

## 2024 07 14 – *Hagar*

**Scripture:** Genesis 16:1-6; 21:1-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

This summer I have chosen to preach a series of sermons based on the stories of women in the Hebrew Scriptures. I'm doing this mostly to keep myself interested in preaching during what are often the dog days of the summer; but also because I want to learn more about these biblical women. I'm hoping that you will share my curiosity. Most of them are well-known; but others may be new to some of us. I began the series, back on June 23, with Eve, the first woman, and this Sunday we will be considering the story of Hagar.

How many of you are familiar with Hagar's story? (wait for response) Not everybody, so let's start at the beginning. Hagar was Sarai's attendant, or, as we find in other translations, her slave girl. Sarai was the wife of Abram and this elderly couple were childless. Sarai had given up on being able to produce an heir for her husband, so she suggested that Abram take her Egyptian attendant as a concubine. Abram agreed. He had relations with Hagar and she became pregnant.

Now you might say that Hagar was acting as a surrogate in this story, just as women act as surrogates for couples today. But it's important to note that surrogates choose to help other couples. Hagar's position in that household gave her no choice, whatsoever. She was, essentially, raped by Abram.

But getting pregnant actually gave Hagar some status in the household and the author tells us that she began to “look with disdain” on the barren Sarai. Sarai got so angry that she complained to Abram and then, with Abram’s blessing, Sarai treated Hagar so badly that her attendant ran away into the desert.

Luckily, Hagar found a spring with water and it was there that the Angel of YHWH found her. The angel explained that she was to go back to Sarai, but that Hagar would be blessed with descendants “too numerous to count.” The angel also told Hagar to name her child “Ishmael—God hears—for God has heard you in your sorrow.” So Hagar returned and gave birth to her son, Ishmael.

Now, you probably noticed that we left out some of the story this morning, skipping from chapter sixteen all the way to twenty-one. In these intermediate chapters in Genesis we would have learned how Abram and Sarai became known by their more familiar names: Abraham and Sarah. We would have heard the story of the infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We also would have been amazed at the part where YHWH promises that Sarah, even in her old age, will conceive and bear a child for Abraham.

This story leads us to the second part of today’s reading and the birth of Sarah and Abraham’s baby. They name their newborn infant Isaac, which means laughter, because Sarah laughed when she was told she would conceive in her old age. After naming her child, she says, “Now God has given me laughter and all who hear of this will laugh with me.” The baby thrives and his parents hold a feast

on the day that Isaac is weaned from his mother's breast. There is much to celebrate!

But Sarah notices Ishmael playing with his younger half-brother. And she is concerned that her husband's fortune will end up split between his two sons. Sarah does not believe that the son of Hagar, her attendant, her slave-girl, should have the same status as her son, Isaac. She asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away.

It's heartening to note that Abraham loves his older son and is reluctant to send him away with his mother. But God speaks to Abraham and assures him that Ishmael will survive and that both Isaac and Ishmael will be the fathers of great nations. So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with only a piece of bread and a skin of water to keep them alive.

Eventually the skin is empty and Hagar places her child under a bush to shelter him from the heat of the day. She sits a short distance away and begins to weep and even to wail. Hagar does not want to watch her beloved child die from a lack of food and water!

Again, an angel comes to Hagar in the desert and tells her, "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the child's cry." Then Hagar's eyes are opened and she sees a well of water where she can fill her skin. The author tells us that "God was with the boy as he grew up. Ishmael lived with his mother in the desert and became a fine archer.

That is the last that we hear of Hagar in the Hebrew Scriptures. Her son, Ishmael, on the other hand, is mentioned several times. As promised, he becomes the father of twelve sons and at least one daughter (see Genesis 25:12-17 and Genesis 28:9). In Islamic tradition, his sons give rise to the "Twelve Tribes of Ishmael", Arab tribes from which the early Muslims were descended. Hagar is therefore, the much-revered matriarch of the Muslim people.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmaelites>

Also in Islamic tradition, the description of Hagar's time in the desert is slightly different. Instead of just sitting and wailing, Hagar runs between two hills in search of water for her son. After the seventh run between the two hills, an angel appears before her. He tells her that God has heard Ishmael's cry and will provide them with water. It is then that Hagar finds the sacred Zamzam Well that resides, even today, in Mecca. Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca, still re-enact Hagar's run. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagar>

Hagar's story has meaning on many levels. It is, of course, a story of survival, a story of faith, a story of trust in God. It is a reminder that no matter how bad our circumstances may seem, we are not alone. Even when we are in the desert times of our lives, God hears us, just as God heard Hagar and Ishmael. God hears us and provides for us. This first meaning is certainly a profound message. It is often the place where preachers end their sermon, but I think this story has an even deeper and broader meaning.

Hagar and Ishmael were the outsiders in this story. As I noted a few weeks ago when talking about Eve, the stories in Genesis, are, in fact, origin myths of the Hebrew or Jewish people. These stories are an ancient people's attempt to make sense of their circumstance and to describe how their lands and their people came to be. It was Ishmael's half-brother, Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, the Hebrew people. According to the Israelites, God's covenant was with the descendants of Isaac, and only with them.

But Hagar's story assures us that that isn't true. God's love goes well beyond the boundaries of any nation, culture or religion. YHWH heard the cries of the outcasts, Hagar and Ishmael, and helped Hagar find a well that remains at the centre of the Muslim faith.

Yes, just as we sang earlier today, Jesus loves each one of us. God the Creator God the Christ, God the Holy Spirit loves you and me, each one of us. But God hears not just us and sees not just us. The Holy Mystery hears and sees all people and all of creation. God's love is universal and cannot be put in any kind of box, including a religious one.

The Spirit of Love exists around and within all people and all of creation. We are invited to see that Spirit, to hear that Spirit and to greet that Spirit wherever it is found.