

Being a Well in the Wilderness
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
June 25, 2017
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86:1-10

“I intend to survive.” These words end the first episode of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, based on the novel by Margaret Atwood. The woman who speaks these words, Offred, has lost her daughter, her husband, her freedom, and even her name as she is living in the not-too-distant future where environmental conditions have resulted in the infertility of most women. American democracy has shifted into a religious rule that gives men explicit and complete control over women and their bodies. The very few women who remain fertile become fertility slaves to breed human children for wealthy families to raise and call their own. Offred, the narrator, does not have her own name but is named for her commander, Fred. “I intend to survive”-- the most important ways that Offred fights for survival are inside of her; as she finds hope in the midst of horror and reserves some part of herself for resisting in the face of repression, she finds her spiritual well that will sustain her in the wilderness of her new reality.

“I intend to survive.” Perhaps Hagar, the Egyptian, also uttered these words when Abraham and Sarah made her into a fertility slave to guarantee the covenant God promised to them, to make of them a great nation. When Hagar first conceived, she looked with contempt upon Sarah. Both women were caught in a patriarchal system that valued women primarily for the purpose of their ability to bear children. In today’s passage, Sarah was not laughing then like we heard her laugh last week; this bitter Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar, and Hagar ran away into the wilderness. This first time in the wilderness, God presented Hagar with a spring in the wilderness and promised her God would make a nation

through her and her son, who would be called Ishmael. Hagar then named the voice of God, saying “You are *EI-Roi*” which means God Who Sees. Hagar is the first person in the bible to call God by any name.

Hagar returns to Sarah and Abraham, only to face Sarah’s punishment and Abraham’s dismissal once more when Sarah finally has a son and cannot bear to see her son playing with the slave’s child. At that point, left in the wilderness with only one skin of water and a piece of bread, survival becomes a dimmer possibility after the water emptied and the hot desert sun beat upon Hagar and her boy.

Can you imagine? Alone and dying of thirst in the wilderness with your only child, who is even weaker than you? Knowing her child was dying and that she could not do anything about it, Hagar wept- “Do not let me look on the death of my child!” Maybe her lips formed a prayer like that of the Psalmist: Don’t just be the God who sees, but also the God who hears! “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life-- and that of my son’s-- for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God.”

At that moment of deepest desperation, God provided a well of water and told Hagar, “Lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” And so, Hagar lived to see her son become an adult and marry and trust in a future they would live to see.

Hagar’s survival had to include her son in it. When she was banished by Abraham and Sarah, she could have left Ishmael behind while she pursued her freedom. But her future was tied to his well-being. Many mothers, and fathers, have been in this position. My friends who have Black sons tell me about “The Talk” they give their boys. “If you ever get pulled over by the police, here is the respect you must show in order to survive. It does not matter if you have done nothing wrong. It does not matter if your rights are

being violated. *To stay alive*, you “yessir” everything the officer says, so that you will live.”

“Yessir” does not always protect a life, as we saw in the video clips of Philando Castile’s killing made public last week. Watching the videos brought forward Hagar’s grief and caused many to ask “Where is *El Roi*, the God who Sees?”

There is not much a loving mother or father wouldn’t do to secure the safety and future of their child.

Last Spring, love was in the air, but in one park in Shanghai, some moms thought *love* might need a little help. In People’s Park, it is the custom that mothers who are desperate for their children to find a spouse promenade with posters advertising their marriageable children’s picture, height, age, salary, and education level to give their late bloomers a little boost in the romance department. This year, a group of mothers of gay sons marched with pictures of their sons calling out “I’m here to find a boyfriend for my son!” They were met with harassment and were eventually forced out of the park. But their persistence on behalf of their sons did not go unappreciated. As one Chinese gay rights advocate said, “Gay men deserve the right to be just as embarrassed by their mothers’ obnoxious matchmaking efforts as straight men and women are.”

As we know in God’s appearance to Hagar, and can see in Jesus’ stepping across tradition’s line over and over to welcome women, to welcome the poor, to welcome the disabled, to welcome the unclean, God has a special care for the outcast and a desire not only for their survival, but that they also drink from the well waters of life.

Consider the possibility that the well of water was right beside Hagar and Ishmael all along, but because Hagar’s eyes were so full of her tears she could not see it. Perhaps her eyes were so stuck on her boy, watching for

signs of life departing him, that she could not see the dancing of sun on the top of the water. Perhaps it took *The God Who Sees* to point Hager to the flowing spring that would preserve their lives before she could open her eyes to it.

I know that I sometimes get so weighed down by the terrible things happening in the world that I can sometimes miss the wellsprings of water God has placed right in front of me. As much as I believe a committed Christian should care about the daily news and educate herself or himself about the issues of the day, I was finding that there is no rest from the news alerts that flash across my iPhone. I acknowledge that when I am bored, I don't just sit around being bored and allow my bored thoughts to take me somewhere creative and interesting. Instead, I devour the news, scrolling through the headlines, several times a day. Reading them so often makes me quite sure that the apocalypse is about to happen and that I should bring my family to Canada. This kind of anxiety is actually paralyzing, and instead of keeping me engaged in the world it makes me fearful and helpless in it. And so I made a decision to stay off the news pages. I still allow myself to read my daily email from the New York Times and read any articles from there and there only. In just a week, I have seen a difference in my ability to connect with my family, and I am able to focus my activism on areas where I feel I can actually make a difference rather than worry about things I cannot change.

I am not saying we should close our eyes to the troubles around the world. We have to look and see them. But we also have to keep our eyes open to where God points out the wells all around us. God longs to give us something to drink, so that we do not get tired and thirsty doing the important work God has in store for us. Through Hagar and Ishmael, God made a nation, it is said. Had Hagar not seen or heard what God was showing her, she and Ishmael would never have survived the wilderness.

I will be marching with my family today in New York City's Pride parade. In a New York Times article this weekend, there is the headline "Gay Pride's Choice: March in Protest or Dance Worries Away." The Pride march began to commemorate the Stonewall Riots, which were protests of the raiding of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village 48 years ago. But along with protest comes rainbows and glitter and everything fabulous. We have fun! And for a day at least, we feel like the whole city affirms our sacred worth. Our love is valued. Our families are valued. Our health is valued. People come from all over the world to cheer us on or march in their own cities. We drink from the well of all that joy and affirmation so that we can make it through another year of families and churches that shut doors in our faces, politicians who won't let us use the bathroom of our choice, and schoolyard bullies that make kids question whether they deserve to live. Some years, we even do more than just survive off that year of Pride. We actually become agents of change and transformation, shining light on the deep wells of water God puts all around us and reminding the world that God invites us to drink there too.

Here at church, we try to be a well for any thirsty person who comes from the wilderness, through our doors, and needs a drink. Sometimes we will be the ones in need of a drink, and sometimes we will be the ones able to offer a drink. We cannot do this without tapping into God as the true, living Source of our water. May our wells never run dry. Amen.