

By a quick show of hands, how many of you have seen the show, or read the book, *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Okay, how many of you have heard of the show or the book, *The Handmaid's Tale*?

The show was recently released, but it is based on the book by Margaret Atwood, which was published in 1985.

For those of you who have not seen or read it, it's about a dystopian place which was formerly the United States, and has now been renamed Gilead.

There was a war of some kind, which included a lot of nuclear fallout, which the Gilead leaders won.

It's an extreme theocracy, a perverted version of Christianity, a nation which derives its laws from the literal interpretation of the Bible.

For example, women are not allowed to read, and the penalty for a first offense is losing a finger.

Women are not allowed to have jobs outside the home.

All marriages are arranged, and adultery is punishable by death. Because of the nuclear fallout after the war, many women have become infertile.

However, there is a group of women who are still fertile and they are called handmaids.

A handmaid is assigned to the home of an elite couple who can't have children of their own.

Through a monthly experience called "The Ceremony," the handmaid is ritually raped by the husband, with his wife in the room.

This happens each month until the handmaid becomes pregnant.

She then lives with the family while she carries the child, she breastfeeds it for a few months after it is born, and then she leaves the child with the couple, and she is sent to the next couple to conceive and carry a child for them.

Because the future of the society depends upon handmaids, they are held in high regard and they are tightly controlled.

If they act out of line, or try to run away, or otherwise revolt or disobey the couple they're "working" for, they are ceremoniously punished and tortured.

The main character is a handmaid named Offred.

Each handmaid derives her name from the husband of the family she is living with she becomes "Of- and then his name," and since the male of the family Offred is living with is named Fred, she is Of-Fred.

There are two other main characters, in addition to Offred.

I mentioned Fred, the husband of the house where she lives/serves, and the other person is his wife, Serena.

Serena is powerful, ruthless and *desperate* to be a mother.

She keeps Offred on a short leash.

Offred does eventually become pregnant and Serena really controls her then, because she is obsessed with Offred's baby, who will become Serena's baby once its born.

Anyone watching the show can sense that Serena has some major resentment against Offred, because she can get pregnant and Serena can't.

In yoday's story that we heard, there were also 3 characters, two women, one man, one of the women is fertile, one of them isn't (although she does give birth later in life).

These people are, of course the married couple, Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah's slave, Hagar.

Sarah is desperate to have children and she's worried because she's getting older and still hasn't born a child.

Out of her desperation, she offers her slave, Hagar, to her husband, to bear them a child.

Hagar has no choice in the matter.

Does this sound familiar?

I should mention that Atwood's novel was inspired by biblical stories.

Sarah then becomes angry with Hagar after she conceives, presumably out of jealousy.

The text says that Sarah, 'dealt harshly with her' or 'afflicted her' depending upon the translation that you're reading.

Well, now comes the first departure for Hagar.

She isn't having any of that mistreatment and so she runs away from Sarah.

Finally, she has some agency in this story. But, her escape doesn't last long.

An angel of the Lord finds her and tells her to go back to her mistress.

This also parallels *The Handmaid's Tale* because in that story, Offred tries to escape no less than 3 times in one season, and each time, she is returned to the family that she serves.

Hagar faithfully returns to Sarah and Abraham, even though the angel of the Lord told her,

*"Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*

*He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."* (Genesis 16:11-12)

Hagar knows she has a tough road ahead of her, that raising Ishmael will not be easy, and yet, she dutifully returns to Sarah,

presumably because things won't be any better if she tries to make it on her own.

But when Hagar returns with her son Ishmael, now Sarah is really jealous and she tells Abraham that she wants Hagar dismissed.

This was a patriarchal society, so asking her husband for permission to dismiss her own slave was par for the course.

Abraham was distressed by this because Hagar is the mother of his son, but he received a message from God who told him,

*“Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you.*

*As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.’* (Genesis 16: 12-13)

Now what you may have noticed here is that nobody has any regard for Hagar.

God tells Abraham that Ishmael will be fine, but Hagar is a tool, a piece of property, useless because she has done her job of bearing offspring, not even worthy of being named, she's simply, “the slave woman.”

In fact, it matters not that he is her offspring, it only matters that Ishmael is Abraham's offspring, that's why God will make a nation of him.

Hagar is irrelevant, only useful while she's fertile, sounds a lot like the character Offred we heard about earlier.

So the next morning, Abraham gives Hagar a skin of water and a loaf of bread and sends her on her way.

Now, I had to Google this because I didn't know how much a skin of water was, but it wasn't much.

It wasn't a pale or a jug, it was like a small canteen.

So, Abraham sends this woman and her baby into the wilderness with a small container of water and a loaf of bread.

This is Hagar's second departure.

I am so frustrated because I want to know what Hagar is thinking, how she feels, I want to hear her voice.

And yet, in this story, her voice is practically nonexistent until the very end.

Up to this point, she has been a pawn that was shuffled around between Abraham, Sarah, the desert, God, back to Abraham and Sarah and now back to the desert.

The only time she exercised agency was when she fled from Sarah and that backfired, she got sent right back to the place she left from.

I know I titled this summer sermon series, "Four Stories of Faith," but I wonder how faithful Hagar is.

We really have no idea.

Is she angry? Despondent?

Maybe she is faithful to God, completely trusting that God has a plan for her.

Any mother going into the great unknown with just a skin of water and a loaf of bread has got to be putting her trust into something powerful, whether herself or a higher power.

Well, as was expected, the water ran out and the bread got eaten.

So this woman who has been controlled, abused and abandoned thinks she is finally at the end of her journey.

She places her son under a bush and walks away because she cannot bear to see him die.

I don't think we can begin to imagine the grief and pain that any mother in this situation would be experiencing.

And yet, God's angel comes to the rescue again.

The angel says, "*What troubles you, Hagar?* [Apparently it hadn't been paying attention to Hagar recently]

*Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.*

*Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.*" (Genesis 21:18)

And then a well of water appears, she gives the boy a drink, and we are told that he grows up and lived in the wilderness.

I think this story is critically important for us to know for many reasons.

The first is that it's not in the lectionary, so if we didn't find a Sunday to discuss it together, we could potentially never learn of Hagar's story.

Why does that matter?

Well, we are called an Abrahamic faith, and Hagar became Abraham's wife and bore him a son.

We need to know the stories of our faith, especially those that pertain directly to our forbearers.

Also, Hagar was treated terribly, used, abused, cast off, ignored, and yet, if we look more closely, she's actually very notable.

We need to pay special attention to the ones whose stories get easily overlooked, because sometimes their stories have important lessons for us.

As for Hagar, according to our texts, she was the first woman among Israelites to bear a child.

She was the first person to give God a name.

In the wilderness she didn't just call upon God, the text says that she named the God who spoke to her, "You are El-roi," meaning God who sees, God who sees *her*.

God sees her even when nobody else does, and this ability to name God puts her in a position of authority, for once.



She is also the first person to hear an annunciation or a pronouncement from God or an angel, and she's the only woman to receive divine promise of descendants, as the angel said to her,

*“I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.”* (Genesis 16: 10).

So I confess that I don't know if Hagar was actually a woman of faith, although I am choosing to believe that she was.

I don't think God would send an angel to someone 3 times if she weren't faithful.

I don't think God would have promised her descendants if she weren't faithful, and I don't think she would have gone into the wilderness with such meager rations if she weren't faithful.

So as much as we have to learn from Hagar about being devout, her story also reminds us to look for the unnamed ones,

the powerless ones who are defined only by their relationships,

the controlled ones, the ones who get caught in the power struggles of their masters like a ping-pong ball,

the Offreds and Hagars of this world.

Whether their stories are in our sacred text, the Bible, or in hidden sections of the newspaper or discreet corners of the internet, they need to be brought to light, for we have much to learn about being faithful and resilient from those whom society has cast off. Amen.