

Making a Future in the Wilderness

Gracious God, You are Way and Life in our moments of “no-way,” exhaustion, and discouragement. Be with us in this meditation as we seek to see you at work in our scriptures and in our lives. Amen.

This morning we continue with the story of Abraham and his family. There is much in the story that we modern people find problematic. The ethics of the ancients are not necessary our ethics. Nor of Jesus’ ethics. In the story, we focus on how the family is structured. the assignment to roles within the ancient patriarchal system, and how this connects to modern ethical concerns.

Genesis 21:8-21: The story begins in a household, among a family of promise and privilege. With feasting, they celebrate the maturing of Isaac, the son of Sarah by whom “seed will be proclaimed” for Abraham.

But, we need to back up a bit. Remember, a few years back~ in the story, Sarah had despaired of bearing a child. So she gave her personal slave to her husband, telling him “to go in to my slave; it may be that *I*~ through her shall obtain children.” The slave was to be a surrogate for Sarah’s own body –a surrogate for sex, womb and birth-canal through which **Sarah** might gain status.

As for the enslaved woman, Hagar, her wishes were not consulted. But when she conceived, she began to think and act as though she had the status accorded to a mother.

In ancient culture, *status* for women came through marriage, but *higher* status came through childbearing. The pregnant Hagar~ began to act as if the roles between her and her

mistress Sarah had flipped. **Hagar** began teasing and showing contempt for Sarah for being **unable** to bear a child. However, Sarah, having household power, took revenge through abuse – certainly, mental abuse of tongue lashing and likely physical abuse.

At some point, the pregnant Hagar had had enough of the abuse. What impact~ may that abuse have had? ...Self-hatred, anger, depression, sense of powerlessness, suicidal sadness? ...Mental illness.

The insistent resilient, Hagar, needed to escape. She fled. But~, with promises of a hopeful~ future, an angel of the Lord caught up with her, instructing – even enticing her – to return. Should she have listened? Returned to her abuser? What options did she have? ...Promises were made: She would be freed and her son would father a nation. She trusted the promise~ that in the end, all would be well with her and the child.

The angel gives the child his name. Hagar, in turn, names God who spoke to her – the only person in the bible to name God. ...That God, she felt had~ **truly** seen her in her distress.

On her returning to the household, she may have expected relations to improve. After all, she had a “**use-function**” for Abraham and Sarah. They needed a son. She was providing it. She thought that Abraham would provide protection, stepping in between to resolve the conflict. He did not!

After some years, Sarah herself gave birth to, raised, and weaned her **own** child, Isaac. Sarah names the child who matters to her – Isaac. She does not name the other child or

that child's mother, referring to the mother as "that slave woman," establishing distance, marking social class, and subjugation. She **owned**~ Hagar, as property. Sarah refers to the first-born child as "the son of that slave woman," indicating she and child and his mother had no family relationship with her.

Over time, she took notice of the child of Hagar-the Egyptian-the foreigner – playing with Isaac, noticing the way the two boys play together. Something disturbed her in that.

In the play, power or status differences became evident. There was a "big brother" and "little brother" distinction – the younger looking to the older with wonder and respect, his~ teacher, playmate, and ideal. The older~ directing, teaching, admonishing. They bonded in love and friendship.

The older brother not only received sibling status; he also received esteem through a close relationship with his father Abraham. As Ishmael got older, he and Abraham were father and son, Abraham~ teaching life skills – how to care for the sheep, how to pray, how to string a bow and to hunt. He accompanied his father in the fields and on trips to be with, and to assist, distant relatives. From his father, he learned the traditions of the tribe.

The relationship... between the two sons and between the father and the elder son... does not sit well with Sarah. She is threatened by the relationships. Especially, she is concerned that this child of her **slave**~ might have some claim to the inheritance she intends for her own son, Isaac.

The birthright laws of ancient times declared that regardless of the parent's wishes the eldest son inherited everything... in fact, he became even the *spiritual leader* of the family.

So, given this concern, Sarah commands Abraham to drive out the mother and son. To her, they are outsiders. Intruders sully in her space. Threatening her future. She wants them out of the house!

In casting out the youth, she and Abraham are denying Ishmael access not only to the inheritance but also to basic resources of the household – food, shelter, water, education, support. If cast out, the mother will have no protector, no means, be of **no** value to anyone other than her son.

Callused and spineless, Abraham surrenders to Sarah's command. We wonder ~what could allow him to do this?... Does he not love the youth Ishmael? Is he not at all concerned for the survival of **both** Ishmael and Hagar. Had Hagar only~ been of **use-value** for sexual gratification and the giving of a son? Where is his heart? Is he afraid of his wife – a wife younger and stronger than he? The text says he is “distressed.” But the distress is of little value. He complies.

He sends them away, providing bread and water to last them only for a short time. Did he stop to think what might happen to them? ...Despite his claimed distress and provision of bread and water, he does not **really**~ own the weight of his action. Places them in jeopardy – throwing the survival prospects upon Hagar's shoulder. **She** must carry the weight not only of personal survival but that of another, her son. Troubled in mind and heart, deeply disoriented, she wanders about in circles.

The word for wandering, in Hebrew *ta'ah*, suggests that she does not know where to go or what to do. She is lost and **at~ a loss**. She has been banished to a place where water is scarce and soil does not yield fruit. When the water runs out, the only future she can see is death.

In ultimate despair, Hagar sets her child beneath the shelter of a bush. She removes herself – the distance of a bow-shot. Too far to touch and barely able to see him, she **sits**, crying opposite him, waiting for him to die. ...There~ ...desperate, hopeless, gripped in unbearably pain!

What is it like~ to be in that situation, when things have gotten so dry and parched, so hopeless, so impossible that we feel like we can't bear to watch? We just want to walk away because, watching another suffer, is just too painful!...

Let us think about **others** today who are desperate, vulnerable, suffering. Let's think of those fleeing from homelands because of **eminent** danger, only~ to fall into slavery, prostitution, forced labor.

The 2023 *Global Slavery Index* reports that nearly 50 million women, children, and men are enslaved around the world today. Their slavery has many forms. For millions, especially women and girls, it is prostitution, forced marriage, or other kinds sexual and reproductive exploitation. Others – an estimated 28 million – are forced into labor, **from~** domestic work and agriculture **to~** construction and manufacturing. **Others** are tricked, kidnapped, and/or sold for illegal adoption, forced begging, armed combat, forced crime, and organ harvesting.

Who are those most vulnerable to slavery and trafficking?

They are ...

- Those with less power in a society, especially women and children.
- Those lacking education or job opportunities.
- Those living in poverty and debt.
- Minorities and outsiders who do not speak the language, who face discrimination in the workplace and legal system, and who have limited or no access to financial and medical assistance.
- Migrants who are cut off from their networks of support, who are eager for opportunity, who have limited protections, who do not know the geographical, legal, and social terrain.

Risks are greatest in contexts characterized by crisis, transition, instability, and corruption. Understanding who is at risk can help us to prevent slavery.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael also highlights the needs of those who have escaped conditions of slavery. For them, basic needs – food, clean water, healthcare, shelter, and safety – are paramount. But there is more.

Healing the whole person requires attention to psychological and emotional. Education, skills, and opportunities for meaningful work and livelihood make it possible to reclaim self and build a future. Education in parenting skills can restore trust in self and teach paths to healthy relationship for parents and children alike.

Ishmael's experience highlights childhood traumas of abandonment, abuse, and neglect that can have lasting impact. His story directs us to confront and redress these traumas as well so that all children may flourish.

The scripture story is telling us God steps in to set things right, to change the context and consequences of the wrong being done. Hagar's experience reminds us that no matter how we are treated by others, no matter how uncertain our future may look, no matter how hopeless things may seem, God hears...

What is our response? ...**We are to** lift up those things that we think are *beyond* hope to the one who **IS**~ hope. ...**We are to** be *still* enough to *let* hope touch our eyes...gently... and to follow the finger of God to lifegiving water that we weren't able to see before.

...In our moments of desperation, as we seek to find our way, may God speak to us, tell us to hold on... to hold on tightly, enable us to open our eyes to what we are **not** seeing, or **unable** to see. May we find the water of renewed hope and possibility. This we pray! **Amen!**