

“Hagar and Ishmael”

Genesis 21:8-21

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The story of Abraham and Sarah along with Hagar and Ishmael is one of the most poignant stories in all the Old Testament. Ask most any person who Hagar and Ishmael were and probably the first association he or she might make with the name is with the old cartoon strip “Hagar the Horrible” or perhaps the opening line to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “Call me Ishmael.” But ask any of the hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world who Hagar and her son Ishmael were, they would tell you that they are two of the most central and revered figures of their faith. Today, you can see pilgrims walking around the Kaa’ba- the holiest shrine in all of Islam and which holds the same sacred significance for the Muslim that the Temple Mount has for the Jew. It is an ancient cubic structure in Saudi Arabia housing a sacred black stone and toward which all Muslims must face when they pray. According to Islamic tradition, it was built by Adam and then rebuilt by Abraham when he paid a visit to Ishmael. Every Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage there at least once in his or her lifetime where they walk around it seven times. Near the Kaa’ba is the holy well Zamzam, whose waters miraculously appeared and saved Ishmael’s life. After pilgrims have finished their walk, they trot seven times between two low hills in imitation of the frantic Hagar searching in despair for water for her crying son. Muslims believe that through the line of Ishmael, they are the TRUE heirs to the promise that God made to Abraham.

According to Genesis, Abraham received a promise from God that through his family line he would become a “Father of many nations.” However, as time went on, it became evident that Sarah, his wife, was barren and unable to conceive. In ancient times, barrenness was considered a fate worse than death for children not only carried on the family name, but in an agrarian society such as their own, they were needed to work the family farm as well as provide for their parent’s future retirement. Having resigned herself that she wouldn’t be giving her husband any children and yet still wanting to see God’s promise fulfilled, Sarah suggested that he have sexual relations with her young Egyptian servant girl- Hagar. According to ancient custom, a wife could give her maid to her husband and claim the child as her own. Therefore, believing that life was getting late for them and that God’s promise just might not come to fruition, at least not through her, they take matters into their OWN hand and try to make it come about under their OWN power.

In time, Hagar—Sarah’s personal slave--conceived and gave birth to a baby boy named “Ishmael.” Though not really having any choice in the matter, Hagar still had to have felt honored beyond all dreams that she would have a part in God’s promise even though the child would never be considered her own. However, soon after Ishmael was born, a change started to occur in her relationship to Sarah. After having had to endure the indignity of being subservient to her every command, that power relationship had suddenly taken a turn with her now becoming the mother of Abraham’s first-born. Furthermore, she had the advantage of being fertile and able to produce children while Sarah was barren and could not. Thus, a sense of contempt and even superiority towards her mistress slowly began to take hold in her heart.

Despite not believing God and feeling like they had to help the miracle along, God remained faithful to his word and Sarah finally DID become pregnant. In time, she gave birth to a son of her OWN who was named Isaac. One day, while Sarah was observing Ishmael playing with Isaac, her jealousy at the thought of Isaac quite possibly having to share God's promise with Ishmael became too much and she demanded of her husband that he "cast out this slave woman with her son." This request obviously cut Abraham to the heart because Ishmael was his son TOO and he loved HIM every bit as much as he did Isaac. But God spoke to him and told him to do as Sarah asked for he would STILL fulfill his promise through the line of Isaac, but God would care for Ishmael and make a great lineage through him for he was Abraham's son as well. And so Abraham got up early, gave Hagar some provisions, and then sent the two of them to wander out into the desert wilderness by themselves. He had to have been aware that by doing so, he was probably sending them both out to their deaths.

As their provisions waned, the situation for the two grew dire. When the water Abraham had given them was finally gone, she placed her son under a bush and then walked just out of earshot so she wouldn't have to listen to the boy's plaintive cries. She then lay down, accepting the inevitability of death for both her and her son. However, what Hagar could no longer do—that is, listen to the weakening cries of her only son Ishmael, God COULD. Our text says, "AND GOD HEARD THE VOICE OF THE LAD; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation.'" When Hagar opened her eyes, she saw before her a well and rushing over to fill the skin with water, she went and revived her son with a drink. It goes on to say that God found favor with Ishmael, that he lived in the desert and eventually became an expert hunter. In time, his mother would find a wife for him from Egypt so that he could begin his OWN family line.

If there is one lesson we may take away from this story, it is that, like Ishmael, God hears OUR cries when WE are in need or in trouble. Earlier, in Genesis 16, Hagar flees into the desert to escape the wrath of Sarah for the FIRST time. She is then pregnant with Ishmael and while stopping at a spring to refresh herself, God encounters her and gives her a promise that the child within her will ALSO be the father of a great people. Then God names the child-to-be "Ishmael," meaning "God hears," because in her need, he had heard her affliction. In turn, Hagar named Yahweh "the God who sees me," and in a delightful play on words exclaims, "I have seen the One who sees me." Then God instructs Hagar to return to Sarah, her mistress, and submit to her.

The name that God had given her son meaning "God hears" was meant to reaffirm that God hears the cries of the needy and oppressed EVERYWHERE, in THIS case, the cries of Hagar and Ishmael. Again and again, the scriptures testify to a God who "hears," and is sure to respond. When Cain slew his brother Abel out of jealousy, God confronts Cain who says, "What have you done? THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD IS CRYING TO ME FROM THE GROUND!" When Rachel, Jacob's TRUE love, proves to be barren and unable to bear him a child, she believes God is judging her. After watching Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah give Jacob the children she couldn't, she cries out to God for mercy and the scriptures tell us, "THEN GOD HEARD RACHEL AND HEARKENED TO HER AND OPENED HER WOMB. She conceived and bore a son, and said, 'God has taken away my reproach'; and she called his name Joseph..." Years later, when the Hebrew children have become slaves in Egypt, God encounters Moses in the burning bush and tells him, "I have seen the affliction of my people who

are in Egypt, AND I HAVE HEARD THEIR CRY because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." And now, in our lesson for this morning, we are told that God heard what Hagar couldn't bring herself to hear any longer- the painful cries of her only son as death was about to overcome them. The Bible is clear that God does not abandon us to the wilderness to die but in the same way that he provided refreshment for them—water being a sign of hope in the midst of complete and utter despair—so does he promise to ever provide for US when WE OURSELVES are desperate. It may not always be according to OUR timetable or in the manner WE would like, but his help will come all the same.

Our God hears the cry of the outcast, the victim, the one who has been excluded as he has ALWAYS had a special care for those who were small or weak or inconsequential. We can only shake our heads with wonder when we see those whom God has chosen throughout time whether it is the YOUNGEST CHILD as was the case with David, a young shepherd boy, or a POWERLESS WIDOW as with Ruth the Moabite, or the SMALLEST ARMY such as with Gideon at Jericho, or an UNIMPORTANT CITY like Bethlehem in Judea, or even a YOUNG GIRL FROM THE BACKWATERS OF GALILEE as Mary, the mother of our Lord. As Paul wrote in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Bruce Feiler is the author of a number of bestsellers on religion and is a frequent contributor to most of the major news networks. A couple of years ago, he wrote a book entitled *Abraham* in which he searched for the meaning behind the great patriarch and the role he plays in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He says in it that each of these great religions tries to elbow the others aside in order to appropriate Abraham--the Father of many nations--for itself. Each wants to seize the blessings of God's covenant and see itself as the great mediator of God's truth to the rest of the world even though Abraham lived well over a thousand years before any of these religions were ever started. He says this has been going on for the past 2500 years and it goes to the root of the conflict in the Middle East that CONTINUES TO THIS VERY DAY.

Many Jews have argued that it is really the story of ISRAEL HERSELF. Hagar is a slave, just as the children of Israel later became slaves under Pharaoh. As Israel ran away from bondage in Egypt, so does Hagar from the cruelty of Sarah earlier in chapter 16. As Moses met God in the wilderness, so does Hagar meet God there, and as God promises Abraham that Israel will become a great nation, so does God tell Hagar that Ishmael will ALSO be a great nation. And so it is not difficult to imagine Hagar's story as Israel's OWN biography.

At its most basic level, the story of Hagar is that of an African slave girl- a tale that involves slavery, poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, domestic violence, homelessness, and single-parenting. For this reason, many Muslims ALSO identify with this story, seeing it as a parable of their OWN existence. When I was a pastor in Syracuse, NY, the leaders of the Palestinian Christians in upstate New York were members of my church- all of them professionals of whom most were either doctors or professors. I spent hours at their homes listening to them talk politics, especially the political situation in Israel and the Middle East. They even purchased for me a subscription to *The Middle Eastern Report*, an independent

magazine that provides news and perspectives on the Middle East not available from mainstream news sources. It helped me to see life in that part of the world from the underside of society which I had never understood before. I learned that since 1947--the year the U.N. created the state of Israel--Palestinians have had their land confiscated, their national identity denigrated, and they are forced to live under Israeli military occupation. They have no political power, cannot serve in the military, and though they often work in Israeli cities, are barred from living there. They can be held without trial for security offenses and even deported without any civil protection. When I was in Israel some years back, our guide--an Israeli named Doran--constantly referred to the Arabs as dogs and pigs, reflecting the general attitude of many Jews towards their Palestinian neighbors. And so they could interpret their own existence in light of Hagar's persecuted history as well.

But if we take ANOTHER look at the story, we might even feel that it is no less a drama about our OWN lives, that Hagar is in a sense a portrait of OURSELVES. The truth is that there's really NOBODY in the story who comes off looking very good for each of the characters appears as either jealous or vengeful of the others. But you also notice that each of their lives is full of GREAT SUFFERING too, whether it is Sarah for her barrenness or Hagar for her years of servitude and then expulsion or even Abraham for having to choose which child he loves more. Then you have Ishmael and Isaac who are merely pawns in the story and for no fault of their own. And not least, you even find yourself having to question the role of GOD in it. Yes, God ultimately saves and blesses Hagar and Ishmael but it is ALSO God who orders her to return and submit to Sarah's hatred and mistreatment in Genesis 16, and it is God who sanctions the plan to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

For us Christians, however, we need to remember that Jesus looked a whole lot more like Hagar than he did Abraham. Like this poor, persecuted servant girl, he too was at the center of God's covenant for like her, he was a person of no account who became a slave to the rest of us; and like her, he suffered and was cast out, experiencing rejection not just by men and women but even by God himself. Yet despite it all, Christ never stopped trying to RECONCILE the world to God, drawing ALL persons to himself while never once refusing ANYONE to come near. He loved them whether they were lepers or prostitutes, the demon-possessed or a sinful Samaritan woman, welcoming them with open arms. Jesus loved them because he knew that the day was soon near when HE would be just as despised and rejected as they were. Upon that cross, Jesus became a leper, a prostitute, a transexual, an AIDS sufferer, an outcast- rejected and despised every bit as HAGAR HERSELF was.

I end by saying that this is not the FIRST time I have preached on Ishmael- THAT actually occurred over a decade ago at my church in Indiana when I was preaching on the theological roots of what has become an enduring conflict between Jews and Palestinians such as we continue to see TODAY. At the conclusion of the service that morning, I pronounced the benediction and immediately headed towards the back of the sanctuary to greet the congregation as they were leaving. While shaking hands with people, I encountered an older couple visiting the church for the first time. I inquired what their names were and how they ended up there that morning. The man said, "My name is Ishmael and this is my wife, Mary Jo." Naturally, I thought he was kidding as it isn't among the more common names one often hears. But he corrected me and said, "No, Pastor Dave, my name is REALLY Ishmael." I asked if they had come that morning because he had heard I was preaching on the BIBLICAL Ishmael and he wanted to hear more about this character he had been named after. "No," he replied, he and Mary Jo were driving past the church when something spoke to him to turn around and attend that morning's service; THAT'S how they came. I was

incredulous and inquired whether he felt it was the Holy Spirit who had spoken to them in their car and if he felt God had wanted him to learn something that morning. He said, "I DO and Mary Jo and I intend to return again NEXT Sunday."

Well, true to his word, Ish and Mary Jo returned the FOLLOWING Sunday and every Sunday AFTERWARDS. Eventually they joined our church and in time Ish became one of our finest elders. Ours was the first church they had ever joined although he had been quite involved with the Masons and even served as the head of the order in the state of Indiana. But not even the MASONS could fill the spiritual void that could only be filled by God's Spirit and the love of his church. It wasn't long before Rose and I were exchanging dinners while Ish and I became weekly golf partners- I came to love him like a brother although he had over fifteen years on me. I can never forget how facing retirement, I announced to Session one evening that I was leaving the church and how he broke down in tears over it. Even after my wife and I purchased our home in Oakmont, he and Mary Jo made the eight-hour trip from Indiana to spend a few days with us.

But Ish did more than share a name with the BIBLICAL Ishmael, he recognized in that figure how more importantly, he was a SPIRITUAL Ishmael in life. When Hagar gave her child that name meaning "God hears," it was because in her desperate need as an outcast, God had seen her affliction and heard her plea and, as a result, she addressed Yahweh as "the God who sees me!" Well, not only did God see this MODERN-DAY Ishmael and speak to him to turn his car around and attend our service that morning, but God NEVER STOPPED speaking to him and led both him and Mary Jo to eventually align their lives with us where he discovered NEW LIFE through a multitude of rich relationships within our congregation. To both he and Mary Joe, we became to them a second family as well as they to US- what the church is in fact INTENDED to be.

But then Covid broke out and Ish would become one of its earliest victims. Deathly sick with the illness, I received a phone call at four o'clock one morning from him and Mary Jo while he lay dying in intensive care- you know that when the phone rings THAT early in the morning, the news cannot be good. With barely a whisper, he said that before he died, he had to hear once again the voice of his pastor whom he had loved as much as anyone in his life. With tears in my eyes, I spoke very slowly but deliberately, letting him know what he and Mary Jo had come to mean to us and how much we loved THEM both in turn. I concluded our brief conversation with a short prayer, knowing it would probably be the last time we would ever talk; Ish subsequently died the following day.

Although I was no longer their pastor and not able to attend his funeral back in Indiana, Mary Jo asked if I would write something short to share and I was more than happy to do so- in fact, my words took the place of the eulogy. In my remarks, I spoke of how there are no coincidences in life, that the Holy Spirit was instrumental in bringing us together in the FIRST place. It had to have been the Holy Spirit who directed him and Mary Jo to turn their car around and attend our service that Sunday, a service in which I was speaking about Ishmael--his namesake--that very morning. It was also the Holy Spirit that helped forge such a deep and beautiful friendship between us and for someone who had never been much of a churchgoer, our fellowship would fill such a deep spiritual need in their lives. As in the case of Hagar and Ishmael, God had seen their need and he answered it in the person of Jesus Christ who, present in and through his church, offered such fulfillment.

My friends, I assure you that if you pay close attention to the drama in this story, you TOO may hear the voice of one saying, "What troubles YOU? FEAR NOT for God has heard YOUR cries wherever you are." It is the voice of Jesus, our Lord, whose words seek US from

out of the midst of our OWN wilderness wanderings to dry OUR tears, to revive OUR hopes, and to restore OUR joy. To the rest of the world, we may appear much too obscure, much too insignificant to bother about, but to Christ--who knows us far better than we know ourselves--we become the most important persons in all the world.

Furthermore, may we remember how our God is foremost a God of love, a God of mercy, a God of healing and wholeness and reconciliation. As such, Christ has given us a mission and a message for the Hagars and Ishmaels among US, and that is to welcome them so that they are outcasts no more. As Jesus, who had NOWHERE to lay his head, loved us and gave US a home, so are we commanded to love those whom our own culture would perhaps fear and despise. The church is called to be a haven and home for the lonely and the lost, for rejects and castaways and NOTHING MORE will testify to the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives than the level of love and acceptance we are able to show towards them. Let us pray...

*Merciful God, you made all the people of the world in your own image and placed before us the pathway of salvation. And though there has never been perfect agreement as to HOW and through WHOM that salvation is achieved; we DO know that there we share much more in common than that which divides us. Please look with compassion on the whole human family. Take away the arrogance, divisions and hatreds which have badly infected our hearts. Break down the walls that separate us. Reunite us in bonds of love. Work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth, that, in your good time, all nations and races may jointly serve you in justice, peace and harmony. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*