



Sarah & Hagar



A Sermon By
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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-06-17-AAA.mp3>.

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June 25, 2018

Genesis 21:8-19
Psalm 34:1-8, 17-19

Galatians 4:22-24a
Matthew 10:24-3

Our second reading this morning from Galatians states, “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants” (Gal. 4:22-24a). These women that Paul refers to in his letter are the same women in our first reading from Genesis, Sarah and Hagar. They are the focus of my sermon this morning, the first in our summer preaching series on characters of the bible.

Sarah and Hagar’s stories are intimately interwoven. In order to understand the one, you must know the story of the other as well. All too often however, our tradition focuses on Sarah’s story to the exclusion of Hagar’s. This is because Christianity and Judaism trace our religious heritage through Sarah and Abraham, while our Muslim brothers and sisters trace their heritage through Hagar and Abraham. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are known as the Abrahamic traditions because each link their origins to Abraham, but as Paul states in his letter, the connections come from two different women – Sarah and Hagar – who each bore Abraham sons.

Sarah and Hagar’s stories are as fascinating as they are tangled. We learn about both women in Genesis 12-21. Sarah is the first matriarch of the Bible. She is married to Abraham. And though she is believed to be barren, God assured Sarah that she would bear children. In that time period, status, economic security, lineage, and life itself depended on the ability to have children. Sarah feared she would never conceive, and so despite God’s promise, she took matters into her own hands. Enter Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian handmaid. Sarah gave her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a temporary wife to produce an heir. Although to modern ears this may seem strange and unjust, it was a common practice during the time. We see further examples of this practice in other biblical stories.

Hagar is given to Abraham, and we don’t know how she felt about this because the text doesn’t tell us, but she is given nonetheless. Hagar becomes pregnant and problems develop between the two women that lead to Sarah’s abuse of Hagar. Hagar flees to the desert. While she is in the wilderness, a messenger of God finds her and tells her to go back to Sarah, because God intends to make a numerous people from her son, whom she is to name Ishmael, which in Hebrew means, “God Hears.” Hagar then names God, *‘el ro’i*, which in Hebrew means, “God who sees me.” Hagar is the first person – not the first woman, but the first person – in the Bible who is visited by a divine messenger. She is also the only biblical character who dares to name God. And she listened to God. She returned to Sarah and Abraham.

Meanwhile, in Sarah’s story, true to God’s promise, Sarah bears Abraham a son, and he is named Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar’s sons, grow up together. Until, in our first reading from Genesis, Sarah demands that Ishmael and Hagar be cast out of the family. Abraham does what Sarah wants and turns Hagar and Ishmael out with few rations. Hagar despairs and fears that she and her son will die. God once again visits Hagar in the wilderness and assures her of God’s plans for her and her son. A water source is revealed, saving the pair.

Both Hagar’s son Ishmael and Sarah’s son Isaac, grow into manhood, marry and have children of their own. Isaac’s descendants worship God as YHWH. Ishmael’s descendants worship God as Allah. And so, both Sarah and Hagar are remembered as matriarchs of great faiths. As Paul puts it, they represent two covenants. That is what they’re remembered for.

Sarah and Hagar's stories raise a lot of questions for me, and maybe for you too – questions about privilege, abuse, gender, class, status and nationality. Posterity holds both women in high regard, but theirs is a sordid and complex history. Their story is not clean-cut. It's not neat and tidy. They can't easily be defined as matriarchs, wrapped up with a bow and filed away in annals of church history. Their story is messy. It's one of human fragility. Sarah and Hagar's relationship exemplifies how we can mistreat one another, using one another for selfish gain, carelessly.

But Sarah and Hagar's story also contains redemption. God is present in the lives of these two women, actively appearing throughout their lives and guiding them. During the course of the convoluted mess and tangled chaos of their lives, God is present. When they hurt each other, when they fail to love as God loves, God is still present. God promises Sarah the deepest desire of her heart. God saves Hagar in the wilderness and covenants with her, promising to make a great nation of her son, Ishmael. Through the twists and turns of their story, God is present, offering relationship and love when all seems lost.

This is especially true in Hagar's story. Hagar and Ishmael are not among the chosen line of successors on which most of the Old Testament focuses, and yet they are important reminders that God's care and presence does not belong exclusively to one group over another. God's mercy and compassion cannot be limited to human standards of who is worthy and who is not. Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman, sees God not once, but twice. She even names God! God sees Hagar. God hears Ishmael. Their story reminds us that God will not forsake the abandoned and outcast. God cares deeply for the marginalized, the oppressed.

Hagar and Ishmael's story sounds hauntingly familiar to stories we have heard in the news recently. Stories of families wandering in the wilderness just beyond our southern borders. Families with mothers who fear for the lives of their children. Mothers and children who should be cared for because of the abuse life has dealt them. Hagar's story reminds us that God sees and hears their cries even if and when other people ignore them.

Life is messy, both now in the 21st century and thousands of years ago in the time of the biblical matriarchs and patriarchs. Nothing is neat and tidy about our lives or about theirs. That is a theme that will come up time and again over the course of our summer preaching series. The life and times of biblical characters was colorful, often times surpassing that of our own lives. But the one constant throughout it all is God's faithful presence.

Hagar named God, "God who sees me." God sees. God hears. God knows. And God never abandons us. No matter what we do. No matter what we experience. No matter what may come. God is present in our lives. God is present in our stories, promising relationship, offering hope, and buoying us with God's presence. May Sarah and Hagar's stories inspire you to reflect on God's abiding presence in the broken places, the healthy places, and all the in-between spaces of your life. Amen.