

SERMON: Say Their Names: Hagar and Ishmael
TEXT: Genesis 21:8-21

Rev. Clementa Pinckney. Rev. Sharonda Singleton. Myra Thompson.
Tywanza Sanders. Ethel Lee Lance. Cynthia Hurd. Rev. Daniel L. Simmons, Sr.
Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor. Susie Jackson. These are the nine individuals
who were brutally murdered while praying in their church in Charleston, South
Carolina, on June 17, 2015. We say their names because we must never forget. We
say their names because we must learn something from their deaths. We say their
names because we must make changes that will prevent similar tragedies in the
future.

And we have made changes. Countless churches around the country, large
and small, urban and rural, have established plans and protocols for keeping their
congregations safe from active shooters and other threats. Some have uniformed
police on duty every Sunday. Others have established training for ushers and
greeters on how to respond to intruders. Others have devised plans for locking
down or evacuating the building.

Every year on September 11, beginning at 8:46 am, family members begin reading the names of nearly 3,000 people who were killed in the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001. It takes nearly four hours to say all those names. But we say their names, because we must never forget. We say their names because we must learn something from their deaths. We say their names because we must make changes that will prevent terrorist attacks in the future.

And in nearly twenty years, we have made massive and sweeping changes. The government now includes a Department of Homeland Security, as well as a Transportation Security Administration. At 7.8 billion dollars, the TSA budget has nearly doubled since its formation in 2001. Additionally, before 9/11, only about 5% of checked bags were screened at airports. Now, as many of us know through personal experience, everything is screened and taken apart and tested and patted down as they search for weapons or anything that could possibly be used as a weapon.

In recent weeks we have heard calls to say the names of dozens of women and men who have been brutally and unnecessarily killed because they were black.

Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. George Floyd. The resulting protests continue, weeks later, because nothing seems to change.

It occurred to me, when reading the troubling story of Hagar and Ishmael, that we should say their names. We should remember who they were and the treatment they endured.

In case you don't know the story that surrounds the passage we read today, let me give you some background. And - just a heads up - this is one of many sordid soap operas in the Old Testament.

Abraham and Sarah were old - too old to have children - but God had promised Abraham many descendants. As numerous as the stars. Yet, even after that promise, however, there was still much waiting to be done. Sarah lost her trust in God. She became impatient, and gave her servant Hagar to Abraham, hoping Hagar might bear him a son.

In a book titled, *Abraham*, author Bruce Feiler, points out, "Sarah does not mention the maid's name, nor does she acknowledge that the resulting child might

belong to the other woman. *Perhaps I shall have a son*, she says.” Abraham’s first-born son is named Ishmael, meaning *God hears*. (Bruce Feiler, *Abraham; A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*)

Eventually, Sarah did become pregnant, at the age of 99. Isaac was the second son of Abraham. Now we’re at the point where today’s passage begins.

“The child grew and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.”

Now, there are a number of theories among theologians about what sort of play was happening that would make Sarah so upset. But it’s entirely possible that Sarah was just waiting for a reason to get rid of them.

“Sarah said to Abraham, *Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac*. The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, *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 for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.

Even more troubling than Sarah giving her slave girl to her husband, is then banishing that slave girl and her child into the desert, into almost certain death. It seems as though God is siding with the oppressor, allowing this abhorrent treatment of Hagar and Ishmael. Yet, God also promises Abraham that they will be okay. According to one commentary, “the narrative holds us to *the tension between the one **elect**ed and the not-elect*ed one who is ***treasur**ed* by God.”

The commentary continues, “In this story the people of God should recognize and rejoice that God’s saving acts are not confined to their own community. God’s acts of deliverance occur out and about in the seemingly godforsaken corners of the world, even among those who may be explicitly excluded from the *people of God*. Here we see God at work among the outcasts, the refugees of the world - who fill our world as much as they did then. Persons of faith are to participate in their lives, to lift them up and hold them fast until the wells become available. They are also to discern where God’s delivering activity

may have occurred, to name these events for what they are, and publicly to confess them as such to the participants and to all the world... Telling and retelling stories like this one keeps that testimony alive and serves to remind the chosen that their God is the God of all the world, including the outcasts.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 1, pp. 489-490.)

We Christians, and, yes, especially white Christians, tend to believe that we are God’s chosen people. Granted, it may come from a place buried deep in our subconscious; often we don’t even realize we’re doing it. But we are the Sarahs and the Abrahams who place our own needs above the needs of the Hagers and the Ishmaels of the world. We might even go so far as to justify our actions, believing that someone else will take care of them. “God will take care of them.”

Instead, I pray that as we SAY THEIR NAMES, we will remember that the people of the wilderness are equally important to those we see as family. I pray that we will strive to love them and stand with them, remembering that God loves them so much that he gave his only begotten Son. I pray that we will follow as God leads us, and live as we have been taught. To be the hands and feet of Christ, to do the difficult work of meeting people where they are, to open our arms wide, to know

that there's enough love for all. To share the message in word and deed that every person of every land, every color, and every religion matters and is worthy of justice.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.