Armenia over 100 years ago. It is not a story that is widely told.

For those of you who don't know, the Armenian Genocide, according to a good summary on Wikipedia, is "also known as the **Armenian Holocaust**, the **Armenian Massacres** and, traditionally among Armenians, as the **Great Crime**; [it] was the Ottoman government's systematic extermination of its minority Armenian subjects from their historic homeland in the territory constituting the present-day Republic of Turkey. It took place during and after World War I and was implemented in two phases: the wholesale killing of the able-bodied male population through massacre and forced labor, and the deportation of women, children, the elderly and infirm on death marches to the Syrian Desert.^{[7][8]} The total number of people killed as a result has been estimated at between 1 and 1.5 million...the word genocide was coined in order to describe these events."

The telling of the story of the Armenian Genocide is itself an interesting story. The Turkish government has long denied that any such event occurred. According to one journalist, "that only 23 countries currently officially recognize the genocide reflects Turkey's geopolitical importance. It's a crucial NATO ally and world player, and most of the international community is keen not to antagonize it. Each time a country acknowledges the Armenian genocide, Turkey is quick to retaliate."

(<https://qz.com/967822/denial-of-the-armenian-genocide-should-concern-us-all/>)

A few years ago, Pope Francis said that what happened in Armenia was the first genocide of the 20th century and after the fact, Turkey recalled its ambassador to the Vatican. The United States has still never come out and named what happened as genocide because of this political pressure. (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/24/europe/armenia-turkey-massacre/>)

In his book, *1984*, George Orwell wrote, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”

As a girl, I owned a novel about the Armenian genocide which, on the first page, quoted Hitler who said in a speech in August of 1939—a week before he invaded Poland—that he would “send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language... Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”

So who would remember the Jews?

There is so much in our history that we don’t know or are afraid to know. So many stories that are only whispered if told at all, that are like shadows behind the main narrative—the narrative controlled by those who control the present.

Take for instance the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael, son of Abraham.

Who here has ever heard this particular story from Genesis 16 about Hagar?

Hagar is enslaved—she is property belonging to Abraham and Sarah (in our passage referred to as Abram and Sarai—God changes their names in Chapter 17). Abraham and Sarah are two of the greatest patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith—and not just Christian faith, but Jewish faith as well. And not just Jewish faith—but, through Ishmael, son of Hagar—the Muslim faith, too.

So here we have the main narrative—the Abraham and Sarah Story—and off to the side, whispered in the shadows, Hagar.

As Abraham and Sarah grow older and older and are unable to conceive, Sarah tells Abraham that he better try his chances at fatherhood with Hagar. And so Hagar becomes pregnant with Abraham’s child. Sarah gets jealous. She realizes this wasn’t such a great idea and mistreats Hagar. Hagar flees into the wilderness.

Walter Bruggeman, in his commentary on this passage says that “The Ishmael presence [that’s the child Hagar is pregnant with] suggests two things...it asserts that God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God’s concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line...the very child who discloses the *passion* of God for the outsider is no small *threat* to the insider.” (153)

The very child who shows the *passion* of God for the outsider becomes a *threat* to the insider. And so Hagar, knowing she and her unborn child are a threat, has retreated to the wilderness. And to Hagar, this tossed aside woman, God speaks. God tells her to return to Abraham and Sarah. God begs

her to leave the wilderness and go towards some sort of a life for herself and her child. If she stays in the wilderness she will die.

And then Hagar does something remarkable, this woman, this outsider, whose story practically no one knows: She gives God a new name. She is the only person in the whole Hebrew Bible, the whole of the Old Testament, who formulates a new name for God. This fact is especially amazing because Hagar is a woman, a slave and a foreigner (Egyptian). And you know what she names God? You are the God who sees me, she says, or as some translations put it: You are the God who sees everything. Think about this for a minute: In this narrative it is clear that Abraham and Sarah are the insiders, the good-guys, the ones we are cheering for. On them hang the whole of civilization, God’s story, this is the main narrative, what happens to them really matters. Hagar’s just a sidekick, a background story. I can only imagine that Hagar, powerless, enslaved, used for her body, did not feel seen by anyone, which is part of the reason this affirmation is so powerful. Maybe I am invisible to everyone else, but *God* sees me. *You* see me. Her act of naming God was nothing short of spiritual empowerment.

She’s not Sarah. She’s not Abraham. She’s not a part of the lineage of the elect—she’s nobody but she knows, she *knows* that God sees her.

And what I love about this story is that it speaks to something deep in the heart of God—that the outsiders and the powerless, even if and when their stories are not told or are forgotten—that they belong to God, too. That while history might not remember them, God sees.

And there are *always* these stories: of the outsiders, the slaves, the immigrants, the suffering, who God sees, even when their story is buried deep within the main narrative. Even when their story is forgotten and overlooked.

And their stories, even if we don’t know them, their stories are part of our story. And make up who we are.

My grandfather, George Svajian, was born in an Armenian village in 1899. He came to the United States by way of Italy and Ellis Island in the late 19-teens. He settled in Connecticut, married an Armenian woman whose parents were also immigrants and they lived in a small Armenian community in the city of Bridgeport. They had three children.

My grandfather died when my father was a teenager. He did not speak of the genocide. there is much we do not know. There are so many stories that died when he died.

All of us have experiences of being foreigners and outsiders which means we also have experiences of resiliency and hope and deep and enduring faith.

Although my family doesn’t know much about this man who came to the US after genocide in his homeland, I would wager a lot on his faith and resiliency, as I would on the faith of my maternal great-grandmother. She came to the US at the age of 16 from Lithuania, all by herself because she was too small to be of use on the family farm. And I would wager a lot on the faith of her daughter, my grandmother, who divorced an abusive husband in the 1930s even though she would no longer be able to receive Communion from her beloved Catholic Church for the rest of her life and who would not dare

speaking of this divorce even to her own children until they were well into adulthood. My grandmother, who quit school after eighth grade to go to work in a crayon factory to help support her family. Faith. Resiliency. Hope.

Like Hagar, my ancestors fled into the wilderness, left home to survive. Were outsiders and immigrants and still knew that God saw them and that they mattered and that God would provide for them a place to have their children, to grow, and eventually thrive.

These stories are not unique. You too have stories of outsiders and immigrants in your family, of bravery, of hardship and an unquenchable human spirit that keeps going, rising up from the ruins of an old world. You, too, in your blood, have stories that have not been told—of the powerless and the powerful—stories we don’t even know that make us who we are.

And stories of those who knew, without a doubt, that even if they stood in the shadows of the powerful, even if they stood in the wilderness facing death, that God saw them.

We humans have been around long enough that all of us have these stories: of women who lost children, who rescued children, of men who had to leave the only home they knew, of violence and being conquered and being the conqueror. These stories are in our blood. They are stories of being human and sometimes we forget—as we see the waves of refugees look for a home, as we see the immigrant mother sacrifice everything for her child—we forget that *that* story is our story.

There was once a boat that held your ancestor. There was once a village he had to flee. There was once a child who fought every inch of the way into adulthood so that you could be here. We all come from those people. We might forget that story, it might not be told, but it is who we are.

And somewhere in the wilderness, our ancestors stood and gave thanks to God for getting them through and said—even if the powerful, the story-tellers and the history makers don’t see us—God does. We are seen by God. We are loved. We can keep going.

May we be inspired by the bravery and the faith of our ancestors; inspired by the bravery of those who put their children on a boat and send them off to our country for a better life as people have done for 400 years; inspired by the resiliency and the courage of the refugee and the immigrant who were our ancestors and who are our neighbors.

And may we know without a doubt that when a day comes and we find ourselves in our own wilderness, outside of the main narrative, hidden in the shadows, powerless, that God is a God who sees even in these hidden places and God is a God who speaks to us in the whispered stories of our past and God is the God who leads us through the wilderness and towards life.

Amen.