

## CONSIDERING HAGAR

### Genesis 1:26-31

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on June 25, 2017, the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."*

#### **Focus Texts**

##### **Genesis 16:1-16**

*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.*

##### **Genesis 21:8-21**

*The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 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.' 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; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after 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, she cast 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; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

*Prayer: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.*

## I.

Aretha Franklin celebrated her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday earlier this year. She was born in Memphis and learned to sing in her minister-father's church in Detroit. She earned the title "The Queen of Soul" after reaching commercial success with Atlantic Records in 1967, when she recorded "You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman," "Think," and "Respect."

Many of us are familiar with the latter song:

What you want  
Baby, I got it...  
All I'm askin'  
Is for a little respect when you get home (just a little bit)...  
R-E-S-P-E-C-T  
Find out what it means to me  
R-E-S-P-E-C-T...  
I got to have (just a little bit)  
A little respect (just a little bit).<sup>1</sup>

When I heard this song again a few weeks ago, it struck me as an appropriate theme for the complicated interactions between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and the God who brings to them their respective sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

When we first read the story, which is spread across Chapters 16 and 21 of Genesis, the book in which we are spending time this summer and fall, it is hard to garner much respect for any of the adults in the story, for the flaws of each are on full display.

In Chapter 16,

- Abraham and Sarah<sup>2</sup> are ten years beyond the time God has promised them a child, an essential component of the promise of land, descendants, and blessing God has made them as patriarch and matriarch of the people of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Respect," Written by Otis Redding; Copyright © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group.

<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 16, the names are Abram and Sarai. Their names are changes to Abraham and Sarah in 17:5 and 15, respectively. For ease's sake, I will simply refer to them as Abraham and Sarah in this sermon.

<sup>3</sup> This original promise occurs in Genesis 12:1-4.

- Sarah blames herself and God for her infertility, a not uncommon tendency (I am told) among women seeking to conceive but having difficulty doing so, Yet Sarah's self-blame overlooks the fact that Abraham's eighty-five years may have something to do with the difficulty conceiving.
- To ensure that God's promise will in fact be fulfilled, Sarah takes matters into her own hand and says to Abraham: "Go into my slave-girl...that I shall obtain children by her."
- Abraham "listens to the voice" of Sarah, takes Hagar the Egyptian slave "as wife."
- When Hagar's pregnancy test comes back positive, Hagar "looks with contempt on her mistress."
- Sarah then glares at Abraham: "May the wrong done to me be on you!"
- Abraham responds: "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please."
- Just as we know few details of what Otto Wormbier suffered at the hands of the North Koreans, the narrator of Genesis shields us from the details of Hagar's mistreatment by Sarah, other than to say that the mistreatment is sufficiently harsh that Hagar runs away.
- An angel of the Lord finds Hagar, tells her to go back and submit to her mistress, and promises that her offspring will be numerous beyond counting.
- Hagar returns, gives birth to a son, and Abraham names him Ishmael.

After ensuing events in Genesis, the narrator returns to this difficult story in Chapter 21.<sup>4</sup>

- Sarah has finally become pregnant and gives birth to Isaac.
- Isaac and Ishmael grow up in the same household.
- One day Sarah sees the two boys playing together. She cannot bear even the thought that Ishmael may receive part of the inheritance of land, descendants, and blessing God has promised her son Isaac. So she orders Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out of the household.
- Unlike before, this time the narrator gives us a glimpse at Abraham's feelings. He is "distressed" on account of his son Ishmael. He takes the matter to God. God tells him to do whatever Sarah says to do, for, God adds, Sarah is correct in claiming that it is through Isaac that the promise will be fulfilled. But God adds: "I will make a nation of Ishmael also, for he is your offspring as well."
- So the next morning, Abraham arises before sunrise, takes bread and water, gives it to Hagar, puts Ishmael on Hagar's shoulder, and sends them both into the wilderness.
- When Hagar runs out of food and water, she casts Ishmael under a bush, finds a spot about the distance of a bowshot, sits down and prays: "Do not let me look upon the death of the child." She then lifts her voice and weeps.

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<sup>4</sup>There are difficulties in chronology with the merger of these two stories. In Genesis 12:4, Abraham is 75 years old at the time he and Sarah are called; in 16:3, it is ten years later when Ishmael is born, so Abraham is 85; in 21:5, Abraham is 100 years old when Isaac is born. Yet in 21:14, when Hagar is cast into the wilderness, Abraham puts Ishmael "on her shoulder" and then leaves him "under one of the bushes" to die, both implying that Ishmael is an infant, rather than a fifteen year old teenager.

- God hears Ishmael weep as well. God calls out to Hagar from heaven: “Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy, hold him fast with your hand, and I will make a great nation of him.” God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees an entire well of water. She gives Ishmael a drink.
- The narrator then tells us that God is with the boy, that Ishmael grows up, lives in the wilderness, marries an Egyptian woman, and becomes the father of Arab peoples.

It is through Ishmael – Hagar’s son – that the religion of Islam will later trace its lineage to Abraham, a lineage Jews and Christians trace through Isaac.

## II.

As we listen to Aretha Franklin, it is hard to have a great deal of R-E-S-P-E-C-T for any of these adult characters.

- While we can sympathize with Abraham and Sarah for the decade that has passed since God promised them a child, it is hard to respect Sarah when she takes matters into her own hand, gives Hagar to her husband, then twice casts Hagar out, the second time with her child.
- While we can sympathize with Abraham for wanting both an heir and the promise of God to be fulfilled, it is hard to watch him standby as Sarah mistreats Hagar and then himself cast Hagar and Ishmael into the hunger and thirst of the wilderness.
- While we have great sympathy for the horrific condition of enslavement in which Hagar lives, and for the way she is forced to have a child by Abraham, we are not sure that dancing on the grave of Sarah’s infertility is an appropriate response to her own pregnancy, even though it is understandable.
- And when we are theologically and spiritually honest, many of us struggle to maintain our respect for God who seems to work within a situation in which slavery exists while not himself condemning it, who sends an angel to order Hagar to submit back into that system, and who instructs Abraham to accede to Sarah’s harsh treatment of Hagar rather than to follow his more tender feelings.
- It can even become hard for us to maintain respect for the Bible as Holy Scripture when such a dark tale of abuse, mistreatment, and expulsion is told at such length, particularly when the main actors are God’s chosen leaders.

There seems to be little worth of R-E-S-P-E-C-T in this story.

## III.

But if we think further about the story – and give particular consideration to Hagar – we may find some material we can respect. Here goes:

- It is significant – on a personal level – that in a book fifty chapters long whose subject is the origin of the human race two entire chapters are devoted to the story of a mistreated female slave, who ultimately receives the attention and care of God.
- Hagar is named from the outset, something that does not always happen to mistreated outsiders in Biblical narrative.

- When Hagar “looks with contempt on her mistress,” she may as much as anything else be lifting a cry of protest against the system which forces her to bear a child to man not of her own choosing, and her opposition is noticed, reported, and given voice by the narrator.
- While an angel of God initially orders Hagar to return to her mistress, that order comes after God has sent the angel to “find” Hagar and is accompanied by a promise that Hagar will become the matriarch of a nation so large that it cannot be counted.
- It is significant that after this visit from the angel, Hagar actually names God – “El-roi” – which means “God sees,” because contrary to the experience and belief of many others in her day, Hagar is privileged to see God and not die, but lives.
- Later, when Hagar is expelled from the household with her son Ishmael, it is significant that God hears the voice of her son, calls to Hagar from heaven, assures her not to be afraid, calls her to lift her son and hold him fast, promises to make of him a great nation, opens her eyes, allows her to see a well of the water, enabling her to give her son a drink and preserve his life.
- On an even broader level, it is significant that within the book that presents to the world the history and formation of the people of Israel – those who descend from Abraham and Sarah through Isaac – there is included a positive depiction and presentation of the origins of the Arab people – those who descend from Abraham and Hagar through Ishmael. While the potential for conflict between these two nations is not papered over but made explicit,<sup>5</sup> it is nonetheless clear from the narrative that Isaac and Ishmael, Israeli and Arab, ultimately Jew, Christian and Muslim, are all children of Abraham, children of the same God, residents of the same small corner of God’s vast universe.

#### IV.

Finally, while there is plenty not to like about Abraham and Sarah in this part of their story, these are two people, advanced in age, wrestling with a seemingly impossible promise from a God who has chosen them, having never before chosen any mortals to lead in the formation of God’s people.<sup>6</sup>

- Abraham and Sarah don’t have role models to which to turn.
- They don’t have mentors.
- Neither the Law has been given nor prophets or sages empowered to speak.
- There is no weekend MBA on how to be mother and father of faith; no Ph.D. program in how to be a chosen people.

Yet Abraham and Sarah take their flawed little selves and their flawed faith in God and they move forward; and God gives them a fair amount of freedom, a fair amount of opportunity to mess up, an opportunity they often, like us, take.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 16:11-12 “...with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him...”

<sup>6</sup> One way to read Genesis 1-11 is as literature which explains our origins and seeks to answer questions concerning why things are the way they are. This literature is written much less “history-like” than the literature that begins with the call of Abraham and Sarah. Thus, it could even be said that

But in the end the promise God has chosen them to receive and bear gets fulfilled in and through them. And so when they die, they die as they lived, blessed.<sup>7</sup>

## V.

My friends, none of the people in this book we call the Bible is without sin – except for one<sup>8</sup> – and the book itself presents us with certain ethical dilemmas and at times violent, morally reprehensible, and stomach-turning behavior on the part of the people of God.

But over the years of reading and studying and teaching from this book, I find myself having entered the lives of its characters and they in turn having entered my life, to where both they and this book in which they appear seem so profoundly human (with all the blessing and bane that being human involves) that both the characters and the book have earned from me more than “just a little bit” of R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

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<sup>7</sup> The death of Sarah occurs in Genesis 23 and the death of Abraham in Genesis 25:7-11.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 4:15.