

Hagar

Genesis 16:1-6

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

We start today a summer sermon series on some of the lesser-known characters of the Bible. And we're going to do things a little bit differently. I'm going to share with you as much of the story of someone as we know. Then we're going to turn to one another, to the people sitting near you, and we're going to discuss. What can we learn from this character? What can we learn about what it means to be human? What can we learn about what it means to be in (or out of) relationship with God? How are we like or unlike this person? So that means you can't sleep through the sermon. You're going to have to pay attention so you can join the conversation.

Now, in order to tell the stories of lesser-known Biblical characters, sometimes we will also run into people we know well. Like this morning. In order to hear the story of Hagar, we also hear about Abram and Sarai. God calls Abram to get up, take everything he has, and journey to Canaan. Once there, God promises to give this land to Abram's descendants.

And here's where we get to the hitch in the story. Abram and Sarai don't have any descendants. The one in the story who's worried about this? Sarai. Maybe she's impatient to see God's plan unfold. Maybe she just really wants to be a mother. In her culture, there was great shame associated with childlessness. Anyway, she is bothered enough to do something about it. According to the genealogy laws of the day, if a man's wife was unable to have children, she

could send her slave (or handmaiden) to her husband. If she became pregnant, the child would be considered as the wife's child. So that's what Sarai does. She sends her slave Hagar to Abram.

And Sarai's plan works! Hagar becomes pregnant. Unfortunately, things don't work out quite the way Sarai had envisioned them. Now that she is carrying Abram's child, Hagar's attitude changes. The text says she looks at Sarai with contempt. Hagar knows that her social position has gone up drastically. Sarai wants the child, but she doesn't want to deal with the new Hagar. Again, Sarai is bothered enough to form a plan. She goes to Abram and asks him to do something about it. Abram, sensing that there's more here than he can grasp, turns it back over to Sarai. "She's your slave; do with her as you see fit," he says. The text then says that Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, so she ran away.

We've covered a good deal of the story, but we really don't know much about Hagar. We know she is Egyptian. Further, we can guess that since she was able to get pregnant, and since she was the slave to Sarai, Hagar is probably Sarai's age or younger. She's away from her home and her culture, and she has no say in what's happening in her life. She didn't ask to be a slave. She didn't ask to conceive Abram's child. She didn't ask for this complicated relationship with Sarai.

So now Hagar is pregnant, feels terribly alone and scared, and she starts running away toward Egypt – back home. While she was out wandering in the wilderness, a messenger from God finds her. He delivers three significant messages to Hagar. First, he says, go back to Sarai and submit to her. That must have been a really hard message to hear. But it was tempered by the other two messages. Second, he said that Hagar would have a great multitude of offspring – and this was considered a great blessing. Moreover, third, she was currently carrying a son. And he

would grow up to be free, not a slave like Hagar. With these messages in mind, Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai.

Several years pass before we read Hagar's name again, but one of the stories that happens in between is significant. God comes to Abram and makes a covenant with him. God promises to make Abram the father of a multitude of nations. God promises that Sarah will conceive and bear a son – Isaac. God further promises that Ishmael and Isaac will both father nations. As for Abram's part in the covenant, he must simply promise to be faithful. As a sign of this covenant, God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. Also, he insists that all males be circumcised as an outward sign of their commitment to the covenant.

The next time the Scripture mentions Hagar is after Isaac's birth, when he's probably around three years old. Abraham and Sarah are celebrating that Isaac has made it through the dangerous infancy years, when Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and gets angry. It's hard to understand why she'd be mad about that, until you know that the Hebrew word used for 'playing' can also be translated as 'mocking.' Likely, Ishmael was not playing nicely with Isaac. So Sarah goes back to Abraham and tells him to send Hagar and Ishmael away. She sees Ishmael as a threat to Isaac's inheritance. Abraham isn't worried about that. He is concerned for his son Ishmael. But God tells him not to worry; God will keep the promise to make both Ishmael and Isaac the fathers of great nations.

So Abraham gives Hagar a canteen of water and casts her out. She and Ishmael, now in his teens, head out into the wilderness. When the water runs out, things start to look pretty bleak. Eventually, Ishmael is so weak and dehydrated that Hagar puts him under a bush, then walks away to mourn his impending death. But just like her last visit to the wilderness, a messenger from God speaks to her. "God has heard your cry. God has heard the cries of the boy. Do not be

afraid. God will make a great nation from him.” And Hagar looked, and suddenly she could see a well. So she took Ishmael, and they drank their fill.

It seems an odd place to end the story. They’re still in the wilderness – where are they headed? How do they get out safely? But while Isaac is considered the ancestor of the Jewish people, Ishmael is considered the ancestor of the Muslim people. Ishmael is their story. The Jewish writers didn’t feel it was necessary to add more than a footnote that Ishmael grew up and God was with him.

This story is all about relationships. The relationships between people, and their relationship with God. Let’s start by talking about the relationships they have with one another. These people lived long, long ago and far, far away. But we can in many ways see ourselves in their relationships. In what ways are we like them? In what ways are we different? Turn to the folks around you and discuss. And for the sake of lively discussion, include in your group someone who doesn’t live in your house with you.

When we look at the people in the Bible and their relationships, we see that the people of God are not perfect. God loves us as we are. God may expect us to work on a few things, but the Bible doesn’t put forth examples of righteous, perfect people. These people, imperfect in their relationships with one another, can also teach us about our relationship with God. In this story, God makes promises, gives commands, and meets people in the wilderness. What can we learn about God and our relationship with him from Hagar’s story?