

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE FOR HIS GLORY

By Gabriela Profeta-Phillips

Theme: God's Transforming Power

Call to Worship: #705, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *I Will Exalt You, My God the King*

Opening Song: #15, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *My Maker and My King*

Closing Song: #341, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *To God Be the Glory*

Scripture: various passages in Genesis

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It was September 2003 and I was in Cairo, among those who were swarming the crowded coaches and piling themselves up against the passengers that had already boarded before...

The train made its wary way through the dry desert, slowly traversing the brown arid wasteland. Above, the sun burned hotly filling the vast empty space with its searing rays. Everything was ablaze under it, and the heat enveloped everyone in a sickly drowsiness, increasing the feeling of heavy weariness...

Life itself seemed sluggish, like the mirage that gleamed on the far horizons.

All the way out the wheels kept up their song which reverberated in each passenger's head: Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, He is the Almighty, Glory be to him! God is the Greatest.

Next to me, sat a young mother of three, her eyes were the very picture of pain and endurance. Her face was dark brown, and the black kohl on her eyes had been smeared by tears and sweat. On her arms laid a restless bundle of several layers that contained a baby, My heart sank when I saw two huge black eyes which seemed attached to his tiny face by invisible wires. They appeared motionless, as if fixed on scene of horror.

I could not bear the scene, with a quick glance I reviewed the expression of the other passengers,

I needed to see something that could distract me from those baby eyes that kept hunting me. But I only saw the thread of suffering that knitted together the untold pain of many hearts...

God, how can you endure the sight of this intolerable and bleak existence? Where are you that I cannot hear you?- I cried out. But God was in that train all along, and I did not know it, no wonder I heard later on someone in the crowd say bismillah al rahman, al rahim... (in the name of God the merciful and compassionate).

In the same land, among the same people (the children of the East) but in another time, someone else called to God and He actually came down to the Egyptian desert and displayed His glory.

Her name was Hagar (Hajar in Arabic) and she is the beloved “Mother” of the Arab people. This morning, we will attempt to retrieve part her life story from a chapters of Genesis and consider God’s way of counteracting the human drama of suffering and pain.

Outside the tent is dark, the desert breeze begins to sift through the bare hills; inside the silence is stifling until finally Sarah gets her courage to deliver her plan. “So Sarai said to Abram, ‘See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go into my maid; perhaps I shall be built up from her’” (Gn 4:16). I can almost hear Sarah reasoning “We have waited 10 years, and if the Lord has chosen to close my womb until this old age, and has promised you a great prosperity, might this mean that your seed would possibly be secured from another women? After all, He has never said that the promise nation will sprout from your loins and my womb...” (Note that is not until (Genesis 17:15) Ishmail is a teenager that God includes Sarah.)

Before this night, Hagar was in Abram’s household just a presence, but where others saw simply a slave, Sarah saw a reliable woman upon which her family could be built. A royal family for a brand new nation to fulfill God’s designs.

And so it happened, and Hagar became Abram’s surrogate wife (Gn 16: 3-4) “then Sarai, Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife...”. “So he went into Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her

mistress became little before her eyes (literal translation from the Hebrew by Maalouf).

Here we have now two women competing for the same slot... Hagar is no longer a simple maid, she has gained a new respect as the mother of the long awaited child of Abraham, and it is not surprising that her barren old mistress does not seem so powerful and important after all.

Sarah's image has diminished in the eyes of Hagar.

Sarah feels betrayed; she no longer enjoys Abram undivided attention. The narrative of this story is rather limited and we are asked to fill the blanks...without losing sight of the real issues: progeny, shame, polygamy and God's provision and faithfulness.

The relation is clearly deteriorating, and Abram keeps himself detached and does not respond to the accusation of being responsible for the crisis. Gn 16 "My wrong be upon you". In what seems an act of desperation, Sarah calls the Lord to arbitrate "The Lord judge between you and me" she said in verse 5.

Abram, perhaps in an attempt to reaffirm his wife, puts Hagar (his wife's maid) under her hand to do as she pleases (verse 6). And when Sarah dealt with her harshly, Hagar fled from her presence. Sarah afflicts Hagar, the term used here conveys the idea of bringing someone under control by means of harsh treatment that might involve physical and psychological abuse.

The same verb is used to refer to the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites later on and just like the Israelites find refuge in the desert later on, Hagar also finds her way out of oppression in the desert.

So, this abused refugee is now homeless, pregnant and aimlessly running into the merciless desert. Is anyone watching? Will her name be buried forever under the sand? Three thousand years later, Hagar unresolved issues are still very relevant today, especially in some countries of the Middle East: fertility, rivalry, rejection, powerlessness, sustenance, inheritance and polygamy, just to mention a few.

Now the Angel of the Lord searches for Hagar, and finds her in the desert, by a spring of water. It is interesting that the Bible is constantly sending people into the desert for redemption, because it's there, away from the ease of settled life, far removed from man made shelters that they turn to God for sustenance.

God then asks her "Hagar, Sarah's maid, where are you coming from and where are you going?" (verse 8). The Lord calls her by name, and yet reminds her of her low position and of the fact that she is still accountable to Sarah... Hagar can only respond to half of the questions. She knows here is she coming from: she is running from unbearable presence of her mistress, but where is she going, she does not know... Perhaps at this stage, it does not really matter!

So the Angel of the Lord, who Hagar later recognizes to be no other than God himself, sends her back under the oppressive hand of Sarah and commands her to submit to her!

Back into servitude, just now that she was starting to experience the sweetness of freedom! Did He know what she had to endure? So, how can he expect her to willingly return?

His words pierced her soul, there were not promises of soothing Sarah's heart; or of protection coming from Abram. She had to return in the same circumstances she had fled and accept defeat under her heavy handed mistress once again. Have you ever try to flee from pain and yet sent back to endure again the unbearable presence of your boss, prtner, mother in law or husband?

And yet Hagar submits herself to God and becomes the first and only person who names God: "You are the God who sees Me". The God of the Hebrews could be heard and like the gods of her land Egypt, could be seen too!!

Doesn't this sound as the jubilant expression of a joyful heart that is moved to worship? You are the God who sees Me.

But, what has Hagar seen that give her the strength to submissively go back? While it is true that God has not changed her external circumstances, it is true that God's has changed something

inside of her and her heart is at peace. Only fountains of blessings, can empower a person to raise above his/ her circumstances and be free even under bondage. In the Bible there several examples of people who drew strength, wisdom and power after having been exposed to the glory of God: Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Mary and Paul, just to mention a few...

Let's turn to the Bible again to find out how each prediction made by the angel was meant to comfort Hagar....

The angel of the Lord also said to her:

"You are now with child
and you will have a son.
You shall name him Ishmael,
for the Lord has heard of your misery.

He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in front of his brothers."

First, in this first annunciation, God names Hagar's baby. His name was going to be a perpetual reminder through the ages that God hears, that his heart is moved by the suffering of even a simple slave. She was wasn't going back empty handed; now everybody will know (including Sarah) that God had come down to meet with Hagar. That He had attentive ears and therefore, everyone was accountable before a God who hears and acts.

Second, God tells to this slave, that her son will not be subject to anyone, free. We do not have time to go deeper, because today to refer to someone as a wild donkey would be taken as an offense. But in the Bible, the traits of a donkey are associated with: strong will, living in the desert, and it is given to him by God. Freedom and nomadic life, and the one who scorns civilization.

Third, Ishmael, will not only be free but able to fight against those who want to subdue him. His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. Hand represents power, God is here reversing Hagar's powerlessness. She has to submit herself under Sarah's hand but her son will not be under the hand of anyone.

Fourth, Ishamel, before Hagar ever knew that her son would not inherit with Isaac, the Lord was already pointing to her which was going to be her son's dwelling place. Hagar was fleeing from the presence of Sarah, and yet her son would dwell in the presence of her brothers.

Today, just like in the past, God hears. And when we allow God to shows us his glory, who He is, his presence changes us, regardless our circumstances. Jesus before departing promised us the presence of the Comforter to walk us through the valleys of shadows and suffering without fear.

God is most certainly Merciful and Compassionate. God hears, and acts... God condescend with the low and comes down to find them wherever they might be stranded. And this is Hagar message, not only for the desert dwellers, but for the whole world. A message that moves people to worship.

If only we could reflect God's mercy and compassion in our daily affairs, how many more would feel compel to give glory to God!

Biographical Information on the Sermon Writer: Gabriela Profeta-Phillips is an honorary consultant to the Global Mission department in the Middle East Union and is involved in promoting creative dialogue, goodwill, and participatory engagement between Muslim and Seventh-day Adventist believers by creating awareness of our shared vision, values, and historical heritage. Profeta-Phillips has a MA in Education as well as three undergraduate degrees in Philosophy, Education, and Psychology. She speaks Spanish, English, and Italian. She currently lives in Cyprus with her husband and two children ages three and five. Profeta-Phillips loves traveling, eating pizza, and reading good books.