

Genesis 16
“Mother Hagar”

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The day started out bright and sunny, which is to say, it was full of promise. As was her daily routine she rose up early that morning, long before the sun. By breakfast time she had already weeded the gardens, brought the day’s rations of water up from the village well, mended a shirt or two, and checked in on a few women in a nearby hut who were pregnant and closing in on their due dates. She wanted to make sure they had enough blankets and food. It was usual fanfare for Hagar, but most people would have said that she worked too hard, even for an Egyptian slave. Even the male slaves would say things like, “You know, Hagar, for all the bending over backwards you do for that mistress of yours, you never get the thanks and appreciation you deserve.” Hagar did have to agree, though she rarely, if ever, complained. She remembered all too well what it was like not so long ago, when Sarai was barren and things were not so easy going.

At the time it seemed like a perfect set-up. Sarai had been trying to get pregnant for years, but quite simply, could not. It was a hard reality for a woman to accept, barrenness. It’s still a hard reality for a woman to accept. But in Sarai’s day *everything* rode on a woman’s ability to bear and birth children, especially male ones. It wasn’t like it is for us here today. Women didn’t become senators or doctors or work in top executive positions. Such were not options for women, let alone dreams. And children didn’t grow up to get college degrees, or even high school diplomas. The economic health and future vitality of a family depended not upon high educational levels or magnanimous pay checks, but upon its ability to farm the land and herd the sheep. Life was work, work was life, and the more people one family had to do the work, the easier life might be. Having and raising children then was not an option for women, but a necessity, and barrenness every woman’s shame.

If all this weren’t pressure enough for Sarai, we consider the promise given by God to her husband, Abram, back in Genesis 12, a promise that Abram will be a great name and nation, and that through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. But what kind of blessing will Abram be? What kind of future will Abram have if he has no heir? And what kind of wife is Sarai if she cannot fulfill her God-ordained purpose in life? Far be it from Sarai to shrug off such responsibility, she does the commonsense thing and calls upon Hagar. After all, who is Hagar?

By name Hagar appears sparsely throughout scripture, getting mentioned only fifteen times in total. A simple reading of those pages on which she does appear suggests that what makes Hagar so memorable has nothing really to do with Hagar at all. Everything we know about what makes Hagar, Hagar, comes from looking not at Hagar, but at the people who surrounded her, for what our text tells us first about Hagar is merely her status in relation to Sarai: “Sarai had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.” Hagar is a woman, she has her own ethnicity, and therefore can claim her own cultural distinctions, but she is not her own person. She is Sarai’s Egyptian maid, and as we shall soon discover, all this means for Sarai is that Hagar is a mere commodity, a no-name prop. We get this from verse 2 when Sarai speaks of obtaining children by Hagar. What Sarai quite literally means here is that Hagar can “build Sarai up.” If Hagar’s womb is built up, Sarai’s reputation, her family’s name, and her future will be built up with it. Unfortunately for Sarai though, she underestimates the effect of pregnancy upon a woman, even a woman like Hagar, and the plan backfires.

You see, in Abram’s day it was everyday practice for a man to have two wives, especially if one of them could not produce a child. Being a surrogate wife though—being a Hagar—was far less prominent than being a Sarai, for Sarai is chosen as a wife; Hagar is only needed as one. If you set this story in today’s world, rather than simply have a child *for* Sarai, Hagar might donate her eggs to Sarai, allowing Sarai to carry her own child, and Sarai would prize Hagar for such generosity. But that’s now. This was then, and Hagar, though given as a wife to Abram, is treated like the pawn she is. Throughout the story it is clear that Hagar possesses no choice and has no voice in becoming a surrogate mother. She is an Egyptian, a foreigner. She is a true outsider to the situation. She is a wife of secondary degree. BUT she is pregnant, and in so being there is no denying that Hagar is a true bona fide woman and mother! Try as Sarai may to put Hagar in her place, in pregnancy Hagar breaks loose, and in this moment all is turned topsy-turvy. She who was to dignify another is dignified herself; she who was to give life to another is full of life herself. The wife of secondary status claims her place among the most blessed of women. The slave disrupts the master’s way of doing things, and the world is filled with new possibilities for justice and grace. But not for long.

For in short order, the one who loses their power always wants it back. And when they themselves can’t do anything to get it, they’ll find someone who can. Just look at what Sarai does to remedy her predicament. Down but not out, she appeals to Abram. Pregnant or not,

Sarai might have thought, Hagar's not above my man Abram. "I gave my slave-girl into your embrace," Sarai tells Abram, "and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt." In other words, Hagar has forgotten who she really is—a servant to Sarai. She's become too much of an equal with Sarai, stepping on Sarai's toes by doing what Sarai herself is supposed to do, but cannot do. Sarai is feeling threatened and wants Abram to set the record straight. And as these things tend to go, Sarai gets exactly what she wants. "Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please," Abram tells her. He is as passive as Sarai is aggressive. And with that Hagar goes from being a wife to once again being just a slave, who is in for a royal beating.

The story tells us only that Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, but put more crudely, Sarai afflicted her, humiliated her. While we don't know exactly what Sarai did to Hagar, we can speculate that Hagar was made to do chores befitting a slave and directly opposed to those befitting a mother. For Sarai it no doubt made her feel good about being Sarai again, but for Hagar, it was treatment too inhumane for even a slave to endure. So she runs for the wilderness.

She knows not what awaits her there, but whatever it is, it can't be worse than what she has left behind. The wilderness is an escape, and that's all that matters to Hagar right now. She is not searching for anything. All hope is lost anyway. Or is it? Little does Hagar know that in the wilderness hope abounds. She is sitting by a spring of water on the way to Shur when a voice speaks to her: "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where you are you going?" It is the first time in a long time that she has heard her own name. Sarai never addressed her by name. But here in the wilderness, alone and destitute, God has found her, and knows her! Not as a maid-servant; not as a substitute mother or wife, but as Hagar she is known! She doesn't know where she is going. She is in the wilderness, wandering aimlessly, searching for purpose, wanting for redemption. Has she found it in this God she does not know, but who knows her?

"Return to your mistress, and submit to her," the voice says. Mmm, I guess not.

I can hear the cries of injustice now, ringing out from all those who presume not only to know the ways of the world, but the ways of God in the world. They shout: Are you crazy God? Do you know what's going on down here? Children are starving, wars are raging, homelessness is rising, my parents are divorcing, my husband is leaving, my skin color isn't changing, my job is tanking, and all you've got to say is return and submit? Return and stick it out? What kind of

God are you who commands bondage over freedom? The kind who promises to set us free from our bondage—that's what kind of God Hagar has, and the kind of God we have.

Don't miss God's message to Hagar, that her suffering will bear not only a child, but a blessing! It is worth noting that the same promise given to Hagar in chapter 16 of the story is the same promise given to Abram back in chapter 12. It is the promise of an offspring so great and many that they cannot be counted. It is, in short, the promise of a future. What kind of future will it be though if the child Hagar is to bear is to be as wild and unruly as God says he will be? A wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and living at odds with all his kin—some future, and some child to have to raise! And yet, in Ishmael Hagar will freedom from her bondage. Consider for a moment: Hagar is to return and submit, but Ishmael will be wild, free, and untamed. If Sarai's hand of oppression is to be against Hagar, Ishmael will spend life waging war against that very hand. As a wild man he may never fit in anywhere. He may not be liked. He may be friendless and unpopular, but in all of these he will be free to act unconstrained by popular opinion. He will be at liberty to spread grace without discrimination, to exercise justice without prejudice.

For Hagar, and for so many of us, the answer to our suffering is not liberation but struggle, but it is struggle with promise and not without end. Cast-off and put down Hagar may have run to get away, but God enters the scene at precisely the moment when exclusion from God's family occurs to show that no one, not even Sarai or Abram, can keep God from welcoming in the likes of Hagar.

What God provides for Hagar is not a way out, but a way through. Girded with the promises of God Hagar knows where she is going. She is going back to where she came from, but she goes as a liberating force, a healing balm in a broken world.

This past Thursday evening about 20 of us gathered around in my office to hear from Baha Sadr and Sarah Antaya. Baha and Sarah work for Dorcas International in Providence, an organization committed to helping refugee families from all around the world find safety and belonging here in Rhode Island. At one point I was sharing with the group how just earlier in the day, while driving my two children to school, I overheard my daughter Lillian telling her younger brother Rowan in the backseat, "Did you know there are people in our family that we've never met? People who are even older than Mom?"

Mind you, their mother is only 33.

“It’s true,” Lillian said with all matter-of-factness, “some of them lived a long time ago and aren’t even alive anymore, but they’re part of our family. And do you want we call them Rowan?”

Rowan did not.

“We call them refugees.”

I chimed in. “I think you mean relatives, sweetheart. They’re called relatives, not refugees.”

“Oh,” she said rather innocently, “I thought relatives and refugees meant the same thing. I guess sometimes we don’t know how to talk about the people we don’t know.”

If only Sarai could have found it in her heart that day to think refugees are relatives, how differently things might have turned out for Hagar. How differently things might turn out today for so many of us, because really, Hagar could be any of us. Are you Hagar? Are you cast-off in a wilderness somewhere? Are you struggling for liberation from something, an addiction, an abusive relationship, that still small voice that says you’re no good, you’ll never make it? Take heart, today you have been found out in the wilderness. Today, by the mercy of Jesus Christ, God has come to find you and to say, you are mine! All of us. Because in Jesus Christ there is no slave or free, no Jew or Gentile, no American or Syrian, no male or female. There’s just love. Are you Hagar?

Or, or do you have a Hagar? Is there someone you wish would return and submit, someone you would put in the corner if you could? We are all Hagar, but remember, God sees you in the wilderness, and calls out to you to say, get up, keep trudging, for you too are my child, and the promise is yours.