

Introduction to the Scripture

Today's story comes from the book of Genesis. It's the story of Hagar and Ishmael and by extension Abraham and Sarah. (It would be easy to say it's Abraham and Sarah's story, and Hagar and Ishmael are just part of it, but that approach only compounds the wounds inflicted on Hagar and Ishmael. It's a messy story--one that forces us to confront the imperfections in the people of the Bible.

For those who are unfamiliar with the story, or who maybe need a little refresher, when Abram was called by God, he was promised that his descendants would number as many as the grains of sand. And then, he and his wife Sarah could not conceive. They grew impatient and decided that maybe Abraham should use Sarah's servant Hagar to bear him a child. And so it was arranged, Hagar conceived and bore Abraham a son.

And now, hear our scripture for the day, coming from Genesis chapter 21.

Scripture reading

Gen 21:8-21

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 servant away with her son! This servant'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 servant. Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. 13 But I will make of your servant'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.

Sermon

Friends, this family is a mess. I keep imagining them in family therapy and there are so many layers to deal with. It would be easy to read this and find deep sympathy for a particular person...Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, or Ishmael, and each of us likely favors one.

I'm going to try and help us reach into this story with a level of compassion and empathy for each of them. That doesn't mean glossing over the hard parts, but it does mean seeing each one as a human, like us, and worthy of compassion and understanding.

First, we have Abraham. He was called by God...a god he did not know or worship, but called by God, whom we now call the God of Israel, to be obedient and follow God and promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand. His wife Sarai (remember they each received a new name as a reflection of their obedience) was old and she laughed when she heard this word from God. It wasn't reasonable, and in many ways, it wasn't even feasible that she, an old woman, would have a child. But, God promised and they were faithful anyway.

And in being faithful they became hopeful. And then, no baby. Still hopeful, and still no baby. Sarah laughed when she heard that...how could an old lady have a baby after all??? And her hope began to dissipate. Of course, she couldn't have a baby. It was ridiculous. God clearly meant something else. After all....the promise was to Abraham....that HIS descendants would be numerous...

And so they decided it would have to be another way. So they called on Hagar to have a son for Abraham. This is the part that isn't glossy. By modern terms, it's gross. Hey husband, I can't have your baby, but she can, so here you go. I mean, she's only property and we don't really care what **she** wants. We want a baby and God promised you, so you get to do whatever you want. It's not ok. And you could argue, "well it's in the Bible so it was ok" and you'd be wrong. Sorry, but really, it's not ok. Hagar didn't have a choice about consent. She was treated as a vessel, not a person, and the child wouldn't be seen as hers, but as his. There's a patriarchal culture, there's messed up notions of women not having personhood. There's sexual abuse. And it's awful.

But there it is. Part of our story. Part of our history. Part of the scars that mark who we are.

And then, the irony....God really did mean for Sarah to have a child and she became pregnant. So now, Abraham has two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and the culture of the day dictated "primogeniture", which means the firstborn son got it all....the land, the animals, any wealth, so you didn't want two sons, especially if one was from another woman, let alone your servant and this tension starts to grow.

Hagar with the son she was forced to have. Abraham's son. Who is now considered as worthless as she was. I mean, for a while there, she had a son, a son who belonged to Abraham, a son who would grow up to be someone and have something because of his father. There was hope. There was a promise. And while there wasn't justice, there was something good that would come from all of this. Because of him, she would be treated

at least a little bit better. But now that Sarah had *her* boy...now it was messy and ugly and painful. Because Sarah couldn't stand it....seeing that little boy who also looked like her husband, being reminded of the children she couldn't bear, and her hopelessness, and her faithlessness, and so she demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be kicked out. "Get them out of here".

And so Abraham sends away his son, his son, his flesh and blood, his boy who bore his hopes. It's heartbreaking.

The scriptures are condensed, they're boiled down, so we get these to the point statements, and short summaries, but if we sit in the stories if we open them up to see and feel with the people...we find there's so much more. Imagine Abraham, on first glance it's easy to think he was heartless and cruel...sending a single woman and a small child out into the desert with a simple ration of one water container and a little food. But, if we try and look with empathy and care...I don't think this was an easy choice. God had promised him and they had made a choice. It wasn't haphazard or rushed or careless. God said he would have descendants as numerous as the grains of sand...he believed that and God had promised *him*. And here was one of those descendants. A son. A son he could legitimately have by another woman and still love. A boy he had watched as a baby and then as a toddler. A boy he had dreamed about and imagined a future for. And now, he had to send him away. Cast him out like he was nothing like he meant nothing.

There's trauma here, not just for Hagar, not just for Ishmael, but for Abraham too.

Now the scripture says God talked to Abraham and assured him God would make it ok and it was the right decision...that Abraham could be faithful to his wife and do as Sarah asked. Specifically, the scripture says:

¹²But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you because it is through Isaac that your offspring⁽¹²⁾ will be reckoned.¹³ I will make the son of the slave into a nation also because he is your offspring.”

And I don't know about for you, but for me, this makes me a little sick about God. I struggle to imagine God saying, “Oh yeah, that boy isn't part of your story, send them away.” I know God says God will provide and make something of the boy, but it sure feels icky that God didn't insist more on Ishmael's care and Abraham's responsibility to him.

But that's all we have in the scripture, and off they fled before the dawn. The scriptures tell us they wandered in the desert until they ran out of water. I can hardly imagine. Carrying a small child on your back, walking away, but not having a destination, not having a purpose. Where would they go? What would they do? How would they eat? Where would they sleep? What if they ran into robbers? Or wild animals? How would she protect her boy? How would she protect herself? I mean clearly, she couldn't go home. She couldn't just sit outside the gates, she had to go, Abraham insisted that they go...but go where? And do what?

I imagine Hagar as lost and desperate and hopeless. There were no answers. There were no solutions. And now, in the desert, they were out of water. So she did the best she could, she placed her boy under the shade of a bush to rest. But she couldn't bear to sit with him unable to do anything, unable to help, no water, no milk to nurse him. She was sure they would die, and him being smaller, he would die first and she couldn't bear the weight of it, so she walked away...

The scripture says within bow shot...I don't honestly know the distance, but what it tells me is, not up close and personal, not right there next to him, but close enough to see him....after all, you have to see what you're shooting if you're within "bow shot". She didn't abandon her son, she stayed near enough...and far enough and she began to sob. And, it seems, so did he, because the next thing the scripture says is, "God heard the boy crying."

And God sent an angel to reassure Hagar that their story didn't end here. Not hers. Not Ishmael's. God would do great things for him. AND, the angel revealed a well to her. God showed up...at the 11th hour, maybe a little later than anyone would have desired, but God was there in the desert too.

There are so many layers here! So much richness in listening to really see and try and understand the people of the Bible. They weren't perfect. God didn't choose them because they had it all together, God used them and redeemed them and worked with them despite their flaws.

This family experienced trauma, pain, and tremendous loss. Holy families aren't holy because they're perfect, but because we can find God in their story. And in them we likely find ourselves--

- People who've listened to God and tried to be faithful
- People who've wondered if we heard correctly because God sure isn't showing up like we thought God would
- People who resort to their own devices, their own plans to solve problems they think God isn't getting too fast enough
- People who make poor choices
- People who treat others as a means to an end rather than whole people worthy of deep care
- People who harm one another and betray one another
- People who lose hope in desperate situations
- People who do the best they can with what they have
- People who desperately need God to show up and intervene.

This family is messy and likely, so are we. But maybe, in spending a little time with them today you found a deeper connection, maybe even a tender spot for them, and in fostering that connection, maybe we make space for deep care, compassion, and empathy for other messy people. And maybe we're more able to see God at work in them, in us, and in others so that someday all our stories might point to God's redemptive work. Amen.