

Go! Sermon Series  
God Tells Hagar to Return to Sarah  
Gen. 16:1-6; 21:8-21  
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Here's the funny thing about the story of Hagar – it has no business being in the Bible. There's nothing that it contributes to the progression of the narrative. Starting with Genesis 12, the story tells us how God chose a specific person – Abraham – to be the bearer of God's divine blessing. Abraham will carry that blessing and, after a few false starts and stumbles, will pass the blessing onto Isaac, who will pass it onto Jacob. That's what Genesis is about, God blessing Abraham and Abraham passing on that blessing through his Godly-ordained offspring.

But Ishmael is not one of those offspring. He's the by-product of Sarah's impatience and Abraham's lack of trust. So, Hagar's story doesn't belong here. She's simply a messy complication in the narrative, an unfortunate footnote. Ishmael, the son that she has with Abraham, is not the child God had in mind when he blessed Abraham, so there's no reason for his story to be told. This is like trying to get somewhere unfamiliar and turning down a street that ends at a brick wall or a cornfield. Like other stories we have looked at, this is a dead-end story. So why is it in the Bible? Why does the author of Genesis spend a chapter and a half telling Hagar's story?

It's certainly not because she was important. In fact, she was just the opposite. An Egyptian slave girl was about as low on the social status pyramid as you can get. If you'll notice, Abraham and Sarah never call her by name. To them, she is simply, "that slave girl." Abraham and Sarah had recently been to Egypt, and when they left Pharaoh gave them some parting gifts: sheep, oxen, camels, and servants. Hagar was probably one of those, numbered among the livestock as property changing hands. As a human being, Hagar was invisible. She didn't count.

Her only value to Abraham and Sarah was as a slave and then as a surrogate. The couple has been promised by God that they will bring forth a great nation, but we know that Sarah is barren, and fathering a child is an important first step in fathering a nation. Rather than trusting in God, Sarah gets impatient and forces the situation, telling Abraham to make a child with Hagar. This may seem extreme and even adulterous to us, but back in those days it was actually quite common. In fact, some ancient Near-Eastern laws had a provision for dealing with barrenness, which included using her maidservant in this capacity. So, Sarah adds to Hagar's job description, invoking the "other duties as assigned" clause to force her to get pregnant. It's not like Hagar was actually a human being to Sarah; she was simply a means to an end.

Hagar becomes pregnant with Abraham's child, and she begins to rub it in that she could get pregnant when her boss couldn't. Sarah goes to Abraham and says, "Do something about this!" Abraham just shrugs his shoulders and says, "Your problem, not mine." So, Sarah begins treating Hagar harshly, so much so that Hagar is faced with a no-win situation: stay and put up with her harsh treatment and this dysfunctional family, or risk her and her unborn baby's life by running away. Faced with a time of trouble and turmoil, she runs.

It reminds me of the commercials for Southwest Airlines, which have the tag: "Want to get away?" We've all been in those situations, when we know what's coming but we don't want to face it, when life doesn't seem fair and we're not appreciated, when we feel like anywhere is better than here, anything is better than this. Have you ever wanted to just get away? Hagar feels

that way, so she leaves the relative safety and security of Sarah's control and heads out into the desolate wilderness.

End of story, right? Sarah picks another maidservant for Abraham to impregnate, this one a little less cheeky and a little more compliant, they have a kid, and the narrative just goes chugging right along. No one was going to miss what's-her-name. She probably wouldn't last a day on her own anyway. So, after she runs away, the story picks back up with our main characters, right?

Strangely enough, no. Rather than staying with our main plot, the story follows Hagar out into the wilderness. Isn't that just like God, to leave the 99 sheep in order to chase after the one who's lost? While on the run, an angel of the Lord comes to Hagar. Let me emphasize again that we're talking about an Egyptian slave girl. By all accounts, she was a nobody. She was young, she was single, she was female. Everyone around her would say God had no use for her, just as God had no use for a young, single female named Mary. And yet, both women are visited by an angel of the Lord and given extraordinary news. Mary is told she's going to have a baby named Jesus. Hagar is told to go back to Sarah because Hagar will have a son, that his name would be Ishmael, and that God would so greatly multiply her offspring that they will be too numerous to be counted. And Hagar responds by naming the God who spoke to her.

Now let's hit the pause button a second here to recognize the magnitude of what's going on. There are several firsts that take place. Hagar becomes the first woman in the Bible visited by a divine messenger. She is the first woman to be given the promise of descendants. She is the first woman to see and have a conversation with God. And she is the only person in all of scripture who gives God a name: El Roi, which means, "the God who sees me." Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl, the nobody, the invisible, has been seen. The slave girl that was never called by name by her owners is called by name by God.

So, she goes back to Abraham and Sarah and has Ishmael, who becomes Abraham's first-born son. Meanwhile, Sarah finally does conceive and has Isaac. And now the story turns into a soap opera. You've got two half-brothers, 13 years apart, both of whom could make the claim as the first-born. You've got Sarah, mother of one of the boys, who despises Hagar, the mother of the other boy. Did I mention that Sarah and Hagar are both married to the same guy? And then you've got Abraham, the father of both boys, the husband of both women, caught in the middle. Throw around a few chairs and you've got an episode of Jerry Springer. Is it any wonder the Bible tells us the matter was "very distressing" to Abraham?

Sarah once again takes matters into her own hands. Even though she finally got the son she was promised, she doesn't want that Egyptian slave-girl and her boy hanging around. Ishmael not only stands to get an inheritance as Abraham's first-born, but he's a constant reminder to Sarah of her lack of trust in God. She tells Abraham to send them packing, but there's a problem. Abraham loves Ishmael. After all, Ishmael is his first-born son. But God tells Abraham to go ahead and do what Sarah says, because God will take care of them. So, for the second time, Hagar leaves the protection of Abraham's camp and goes into the wilderness.

Only this time, she's not alone. Ishmael, her teenage son is with her, and her well-being is tied directly to his. Eventually, they run out of water, and it's looking like they both are going to perish. The story appears to have come to another dead end. Hagar puts Ishmael under some bushes and departs, saying she can't bear to watch her own child die. But the God who sees is also the God who hears, and for the second time an angel of the Lord visits this invisible nobody.

I was talking once with a young mother outside of the church nursery where a bunch of kids were playing. In the middle of one of her sentences, there was a loud, blood-curdling cry

from the nursery. The mother stopped, tilted her head to the side, and got this look of intense concentration on her face. After a second, she said, “Nope, it’s not mine,” and went on talking. It’s amazing how parents, even in noisy places, know the sound of their child.

God, our parent, knows the sound of our cries. The angel of the Lord says to Hagar, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy.” The angel reiterates the promise of blessing for Ishmael, and then opens Hagar’s eyes to show her a well of water, from which she gives Ishmael a life-saving drink. El Roi, the God who sees, now helps Hagar to see, and when she does, God literally saves her life. This dead-end story ends up being not such a dead-end after all, as Ishmael goes on to father a great nation, and is considered the line through which the Arab people and the religion of Islam descended.

I believe Hagar’s story is in the Bible as an important reminder that the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac is also the God of Hagar and Ishmael. A person’s worth to God is not determined by their status or birth order or usefulness. This story says to us that even the most invisible people in our world matter to God. We may only choose to give our attention and authority to the powerful, the privileged, the wealthy. What about the single, the pregnant, the oppressed, the foreigner – God sees them. They matter to God.

When I think of the modern-day Hagers, I think of people whose livelihood is dependent on taking care of others, and yet who are often invisible. I think of factory workers, waiters and waitresses, hotel maids, custodians. For many of us, these people only exist for their utilitarian value. We only see them because they serve a purpose for us. And when they’re out of our sight, they’re out of our mind. There are Hagers all around us.

The same God that gave us life gave them life. The same God who hears our cries hears their cries. God tells Hagar to go back to Sarah because God is with her as she goes. The outsiders, those on the margins, those who don’t fit our definition of valuable, they are also God’s children. Hagar’s story gives us this jaw-dropping sense of God’s intimate interest and care for the invisible people in our world. God has opened their eyes and shown them the life-giving well of water that is the kingdom of God in their midst.

And guess what? The church is full of water bottles. Actually, the Bible calls us “clay vessels.” God calls us to fill ourselves with the living water of Jesus Christ, and then to go out and quench the thirst of the Hagers and Ishmaels of this world who are literally and spiritually dying of thirst. We have that to offer, don’t we? We have the means to say, “You matter to God.” People are crying out for hope, for justice, for a reminder that God sees them. They want to know that we see them, that we believe their stories, that we stand beside them when they are mistreated and abused, even if it means standing against those in power. They are dying of thirst. And there is water right here, sweet, life-saving water. “She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.” Hagar and Ishmael mattered to God. Do they matter to us?