

June 22, 2008

Title: What about the Second Wife?

Text: Genesis 21:8-21

The Big Idea: God is sensitive to the plight of the outcast... God sees, hears, and helps.

Introduction

Let me begin by saying that this is a rather convoluted story. It is intricate and involved. To convolve something is to roll it together into a coil... to create a writhing, twisted mass. Perhaps an image we can wrap our minds around is that of the twining of the vines of plants growing together.

Our story is about a woman named Hagar. Her circumstances are complicated... Was she a slave / servant / handmaiden to Abraham's wife, Sarah? And / or was she a wife to Abraham? It is a legitimate question. The long history of slavery in our own country resulted in the births of children by slave women fathered by their masters. One such master / slave relationship is that of the storied Thomas Jefferson and his alleged slave mistress, Sally Hemings.

As the story of Abraham unfolds in the book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation in Genesis 12. Years later, when Abraham was concerned that he would die without an heir meaning, all that was his would pass on to his servant Eliezer, God reaffirmed his promise, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own to inherit everything I am giving you..." Genesis 15:4-7

A few weeks ago I misplaced my debit card so Bonnie and I decided the better part of wisdom was to cancel the card... we did. The next morning I found the card slipped under the door of my study. It was inconvenient but a new card was issued in about a week.

Meanwhile, I had an online transaction set up for an automatic payment from the original, now cancelled card. This week I received an e-mail from the online service under the heading, "Houston, we have a problem" which went on to explain that the account numbers they were submitting no longer worked.

Abraham and Sarah had a problem but Sarah, Abraham's wife, was a problem solver. God made Abraham a promise and in that she was incapable of bearing a child, she thought it would be helpful to offer a workable solution.

Genesis 16:3 states, “Sarah, Abraham’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant, and gave her to Abraham as a wife.”

Hagar was not a surrogate mother in this case... she was not to have a baby that would then be raised by Abraham and Sarah as their own. Sarah’s intention was that Abraham father an heir through Hagar, who is described as a wife. In Genesis 21:11, God spoke to Abraham referring to Hagar as his “servant wife.”

The recent interest stirred by a polygamist sect in Eldorado, Texas and sheriff’s surveillance of similar sects in Delta and Montezuma Counties here in Colorado, have raised significant concern for the well-being of children being raised in a polygamist environment. Specifically there is legitimate concern regarding the arranged marriages of underage young women to older men. Though a quite different set of circumstances, this is a story about a polygamist marriage in the bible that raises the issue of the care and well-being of a second-wife and her son. Does God care about her and her son?

We pick up the story in progress in Genesis 16 where we are reminded:

1. If you move ahead of God, you will likely make a big mess!

“So Abraham slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant . When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress Sarah with contempt.” Genesis 16:4

There is an old idiom that states, “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” In other words, it is really hard to take something that is ugly and coarse and transform it into something delicate and beautiful. If something is not good to begin with, it is really hard to make something good of it.

What Abraham had on his hands was a sow’s ear of their own making. The offering of Hagar as a wife and Abraham’s taking of Hagar as his wife was not a good beginning of a healthy family. It was the beginning of what turned out to be the making of a family as dysfunctional as dysfunctional gets.

In verses 5-6, we see the impact this bad decision had on their family.

“Sarah said to Abraham, ‘It’s your fault! Now this servant of mine is pregnant, and she despises me., though I myself gave her the privilege of sleeping with you. The Lord will make you pay for doing this to me!’ Abraham replied, ‘Since she is your servant, you may deal with her as you see fit.’ So Sarah treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away.” Genesis 16:6

This is the way the incident unfolds:

- 1. Sarah blamed her husband for the mess.**
- 2. Sarah learned that “no good deed goes unpunished.”**
- 3. Sarah expressed her hope that God would make Abram “pay.”**
- 4. Abraham wimped out.**
- 5. Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that she ran away.**

So much for the happy little family with one wife haughty and the other harsh. I suspect Abraham was the originator of the famous Laurel and Hardy line, “Well, this is another fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”

So while Abraham is skulking about trying to stay clean of his first wife, who is still on the war path, his second wife, Hagar, has run away. The once haughty handmaiden is now the harassed servant wife who has had enough.

We have gotten a glimpse into the characters Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Now another character enters the story.

“The angel of the Lord found Hagar beside a desert spring along the road to Shur. And the angel said to her, ‘Hagar, Sarah’s servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?’ ‘I am running away from my mistress,’ she replied.” Genesis 16:7-8

In the verses that follow the angel of the Lord instructs Hagar to return to her mistress and to submit to her authority. Then God gave Hagar a promise similar to that given to Abraham, “I will give you more descendants than you can count. You will give birth to a son and you will name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard about your misery.” Genesis 16:9-12

That experience taught Hagar something about the character God and God’s character.

2. God sees the plight of the marginalized person.

“Thereafter, Hagar referred to the Lord who had spoken to her, as ‘the God who sees me, for I have seen the One who sees me!’ So Hagar gave Abraham a son, and Abraham named him Ishmael.” Genesis 16:13-15

When Jesus cited his reason for coming he quoted a variation of Isaiah 61 in which he referenced the poor, brokenhearted, captives and prisoners, and those who mourn. Last week, when I spoke of the references to justice in scripture, I noted that almost always it was in conjunction with one of the following words: widow, fatherless, orphans, poor, hungry,

alien/stranger, needy, weak, and oppressed. When Jesus spoke of the judgment that will follow the Second Coming and the separation of the sheep and the goats, he said those who would inherit the Kingdom were those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoners. Matthew 25:31-46

God cares about people in the margins. People who are marginalized are people who have been relegated to the margins of society... they occupy the borderlands. They are people who exist outside of the mainstream. They are often kept “out of sight, and out of mind.”

A class of 5th graders was lined up at the cafeteria line of their Christian school for lunch. At the head of the line was a large dish piled high with shiny red apples. The “lunch lady,” ever diligent, had made a note: “Take only one, God is watching.” At the other end of the serving line was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies where a clever boy had left his own note, “Take all you want, God is watching the apples.” (PreachingToday.com, Pastor Tim’s Clean Laugh List, submitted by Mark Moring)

God may have his eyes on the apples, but he also has his eyes on the cookies. God sees the marginalized person and God cares for those we prefer be out of sight, and out of mind. In fact the bible says, “The angel of the Lord found Hagar...” Genesis 16:7 The inference is that God was looking for her. Hagar was so impressed that she named God, “Thereafter, Hagar referred to the Lord as ‘the God who sees me.’”

What do we make of this kind of God who looks for the marginalized in our society? We can begin to see. Perhaps as God softens our hearts, we will begin to look for those on the fringes who do not count, who do not matter.

When I read Newsweek this week I was fascinated by the *Turning Point* feature written by Danielle Steel. Danielle Steel is, according to wikipedia, not only an American Romantic Novelist, but also currently the best selling fiction writer alive today.

In *Turning Point* she wrote about how the suicide death of her 19 year - old son was a turning point in her life. She said that in her devastation, she went to church praying about who she might help who was more miserable than she. The message that came to her was to help the homeless. It was not a message she wished to hear... she was frightened of them. But she knew that her son had a special compassion for the homeless, so she embarked on what she thought would be a one-time mission that has become a life, labor of love.

For the last ten years she and her 11-member Yo! Angel! team have sought out the most marginalized of the marginalized... those who are at the bottom who are too desperate, too disoriented, or too physically or emotionally ill to seek help.

She said, "We drive around late into the night, with vanloads of supplies looking for clients... [they can't come in] so we go to them. We find them in doorways, cardboard boxes, dumpsters, and along railroad tracks where they sleep."

She went on to say, "It's easy to say, 'they should clean up and get a job.'" Then she went on to ask, "When is the last time you hired a homeless person, or even stopped to help one?" (Danielle Steel, *Turning Point*, *Newsweek*, June 23, 2008, P. 64)

It is the nature of God to go looking for the marginalized and it is the calling of his people to look for them and see them. For the homeless in San Francisco, Danielle Steel and her Yo! Angel! team are the angels of the Lord.

Sarah did return to serve her mistress. For the next sixteen years Hagar lived in Abraham's household as Sarah's servant and raising her son. For sixteen years, Abraham looked upon Ishmael as the fulfillment of God's promise of an heir. And then against all odds and to their shock and delight, Sarah became pregnant and had a baby boy they named Isaac. We can only speculate about the joy Abraham must have felt when he looked at his two sons.

When the boy was three years old, Abraham and Sarah threw a big birthday bash for little Isaac... and if we think the circumstances of Genesis 16 got a little dicey, things really lit up in chapter 21.

If we thought harsh Sarah was hard to swallow... try hateful Sarah.

3. People in God's plan and who enjoy God's blessing, aren't always nice.

"But Sarah saw Ishmael, the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar, making fun of Isaac. So she turned to Abraham and demanded, 'Get rid of that servant and her son. He is not going to share the family inheritance with my son Isaac. I won't have it!'" Genesis 21:9-10

This is an interesting passage of Scripture... the word translated mocking is a form of the same word translated for the various terms of laughter. "Abraham and Sarah both laugh (17:17; 18:12); Sarah exclaims that God made her laugh and all will laugh with her (21:6); and Isaac's name means 'he laughs' (17:19)." (Emily Hunter McGowin, *Think. Laugh. Weep. Worship. The God of Hagar*, Part 2)

This scenario suggests that Sarah saw sixteen year- old interloper Ishmael mocking or making fun of three year old Isaac and became angry. If that was the case, her anger is understandable. Some commentators cast Ishmael in an even darker light suggesting that he was trying to hurt or even kill his little brother. And the historical image of Ishmael as a bad boy is reflected in the writing of the Apostle Paul who wrote, “And we who are born of the Holy Spirit are persecuted by those who want to keep the law, just as Isaac, the child of promise, was persecuted by Ishmael.” Galatians 4:29

But perhaps Ishmael was not a bad big brother... maybe Ishmael was playing with or laughing with Isaac. Sarah has never liked the fact that her second wife servant gave Abraham a son and now that she has the power of the first wife and an heir to prove it, she perceives Ishmael as a threat to her son and to his inheritance.

It isn't an unfamiliar occurrence. In 1550's Queen Mary of England, who was the legitimate daughter of King Henry VIII, kept her half sister, Queen Elizabeth, the daughter of Anne Boylen, in prison to keep her out of the public eye and off her throne. Queen Mary was motivated by power and jealousy. Sarah was motivated by power and jealousy. She did not want her son to have to share with the other quasi heir.

In our own culture we understand the tensions between heirs in the settling of an estate. The idiom that readily comes to mind is, “Where there is a will, there is a war.” Sarah was going to war and she was making sure Isaac got it all.

In this instance, as in the earlier attempt at getting her husband an heir, she makes another mess. Fortunately, God can make something out of our messes.

“This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. But God told him, ‘Don't be upset over the boy and your servant wife. Do as Sarah says, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar's son because he is also your son.’” Genesis 21:11-13

In the text that follows, Abraham prepared food and water for Hagar and Ishmael and sent them away where they wandered aimlessly out into the wilderness of Beersheba.

Take a moment to grasp the emotion of the artist's portrayal.

Project *Farewell to Ishmael* – a plaster casting done by George Segal in 1987.

See Abraham holding his sixteen year-old son in his arms. See Hagar, her back turned to the scene. See Sarah peeking out from behind the rock. Imagine for a moment... what was going on in each of their minds? What were they feeling? What do you feel as you reflect on the scene?

If he did not think it, he could have thought, "This is another fine mess you've gotten me into Sarah."

In the story, their water ran out and facing imminent death, Hagar left Ishmael in the shade and went off some distance so she would not have to listen to him crying or see him suffering.

Notice the despair expressed in this painting of Hagar and Ishmael.

Project Hagar in the Wilderness – a painting by French painter Jean Baptiste Camille Corot in 1835. Notice the near lifeless body of Ishmael, the despair and anguish of Hagar as she raises her arms to heaven. The bible says that she burst into tears or wept loudly.

This is a moment of absolute despair in her life... perhaps she wondered, "Where is the God who sees me?" If you look closely you will see in the upper left hand corner of the painting... the Angel of the Lord is on his way.

This story has to rank right up there on the list of the ten most tragic bible stories. Hagar is the epitome of a person who is marginalized and helpless... a person at the mercy of others. She is a young slave girl from Egypt. Her mistress decides she should sleep with Abraham so he can have an heir... so she is shuffled off one night to Abraham's bed. She has a baby and just as she is feeling a little too secure, her mistress puts her in her place and treats her so harshly that she runs away. She humbles herself and returns to her difficult circumstances where she continues to serve her mistress for another ten years. Then... her mistress decides she wants her and her son sent away. She is a woman who had no voice. She had no defender. She had no safety net. She was just out...

She was out but not unseen or unheard.

Then the angel of God called to Hagar from the sky, 'Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy's cries from the place where you laid him. Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants. Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well. She immediately filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness of Paran...' Genesis 21:17-21

God sees and hears the marginalized.

4. God hears the cries of the marginalized.

“God has heard the boy’s cries...”

There are those who believe that God carefully maps out his will and meticulously executes it down to the very last detail... If that is the case, every detail of this dreadful story including enslavement, forced marriage, abusive behavior, and sending a son/ stepson, and the second wife out into the desert or as we would say, “kicking them out onto the street and making them homeless,” was the will of God.

What we see in this story is a God who is not overwhelmed by the messes we make or the circumstances we create. What we see in this story is a God who continues to love and bless those who really mess up... and a God who sees, hears the cries, and blesses those who get caught in the messiness of life and who find themselves marginalized and on the fringes.

What we see is what Paul describes in Romans 8:28, “All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”

In this story, God certainly honored his promise of an heir to Abraham and Sarah, but we also see that God honored and blessed Hagar and her son as well. No, Ishmael was not Isaac... but Ishmael was a loved son and God ultimately blessed him as well. And despite the animosity that exists between the Israeli and Arab peoples of the Middle East today... one has to wonder if it was always so.

“Abraham lived for 175 years, and he died at a ripe old age. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field he had purchased from the Hittites, where he buried his wife Sarah.” Genesis 25:7-11

In the opinion of some, Hagar is Hagar the Horrible, but in fact she is Hagar the Harassed. Hagar the Hazed. Hagar the Humiliated. Hagar the Homeless, but ultimately, Hagar the Helped.

Conclusion:

It seems to me, if God cares about people in the margins, so should we!

This week I learned that people over twenty-five years old cannot hear sounds above 16 kilohertz. By the time we are twenty-five we have sustained sufficient hearing loss that anything over 16 kilohertz is out of

our range. Meanwhile, teenagers have figured that out and are downloading what is called the “mosquito tone” as the ring tone on their cell phones. The mosquito tone is 17 kilohertz, so they can hear and pick up and send text messages without their teachers, parents, or anyone over twenty-five years of age knowing they are on the phone.

While not seeing and not hearing everything has its benefits, it is hardly the way God operates. God sees all and hears all, even the cries over 16 kilohertz, and it is God’s will that we see and hear and act in his behalf.

Perhaps we might respond today by committing ourselves to:

- **Training our eyes to see whom God sees;**
- **Tuning our ears to hear whom God hears;**
- **Turning our hearts to feel for whom God feels;**
- **Taking the love of God to those who live on the fringes.**