

God Was with Them
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
June 25, 2017

Genesis 21:8-21

⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.’ ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.’ ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child.’ And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

I always wanted this story to have a different ending, or maybe it’s really a different beginning. I guess I wanted Sarah to be a bigger person than she was. After all, Hagar giving Abraham a child was Sarah’s idea in the first place. Hear the pre-name-change story from Genesis 16:

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 for 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.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' The angel of the Lord also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' And the angel of the Lord said to her,

'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,
for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.

He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.'

So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.¹

You can, of course, see where the seeds of discontent between Hagar and Sarah were first sown. And yet, somehow, I still wanted Sarah to rise above, for her character to be fitting of what I imagine a parent of our faith should be. But, alas, she is as human as the rest of us, all hurt feelings and payback schemes. A Real Housewives and Sister Wives mashup: Ancient Near East Edition.

They are, sometimes disappointingly, human, Sarah and Hagar and even Abraham, but that doesn't change God being with them. God is not deterred and God does not ignore. The name of Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael, means "God listens." God sought out Hagar

¹ Genesis 16:1-16.

when she first ran away; the well where she was found by God was named “well of the living One that sees me.”² And then, when the water ran out after she was sent away, God came to Hagar and showed her the “well of seven,” so that she might give her child water. And we read after that “God was with the boy, and he grew up...” Hagar, who, when the water had run out, cast her child under one of the bushes and sat down opposite him a good way off, saying, ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child,’ watched her child instead grow up even to the age where he was an expert in hunting, and to the age where she found him a wife - the same child she literally left for dead. But God had other plans.

And we know from last week, and from today, that the body Sarah had thought was a lost cause for bearing children nurtured a child who went on to be the ancestor of many. God had other plans. The angel of the Lord asks the despondent Hagar, “What troubles you?” And the angel continues, “Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.” There are those who see the declining Church in America and consider it a lost cause; there are those who have left it for dead. Last year at the presbytery meeting held at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber spoke about the perceived decline, joking about how the members of the ancient cave-churches sat around trying to figure out how they could bring young families into the cave-churches. She pointed out that those cave-churches may be long emptied but it seems to be God’s Church lives on. Who are we to say the Church is a lost cause or to leave it for dead? Last week we were asked “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” God listens. God has other plans.

It is very human of us to, like Hagar, sit a good way off, not wanting to watch death, but God is inviting us closer so God might open our eyes to the well that is right before us. And what did Hagar then do when she saw the well before her? “She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.” God persists so we needn’t give up. As God was with our ancestors, God is with us. God reminds us, “Do not be distressed. Do not be afraid, for God has heard. God is listening.”

² <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/883.htm>

Let us pray: Hear our prayers, O God, and open our eyes to what you have placed before us,
we pray. Amen.