

Year C, Epiphany 6, Black History Month
Hope Central Church
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2/17/19

Our Scripture today is a story of harm, of oppression, and ultimately, of survival. It is the story of Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian slave, which is embedded within the larger story of Abram and Sarai, the ancestors of the Israelites. We are using this story because it is foundational to the work of Delores Williams, this week's theologian for Black History Month. According to a profile written by Debria Upton, *"Dr. Delores S. Williams, African-American Presbyterian theologian, was born 1937 in rural Alabama. Her grandmother, a daughter of a slave, along with her mother took Delores to church regularly. There she sat by her mother and grandmother singing spirituals and listening to the testimonies from black women about how God had brought them through hard times. Delores knew what it was like to be a black woman and knew the stories of racial pain and inequality. As an adult, she was part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and completed college. Delores's husband died suddenly making her a widow struggling to raise four children during a challenging political climate. Only then did she begin to understand the spirituals sung in her youth extolling how God moves us to live with a deeper meaning. Delores claimed when she heard the teaching of feminist Beverly Harrison at Union Theological Seminary in New York, feminist theology connected with her. She had remembered the words of her grandmother telling her that white people*

and African-American are both Christians, but they didn't have the same religion.

Delores began to understand the meaning behind that statement as she continued her education. James Cone was teaching liberation theology, so Delores heard the message of black male theologians but realized black women were still left out. Several Union Theological Seminary black women including Renita Weems and Delores Williams challenged James Cone to consider the other half of the equation in liberation theology, especially since black women made up more than seventy-five percent of African-American churches. This challenge would open a door of opportunity through which Delores would walk (Pinnock, 2005).

Delores embraced Alice Walker's term "womanism" which was different than feminism with focus on women, primarily white women issues. "Womanism" came from the concept of a "black woman" who was bold, strong, nurturing, protective, and a force with whom to reckon. Black women for centuries had cared for the babies of white people along with their own. Their care and concern depended on circumstances and marginalization. Womanism embraced the full identity and "humanity" of black women and challenged the white supremacy of feminists. Delores's beautiful poetic language and her ability to tell stories allowed her to explore and expound on Alice Walker's work."

This is the context from which *Sisters in the Wilderness* emerges. It seeks answers to questions that were real and alive for Dr. Williams not as hypotheticals but as drawn from the lived experience of African-American women. In the early pages of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams says, “Many black women have testified that ‘God helped them make a way out of no way.’ They believe God is involved not only in their survival struggle, but that God also supports their struggle for quality of life, which ‘making a way’ suggests.

I [Williams] concluded, then, that the female-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation could be named the *survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation*. This naming was consistent with the black American community’s way of appropriating the Bible so that emphasis is put upon God’s response to black people’s situation rather than upon what would appear to be hopeless aspects of African-American people’s existence in North America. In black consciousness, God’s response of survival and quality of life to Hagar is God’s response of survival and quality of life to African-American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God’s help.” (p. 6) This survival/quality-of-life lens is at the center of how Williams encounters Scripture, the Black church, and other theologies (including feminist and liberation theologies) throughout the book.

It was at BU that I first encountered *Sisters in the Wilderness*, and although this book does not speak to my experience—it is not about me or written for me—it none the less changed how I think about theology. Though it was originally written decades ago, it still feels relevant as we grapple with the racist history of our country and as we try to build beloved spiritual community together. Her book is incredible, deep and wide and extensive in its exploration of theology in the church and in African-American culture more broadly understood. I won't have time to go into everything she says. What I'm attempting to do here is pick up on what Laura Ruth started last week. Last week, Laura Ruth began talking about an ethic centered in the lived experience of Black women. This week, I'm attempting to offer Delores Williams' work as a foundation for how we can ground our ethic theologically—not, I hope, by appropriating Williams' work but by using some of her methodology to find ourselves in Scripture, to see ourselves reflected in God's revelation in the world. I believe Dr. Williams's work offers us three things: 1) a lesson in contextual reading of Scripture from a Womanist perspective 2) what it can mean to see our stories in sacred story and 3) a framework for doing further theology with a wide enough lens to incorporate the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of oppression.

As a woman of African descent in this country, Williams sees the plight of her ancestors and her contemporaries in the story of Sarah and Hagar. Taking cues from liberation theology, which is preoccupied with how God cares for the oppressed and marginalized, she invites her reader to consider this story from the perspective of Hagar. In order to read the text more effectively, as Williams explores the Scripture, she includes the socio-historical context in which this story would have taken place—the context that the original hearers of the story would have understood. For example, after Hagar is forced to bear Abram's child and finds herself pregnant, Sarai is worried Hagar thinks herself better than Sarai by virtue of bearing an heir for Abram. It's not just Sarai being angry that a slave would think herself on equal footing with her master; it's also the complication of two wives vying for the security a husband would offer. Williams explains that "Technically, Hagar no longer belongs to Sarai. She has given Hagar to Abram as a second wife.... So 'Sarai accordingly treats her so badly that she ran away from her (Gen 16:6b).... Hagar becomes the first woman in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures." When the angel of God meets her in the wilderness to encourage her to go back Abram, Williams says, "The angel of Yahweh is, in this passage, no liberator God." This angel is preoccupied with the survival of Hagar and the child. In terms of quality of life, "God apparently wants Hagar to secure her and her child's well-being by using the resources Abram has to offer."

So Hagar goes back to Sarai and Abram. Then when Sarai has Isaac, custom dictated that the firstborn son was to receive a double portion of his father's wealth, so the child born to Hagar would receive the larger inheritance. Wives did not inherit from their husbands, so it was up to the son or sons to take care of Sarai—meaning her fate and Hagar's fate would likely both rest in the hands of Hagar's son. Sarai will not stand for that, so Hagar and her son, at the mercy of Sarah's fear and jealousy, are sent away. In addition to the child she is forced to bear, Hagar is also forced into homelessness and economic instability with a child to care for. Williams notes that Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with no real long-term resources to sustain them. Even God does not intervene in this instance until Ishmael is near death. It's not exactly liberation that God provides but a promise of protection that the child will survive and also be the head of a great nation. Hagar creates her own liberation by finding Ishmael a wife, thus helping him establish a house, which is the beginning of his legacy. Ultimately, neither Abraham nor his God are the heroes of Hagar's story. Hagar, with her son and her God (el-Roi) at her side, is the hero of her own story by securing the quality of life for her son and therefore for herself.

Williams reads the lived experience of African-American women during the antebellum and postbellum South in this story. The forced surrogacy of Hagar is not

unlike the forced surrogacy experienced by Williams' own ancestors at the hands of white men. In addition to the violence visited on slave women, Williams also talks about the surrogate roles played by African-American women in the form of wet nurses and Mammy figures, caring for white children and white households while being subject to the whims of the white families in whose houses they worked. Like Hagar, their economic wellbeing was not in their own power. Like Hagar, they sought first survival and then quality of life. Williams explains these roles that are part of the emotional memory of African American women, the experiences that perpetuate oppression. Moreover, Black women have been and continue to be overlooked and ignored by white feminism and Black patriarchy, so Black women, like other women and queer communities of color, other communities that sit at the intersection of oppression around race, class, gender, sexuality, continue to seek stories that tell their truths as they work to secure their places at the table of justice work. And as they work to secure their places in the Church, too.

I said earlier that I believe Dr. Williams's work offers us 1) a lesson in contextual reading of Scripture from a Womanist perspective 2) what it can mean to see our stories in sacred story and 3) a framework for doing further theology with a wide enough lens to incorporate the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of oppression. We've dealt a little with the first two through the story of Hagar

and Sarai, and I want to move away from today's Scripture to share one of the ways Dr. Williams's book widens a framework for whatever theological work we do together. This might seem like a leap, but bear with me. Although much of her initial work uses the story of Hagar, she does deal also with the New Testament and specifically with the role of Jesus. As you heard in her biography, Williams the person was in conversation with James Cone, on whom Ben preached a couple of weeks ago, and her work is also in conversation with his. It is nearly impossible to deal with theological issues in the Christian Church without dealing with atonement theory (that is, what if anything saves us and/or what Jesus' death and resurrection might mean). We heard some of what James Cone has to say on the subject in Ben's sermon, which used Cone's book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. By way of complicating that conversation, I want to offer what Williams has to say. In this case, she is specifically addressing the theology often encountered in more conservative theology that Jesus died for our sins, that he paid our debts by dying a gruesome death on the cross. She writes "To respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil (p. 165)." But she doesn't stop there. She doesn't just leave it at, violent surrogacy cannot be the saving act. She puts forth her own imaginings about how Jesus can actually be

Redeemer without using his death as the moment of salvation. Her take is this: if Jesus enacted redemption in the world, it happened in his response to the temptation in the wilderness. Again, here are her words:

“Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11) by resistance—by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual; by resisting death [when he was told to throw himself down]; by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership [when he was offered all the kingdoms of earth if he would bow down and worship the tempter] (p.166).”

If redemption or liberation is to be for African-American women, the means to that redemption cannot be through the same kind of forced surrogacy that is part of the spiritual historical memory of African-American women. When I read her words, I knew something I hadn't known before: substitutionary atonement has long given me an icky feeling, because it's not compatible for me with a God who is Love. But more than that, it's actively harmful for entire communities of people including people I knew and loved. Atonement theory doesn't work individually, for survivors of violence who are too often expected to “bear their cross.” It also doesn't work in the case of entire groups of people whose worth to dominant culture has been predicated

on the extent to which they allow themselves to be coerced or pressured into surrogate roles that perpetuate their oppression and suffering. And what I further realized is that whatever is the capital G Good News is, has to be Good News for us all: for people of color, for women, for nonbinary and/or transpersons, for people of all sexual identities, for people of all economic realities. If the Good News isn't good for everyone, it isn't good for anyone. Or at least, it's not good for me. Delores Williams's great genius is not just that she is a brilliant theologian. It's that she stands among her people to create a theology that could be capital-G Good News for that community. She uses her experience to re-read Scripture and to critically engage the tradition in responsible and life-giving ways. She stands in the gap between where white feminism has not been responsive to the realities of women of color and where the Black church has been steeped in patriarchy. I think we are trying to do something similar in our own context, something delicate and difficult and complicated—we are trying to ensure seats at the table, or seats in the pews, for those who don't always see a place for themselves in the Church, in sacred texts, in Christian tradition, in spiritual communities. We are asking ourselves to mind the intersections of our lives—our economic realities, our gender, our race, our sexuality, our stories—with an eye toward the places where we assume we can take up space and an ear toward the voices that are heard far less than our own. Whatever we do toward liberation in our congregation, in our community, among our people, I pray

that it is centered in the survival, the prosperity, the thriving of those who are most marginalized, because only then can we all begin to thrive.