

This Slave Woman

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June 25, 2017

Genesis 21:9-20 — But Sarah saw Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom Hagar had borne to Abraham, playing with Sarah's son Isaac. So Sarah 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." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; do what Sarah has told you to do, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 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. When the water in the skin was gone, Hagar put the child under one of the bushes. 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. 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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 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. God was with the boy, and he grew up.

In order to fully appreciate what's happening here in our second reading, in Genesis 21, we need to back-track a bit and cover some of the earlier stories about Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar leading up to this. Last week, if you recall, we read a story from Genesis 18, where three strangers, sent by God, visit Abraham and Sarah to tell them that they are going to have a son. Now, that message, mind you, had been a long time coming. Back in Genesis 12, when God appeared to Abraham for the first time, God commanded him to leave the region where he lived and to travel—with Sarah, their livestock, and all of their possessions—to a land far away, which God would show them. In return, God promised that God would make a great nation out of Abraham and Sarah's offspring, and through them all nations of the earth would be blessed. According to the text, Abraham was 75 years old when he and Sarah began making their way to the land of Canaan, which would become the land of their descendants, the ancient Israelites.

Now, a lot happens in between Genesis 12 and the actual birth of Abraham and Sarah's son: once Abraham and Sarah arrive in Canaan, they are confronted with famine, land disputes, run-ins with local leaders. Many years pass, and still, Sarah has not borne a child. Both Sarah and Abraham are getting impatient about this, so in Genesis 16, Sarah comes up with her own solution to the problem: she owns an Egyptian slave girl named Hagar. Perhaps Abraham could try having kids with her for a while, she thinks, and they could create an heir for themselves that

way. Abraham listens to Sarah's plan and says, "Well...okay," and Hagar does, in fact, give birth to a son, named Ishmael.

But Sarah's plan begins to fall apart almost right away. As you can imagine, tension emerges between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah is jealous that Hagar has a child while she does not, and Hagar is hurting, because she was not asked for her consent to this plan. As Sarah's slave, Hagar did not get to make decisions about her own body, which was used like a pawn in Sarah's scheme. So, the tension between these two women in relation to Abraham builds and builds and then boils over: it appears that Sarah becomes abusive with Hagar, and so Hagar runs away. Just as God came to Abraham in Genesis 12, however, God also comes to Hagar when she's on the run in Genesis 16, assuring her that God has seen her affliction and heard her cries. She returns to Abraham and Sarah's household, and somehow they all live together again.

Not long after that episode, we get chapter 18, when the three strangers announce that Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac is on the way. Fast forward to chapter 21, just a few verses before this morning's reading begins, and Isaac is born. And at this point, you might think that we've got something close to a happy ending: at last, Abraham and Sarah have the son that God first promised to them more than two decades ago, and Hagar has a child of her own as well. The first verse of this morning's reading paints a picture that sounds thoroughly pleasant: "Sarah saw Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom Hagar had borne to Abraham, playing with Sarah's son Isaac." Two kids frolicking together, two siblings growing closer to each other—and they all lived happily ever after.

But that's not how the story goes. Because when Sarah sees her son Isaac playing with Hagar's son Ishmael, she doesn't see the friendship, the sweet bonding of two brothers; no, Sarah sees a threat—not to her or to anyone's safety, but a threat to what she thinks belongs to her: "The son of this slave woman," she says, "shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." When Sarah sees Ishmael, she does not view him as a part of her family, although he is. Rather, she views him as a problem, good-for-nothing, a future freeloader, the kid of a foreigner, the kid of someone who is beneath her—and therefore, a kid who does not deserve to get what her kid deserves to get.

Up until this point in the story, Sarah has been okay having Hagar the Egyptian around. It was okay so long as Sarah got to call the shots, so long as Hagar did what she was told and knew her place, so long as it was clear who was more important around here. But as soon as Sarah gets it into her head that this child might end up becoming an equal to her son Isaac, as soon as she gets it into her head that Ishmael might take or might be given some of what she thinks belongs to her, it's over. Immediately, she goes to Abraham and demands, "Cast out this slave woman, with her son."

I would like to think that I myself am worlds away from Sarah's cruelty, but I'm not so sure that I am. I'm not so sure that we are. See, friends, everyone is a nice person until being nice actually costs us something. Everyone wants to be compassionate, so long as we aren't inconvenienced.

Everyone likes the idea of lending a helping hand, but everyone recoils at the idea of someone getting something that should be mine, or something that should go to my kind of folk.

But for those of us who seek to be followers of Jesus, we've got a problem here: because the message of Jesus calls us to a costly ministry. The message of Jesus expects us to endure some inconvenience for the sake of compassion. And the message of Jesus isn't especially concerned with what belongs to *us*; rather, it is concerned with what belongs to God. The message of Jesus doesn't put much stock in what we think we have earned for ourselves; rather, it points us, again and again, to what God has graciously given us.

So, as Sarah tries to be the guardian of her son's future, as she tries to make sure that he gets everything and that the son of this slave woman gets nothing, because it's her son that matters and those people can just die in the desert, I imagine that God might be saying to Sarah, "Who gave you this future that you are guarding so desperately? Who gave you this son in the first place? You are over 90 years old, Sarah—you didn't make this baby! This child, this future, all of these blessings—you didn't get them all by your little self; they are a gift from God, and God did not give them to you so that you could keep them clenched in your fist."

But Sarah refuses to loosen her grip, and so Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the desert, with nothing but some bread and a little water. Actually, there is a hidden blessing here, in that Hagar is now free from this toxic, abusive household. But when the water runs out, and Hagar is still wandering in the desert with her child, all she can see is a curse, ready to kill them both. And it's at this point, in the depths of a valley that could not get any deeper, that God comes to Hagar and saves her.

Now, there is a clear patriarchal influence in this part of the story: according to the text, "Hagar lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice *of the boy*." Almost all of the divine words of comfort spoken to Hagar in the desert are about her son, not about her. Apparently, the text expects its ancient audience to be more concerned with the fate of the boy than with the fate of his mother. But God is here to rescue Hagar and Ishmael alike. God is here to assure them of God's care for them, regardless of where they come from or where they're going. And God is here to secure a future for Hagar's offspring, just as God has secured a future for Abraham and Sarah's offspring.

Today, friends, I invite you to carry the following questions into the upcoming week with me: Is there an inheritance that you are trying to protect? Is there a slave woman that you might think of casting out to protect it? How much credit can you actually take for that inheritance? Does God give you credit for it? And what would it look like for you to open your fist, ever so slightly, and reach out your hand to the slave woman? Amen.