

“Souls in Exile”

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Genesis 21:8-21 | Matthew 10:24-31

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“What does faith mean? I think it must mean, as all the great masters tell you, *see things as they really are.*” *See things as they really are.*

Karen Armstrong, historian, ex-Catholic nun, and self-proclaimed former “freelance monotheist,” shared this definition of what faith could mean on an episode of the podcast *On Being* from 2009. Karen Armstrong is perhaps best known for her book *The History of God* from 1993, which explores the religious understanding and development of God among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. *History of God* was very popular at the time of its publication and remains a companion text for everyday, lay scholars of religion. In fact, we even have a copy of her book in our church library! You may have also heard of her first book from 1982, *Through the Narrow Gate: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery*. In *Through the Narrow Gate*, Armstrong details the account of her time as a nun in an authoritarian convent in the 1960s, just as the Catholic Church made the decision to begin modernizing their religious communities and their services. Entering the convent at just age 17, Armstrong longed to find oneness with God and to seek perfection in her vocation. Yet, she quickly realized that the convent did not exactly encourage a personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, they encouraged *order* and *obedience*. Free-thinking and self-care were expressly discouraged. The strictness of the convent’s hierarchy and the nonsensical nature of many of the social and religious rules left Armstrong feeling lost, confused, and dissociated from herself and, indeed, from God. She became a soul in exile, unfamiliar with herself, her mind, and her spiritual life. To come back home to herself, she had to make the difficult decision to

take herself out of a spiritual desert and reckon with the abuse she had suffered at the convent. After seven years as a religious sister, she renounced her habit and left to studies in English literature at Oxford University at the age of 24.

In the episode with Armstrong on the podcast *On Being* and in her book *The Spiral Staircase*, she explores how she, little-by-little, came back to herself. The journey of bringing her soul out of exile and into the full belovedness of who she is was slow and difficult. She says, “Intermittently, I was able to think again, to respond again, and, slowly, slowly, to have fresh ideas.” She goes on to quote the Buddha, as she said she began to “*see things as they really are.*” This was something that Armstrong had been unable to do for seven years - *see things as they really are.*

This practice of *seeing things how they really are* and bringing our souls out of a disoriented, lost exile means that we are fully allowing ourselves to be in the presence of God. We actively seek God as we listen for God’s Word and feel God’s Spirit. But, this is hard work, as Armstrong’s story shows. We human beings have both the blessing and the curse of narratives, of what we have learned *should* and *should* not be. In the convent, Armstrong was told a particular narrative, which she grew to believe to protect herself. Yet, in her heart, she believed something entirely different.

We humans are storytellers who try to make meaning of the confusing, chaotic world around us through rules, patterns, symbols, and clues. Think about the concept of first impressions. Have you ever had a bad first impression of someone, and, despite ways they’ve grown as a person or defied your initial perception of them, you still have some wariness or trepidation around them? You may think to yourself, *oh, there they go again, do that same old thing they do because that’s who they are.* This is a narrative or

a rule that you have created for yourself. Or, you may compare a certain person who gets on your nerves to other people—other patterns in the rolodex inside our brains. *Oh, there they go again*, you may think to yourself, *they are just like my father or my ex or my first-grade teacher or my old tennis coach*. But, is that *really* who they are? Do we *really* know them well enough to say that? Are we all doomed just to be known through dubious narratives, as 1 Corinthians reads, “through a mirror, dimly?”

Our challenging lectionary readings today from Genesis 21:8-21 and Matthew 10:24-31 encourage us—force us, really—to *see things as they truly are* by examining some of the narratives they present and confronting the realities of the authors’ time. Genesis portrays the forced exile of Hagar and Ishmael from the home of Abraham and Sarah into the desert. Hagar was Sarah’s Egyptian handmaiden, or servant, and was forcibly arranged into a sexual relationship with Abraham. Having little choice in the matter, she bore Abraham’s sons, as Abraham was struggling to produce an heir with Sarah. Here’s how the story goes:

On the day [Ishmael] stopped nursing, Abraham prepared a huge banquet. Sarah saw Hagar’s son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. So she said to Abraham, “Send this servant away with her son! This servant’s son won’t share the inheritance with my son Isaac.” ...Abraham got up early in the morning, took some bread and a flask of water, and gave it to Hagar. He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away. (Genesis 21:8-10, 14)

Alone with her son and only limited bare necessities in tow, Hagar leaves the home she knows and wanders through the desert near Beer-sheba. Remember, her son Ishmael is only a toddler – let’s say 2.5-3 years old. When her water flask runs out, she places Ishmael under a desert shrub to provide him a bit of shelter against the searing sun. Both of them begin to cry. God witnesses their tears and sends an angel to Hagar.

The angel tells her to pick up her son, take him by the hand, and raise him to become a leader of a great nation.

While everything works out for the mother-and-son duo—Hagar survives, and Ishmael does indeed become a prophet and ancestor of the Ishmaelites—we cannot ignore the alarming reality that sent these two vulnerable people into the desert in the first place: the dynamics of class, race, and gender at play in the home of Abraham and Sarah. We witness a physical exile, as well as a social and spiritual exile, in these two biblical figures. Delores S. Williams, the late Presbyterian, Womanist theologian, published a seminal book called *Sisters in the Wilderness* on Hagar. In it, she argues that Hagar is a prototype for the struggle of twentieth-century African-American women and “an image of survival and defiance appropriate to black women today.” She “[explores] the themes implicit in Hagar’s story—poverty and slavery, ethnicity and sexual exploitation, exile and encounter with God.” A cursory reading of the Hagar/Ishmael story may lead a reader to only see it only as an extension of Abraham’s narrative—his son, his lineage, his legacy, his wife’s decisions. However, Delores S. Williams helped shine a light on the intricacies of this reality: pain, cruelty, and exploitation, yes, and the inevitable survival and resilience of Hagar and her son. She side-steps a common narrative of our religious patriarch and looks deeper to *see things as they really are*.

Jesus also invites us to *see things as they really are* in the Gospel of Matthew. He says, “Disciples aren’t greater than their teachers, and servants aren’t greater than their master” (Matt. 10:24). At first reading, Jesus’s statement aligns with the socio-political values of the Roman Empire. In fact, this verse can read like a reinforcement of an oppressive system of power. But, does that sound like the Jesus we

know? No. We have to look deeper to understand this verse in context. Jesus is speaking of the persecution that his followers will face because of their identification with him and his ministry—a ministry that upends much of Roman life. Matthew 10 provides a warning of sorts to his followers that they will likely find their souls in spiritual exile because of their association with Christ. He is saying, effectively, “Think of how I am and will be treated for my beliefs and my actions. Remember that I am in a position of social power as your teacher and as someone who is not a servant and is not enslaved. Consider what you, too, may face should you choose to follow me.” This is the cruel, unjust reality that is so contrary to Christ’s Kingdom. Jesus isn’t saying that we should have no hope that these systems and injustices will change. But, he is shining a light on a very possible reality. Like Hagar and Ishmael, some of Christ’s followers may have found themselves in a spiritual or social exile.

Jesus continues on in Matthew 10. He says, “What I say to you in the darkness, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, announce from the rooftops” (Matt. 10:27). When we are in the practice of *seeing things as they really are*, the Spirit guides us to the truth and asks us to accept it and be fully present in it. This is the good news. While we may feel a weariness in our bodies, while we are walking in the desert of our lives or find ourselves in the dark night of our souls, God provides us a safe haven for our wandering, exiled selves.

Seeing things as they really are is not a comfortable practice. When we clearly know the world, we know its beauty and its ugliness, its joys and its sorrows, its compassion and its cruelty. By being present to and observant of our realities, we more easily eschew limiting narratives. We dig deeper into what makes us human, what

makes us part of God's family, and what God is trying to communicate with us. We recognize when we feel our souls are in exile from ourselves, from God, and from our communities. These are the moments wherein we feel most disconnected and wherein we resist *seeing things as they really are*. Then, with God's help, we can bring our souls, little-by-little, out of exile and back home.

Friends, may we go forward and remember what we have heard today. Remember the practice of *seeing things as they are*. Remember that the truth of the material world, for all of its good and all of its ills, is inescapable. Remember that narratives are limiting. Remember that the material world is the impermanent world. What remains always is the ever-enduring love of God, the mercy of Christ, and the comfort of the spirit. Here, the Trinity tends to our exiled souls and brings them refuge. Amen.