

Grace in the Wilderness
Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21
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Two weeks ago we told the story of the promise of and then birth of Sarah and Abraham's child—Isaac. But there's another story intertwined with that one that we don't tell as often. Today, we're going to go back and pick up that thread. We start back before Isaac was born in Genesis 16.

16 Sarai, Abram's wife, had not been able to have children. Since she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar, ² Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from giving birth, so go to my slave. Maybe she will provide me with children." Abram did just as Sarai said. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. But when she realized that she was pregnant, she no longer respected her mistress. ⁵ Sarai said to Abram, "This harassment is your fault. I allowed you to embrace my slave, but when she realized she was pregnant, I lost her respect. Let the Lord decide who is right, you or me."

⁶ Abram said to Sarai, "Since she's your slave, do whatever you wish to her." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from Sarai.

⁷ The Lord's messenger found Hagar at a spring in the desert, the spring on the road to Shur, ⁸ and said, "Hagar! Sarai's slave! Where did you come from and where are you going?"

She said, "From Sarai my mistress. I'm running away."

⁹ The Lord's messenger said to her, "Go back to your mistress. Put up with her harsh treatment of you." ¹⁰ The Lord's messenger also said to her,

*"I will give you many children,
so many they can't be counted!"*

¹¹ The Lord's messenger said to her,

*"You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son.
You will name him Ishmael [which means God hears]
because the Lord has heard about your harsh treatment.*

¹³ Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El Roi" [which means God Who Sees] because she said, "Can I still see after he saw me?" ¹⁵ Hagar gave birth to a son for Abram, and Abram named him Ishmael.

Not long after this, Sarah herself gives birth to a child, to Isaac. But then, we pick back up with Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 21.

⁸ The boy grew and stopped nursing. On the day he stopped nursing, Abraham prepared a huge banquet. ⁹ Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Send this slave away with her son! This slave's son won't share the inheritance with my son Isaac."

¹¹ This upset Abraham terribly because the boy was his son. ¹² God said to Abraham, "Don't be upset about the boy and your slave. Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. ¹³ But I will make of your slave's son a great nation too, because he is also your descendant." ¹⁴ 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.

She left and wandered through the desert near Beer-sheba. ¹⁵ Finally the water in the flask ran out, and she put the boy down under one of the desert shrubs. ¹⁶ She walked away from him about as far as a bow shot and sat down, telling herself, I can't bear to see the boy die. She sat at a distance, cried out in grief, and wept.

¹⁷ God heard the boy's cries, and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "Hagar! What's wrong? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries over there. ¹⁸ Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. She went over, filled the water flask, and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ God remained with the boy; he grew up, lived in the desert, and became an expert archer. ²¹ He lived in the Paran desert, and his mother found him an Egyptian wife.

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What a mess, huh? This is another one of those stories that gets left out when people talk about Biblical family values. In the first half, Sarah and Abraham are brokenhearted and despairing about their continuing infertility. So, Sarah suggests to Abraham that he use Hagar as a surrogate. It was a culturally accepted solution. The child would still be Abraham's and could be recognized as his heir.

But the fact that it was culturally accepted doesn't make it right. Hagar was their slave. We don't know how she came to be enslaved by Abraham, but it's surely not a happy story, not a story without trauma. Hagar in Hebrew simply means, the foreigner, the stranger, the immigrant. It's a common noun. In Leviticus where we're told "love the immigrant as yourself," it's "love Hagar as yourself." To Abraham and Sarah, she doesn't even warrant a name. She's nobody, just the foreigner who they believe they own.

So when Sarah suggests Abraham try to have a child with Hagar, Hagar didn't have a say. She doesn't get to choose to consent or not. Even if Abraham was "nice" about it, Hagar didn't have a choice.

So Abraham used Hagar, and she got pregnant. Then, it says, Hagar no longer respected Sarah. And Abraham tells Sarah, "Do whatever you want." Sarah casts her out, essentially sentencing her to death.

Horrifying isn't it? Sarah's clearly at fault. It was her idea. And then she didn't like the consequences. Hagar didn't help matters by getting so proud. These are the conclusions traditionally drawn about this story. It's Sarah's fault, and Hagar makes things worse, and poor Abraham, just doing his best, surrounded by these women who are manipulative and jealous.

It's an awfully convenient story—for Abraham. It completely lets Abraham off the hook. So, let's think about this. Who told this story? Who had access to education, and papyrus, and time? This is a story told by men who identified with Abraham, not Sarah, and certainly not Hagar. And so the story is told in a clever way that manages to completely let Abraham off the hook, even though he's the only one who had true agency and power.

We all do this. We tell stories that blame others—often, and most dangerously, we blame others who have far less power than we do.

When, by some grace we catch ourselves, or we are caught and called to account, and it *is* grace that lets us notice this, when we catch ourselves telling a story that blames someone who has less power than we do for our troubles, we need to stop, and get as honest as we can with ourselves: How does this story let me off the hook?

Through all of this runs fear. Sarah's scared she'll lose what little standing she has. Abraham's scared to intervene and make a bigger mess. When we let fear run the day, things get dangerous. We blame and scapegoat and avoid responsibility and cause all kinds of suffering. That's how Hagar ends up in the desert. Pregnant, alone, foreign, without any resources.

But then, out in the wilderness, God comes to Hagar. God sees her, hears her. Hagar is the only person in the Hebrew Bible to name God. She doesn't settle for the name she was taught by the people who enslaved her. For me, she says, you are the God Who Sees, the One Who Sees Me.

God didn't just see a foreigner, or an object, or a means to an end. God saw *her*. And saw her pain and her suffering, met her there in the midst of it, as she lay sobbing in the desert. God saw her, holy and beloved, child of God. Finally, at last, she was seen for who she was.

You know how amazing that is? To feel like someone really, truly sees you? We need that, as fundamentally as we need milk from a mother's breast. We need to be seen: not as a category, not as an object, not as a projection of someone's desires or fears, but as ourselves. We need to be seen and Hagar was seen.

Especially as she turns from this wilderness back to the wilderness of living with Abraham and Sarah, she needs to hang on to this. It is lifesaving. I have been seen. I am somebody.

It is this acknowledgment of the fundamental dignity of every person that has fueled every liberation movement. It reminds me of the last protest Martin Luther King took part in, when he marched with garbage collectors carrying signs that said, "I am a man." They knew. They had been seen. They were somebody.

I wish Hagar didn't get sent back to Abraham and Sarah. I don't know why God sends her back. Maybe the desert's too dangerous for a pregnant woman. Maybe this story was told by slave owners. But as she leaves this wilderness for that one, she won't forget. She has been changed. She knows: I have been seen. I am somebody.

Time passes and Sarah has Isaac and grows threatened by Hagar and Ishmael once again. And once more Abraham abdicates responsibility and casts them out. Hagar and Ishmael again face death and are again met in the desert and saved by grace. They are seen. They are blessed.

Where do we find ourselves in this story? How is this our story? Sometimes we are Abraham, for sure—all too quick to claim we're powerless, to blame others, to abdicate responsibility. And we're Sarah, too, stuck in a system that gives us some power, but also cripples us; we resort to manipulation, harming others to try to secure our own place.

Abraham and Sarah don't ever repent of what they do to Hagar. I wish they did. But they don't. Isaac and Ishmael chart a new path. They reconcile at the death of their father and bury him together. But what would have happened if Sarah and Abraham had repented? What could they have learned, about God and about themselves, if they had seen her, really seen her, as God did? Because, of all three of them, Hagar is the one who comes to know God most intimately.

That's the promise here: When we don't really feel like a person, when it feels like no one sees us, Hagar leads the way. And when we lose our way and stop seeing our neighbor as a child of God, Hagar calls us to account.

She is our mother, just as much as Sarah is. She is the mother of all who find themselves overlooked and unseen. This is her testimony: You are seen and loved. You, and I, and all of us—all of us—we are children of God Who Sees Us.