

Hope in the Desert Times of Life

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Genesis 16

It's hard not to feel sorry for Hagar. I know she bears some responsibility for the plight she is in, and I'll talk about that in a moment.

But let's start at the beginning. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a child. You know about that promise. But for ten years no child was born. Sarah did not, could not conceive. That's a long time to wait for a promise to be fulfilled, to wait for God to make good on his word. What's more, Sarah and Abraham were not exactly getting younger. When the story opens, Abraham is 85 years old, and Sarah is 75 years old, which is way beyond the age of child-bearing. So, impatient to have a child, Sarah suggested to her husband that he take her servant Hagar and have sex with her in the hope that she would become pregnant.

Now to us that seems very strange. To us that almost borders on adultery. But it was a fairly accepted practice at that time. When a woman was infertile, she would sometimes offer her maid to her husband; a kind of surrogate situation, and if she conceived and gave birth, the child would officially become the wife's child. Even though, as I said, this was somewhat common practice, this action of Abraham and Sarah was not good or right. It showed a lack of faith on their part. They did not trust God to keep his promise. Instead of waiting on God, waiting on his timing, they took matters into their own hands. Nevertheless, that's what they did. Abraham made love to Hagar and she became pregnant.

And that's when things, as we say, got ugly. Because, as the Bible says, Hagar began to despise her mistress. To despise means to snub your nose at, to look down your nose at. I suspect that there were times when Hagar looked at Sarah and said, "I got pregnant; you can't." Something like that perhaps. Of course, that didn't suit Sarah very well. So she complained to her husband, even though the whole thing was her idea. Abraham said to his wife, "You do whatever you think is best." Whereupon Sarah began to mistreat Hagar.

I don't know what form that took. It may have been verbal abuse; speaking badly of her, calling her names. It may have been physical abuse, beating her, making her work extra hard, domestic violence. In any case, it got so bad that Hagar said, "I can't take it anymore. I can't stand it any longer," and she ran from home. She headed south, because she came originally from Egypt. She ran into the desert. And that's where we find Hagar half-way through the story.

What a bleak place to be. A desert. If the desert was bleak, even more was her inward condition. Her inward condition mirrored the desert. Hagar was in a desert place geographically and also internally, emotionally. Picture her. Try to imagine what's going on in her mind and heart. She is a runaway, a castaway. She is all by herself in that desolate wilderness. She is an abuse victim. She's pregnant which adds to her distress, because pregnancy has a set of concerns all its own. Add it all up and here clearly is a woman in distress. I think about words that describe her: abandoned, unloved, anxious, scared. What do I do?

In her book Phyllis Tribble points out that Hagar's are all around us. They walk on our streets, she says and live on our block. Some of them even sit next to us in church. Hagar is the faithful maid exploited by the male and even female members of the ruling class. She is the surrogate mother. She is a single parent juggling her job and her care for her children and her concern for her own well-being. She is a person going through a painful divorce. Hagar is the homeless person. She is the poor person relying on hand-outs from the government just to make ends meet. Or the one who feels like a nobody. Hagar is all these women, and men I might add. She is anyone feeling the trauma of rejection, feeling oppressed and downtrodden, with nowhere to turn. Hagar is you and I when we feel weak and afraid and vulnerable and alone, when we feel we're at the end of our rope.

Is there hope for people in such a situation? Is there hope for Hagar then and the Hagar's today? There is. The story of Hagar is a story of hope for all people who feel destitute and un-cared about, unappreciated, who find themselves in a desert place in their life. So where is the hope in this story? It's all over in this chapter. It's everywhere in this chapter.

The hope, to begin with, is that God comes looking for us. The Bible says in v. 7: "The angel of the Lord found Hagar." "The angel of the Lord," is likely a title for the pre-incarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity. The angel of the Lord found Hagar. And I don't think this was a coincidence, a case of God happening

to see her and find her. No, this was a case of God looking for her; making it a point to, as it were, to catch up with her.

That's the good news of Scripture. The Bible is not the story of man's search for God, but of God's search for man, not to punish but to bless and show grace. God came to Adam in the garden of Eden after he had sinned and says, "Adam, where are you?" God came to Hagar in the desert and says, "Where have you come from and where are going? In other words, "Tell me what's going on?" That's the gospel. Our salvation lies in the word found. A great Calvinistic song says: *"I sought the Lord and afterward I knew he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me. It was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found by Thee.* Another song says, *"Here in our weakness you find us."* God found Hagar.

He also calls her by name. Someone pointed out in a sermon I read not long ago that in the exchange, the conversation, the dialogue between Sarah and Abraham neither one mentions Hagar by name, but only as servant. "Sleep with my maidservant," Sarah suggests to her husband. Later on, Sarah says to Abraham, "I put my servant in your arms." Abraham then says to his wife, "Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think is best." Judging by their conversation with each other, Hagar is, nameless, just a servant, a maidservant. By contrast, what does the angel of the Lord say to her when he finds her in the desert? He calls her by name: "Hagar," he says. It feels good to have someone know your name and call you by name. To have someone address you by name means: you are valued. Someone cares enough about you to remember your name, to call you by name, to speak your name. I can almost imagine Hagar thinking, in her mind saying to the angel who speaks to her: "How'd you know I was here? How'd you know my name?"

Let's go on. Where does the Lord find Hagar? In the desert yes. But did you notice something else? Verse 7 says that "the angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert."

By the way, it would happen again several chapters later. Some of you may know that after the birth of her son, Hagar again was kicked out of the house. Hagar again went into the desert. With little Ishmael with her this time, Hagar again is desperate. The angel of the Lord again met Hagar and told her, "Open your eyes." And when Hagar did so, what did she see? A well of water. So both times that Hagar ran away into the desert, there was a well, a spring nearby.

A spring, that means, life in the midst of death; that means: there's hope for you. A spring means: God makes provision for you to go on.

A spring doesn't have to be literal water. It might be that in your distress, in your despondency, in your desperate plight, God sends a person into your life. Like Jonathan going out to meet David when David, weary and worried, was fleeing from Saul. A person to encourage you, to come alongside of you - that's a spring.

A spring might be unexpectedly getting a check or some financial gift when you've been wondering about, anxious about how you are going to make ends meet.

A spring might be a Bible verse that speaks to you about a promise from God. Or a song that God puts into your mind. I spoke to someone not long ago, I forget who, who said to me, "I don't know where it came from, but suddenly during the night as I lay awake, I remembered a song which I learned many, many years ago as a child. It popped into my head." That song was like a spring to her.

That's hope; that God provides a spring in the desert experience of your life. Do you know where else hope shines through in the Hagar story? In names. One is a name given by God; the other is a name given to God.

The first name is Ishmael. The angel of the Lord, God, tells Hagar that she will have a son, and then tells her to call him Ishmael, "for", the angel added, "the Lord has heard of your misery." In fact, that's what the name Ishmael means: God hears.

El in the name Ishmael is a short form for the Hebrew word Elohim which means God. Whenever in the Bible you find a Hebrew name with the letters el in it, that means "God something or other." Elijah starts with El - it means My God is the Lord. Elimelech - My God is king. On the cross Jesus cried out, "Eloi, Eloi - my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The angel tells Hagar to call her son Ishma-el. Ishma: hears; el: God. God hears.

Psalm 22 begins with the poet crying out to God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I cry out by day but you do not answer." etc. After this lengthy lament, the poet says: "God has listened." In Psalm 116 the author describes his divinely given deliverance from a fatal illness. He starts out, "I love the Lord, for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy." God hears.

And God sees. That's what Hagar went on to indicate. She said, El-roi, you are the God who sees me. For the first time in Genesis, for the first time in the Bible, a human being gives a name to God. In verse 13 we read, "She [Hagar] gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me.'" "The God who sees me" - that's the name in English 5 words. In Hebrew it is two words: El-roi.

In those two names we have hope. Our God is a God who hears us, especially in our distress. Ishma-el. Our God also sees us. El-roi.

The psalmist joins them together and says: "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry." A song put it this way: "He knows my name, he knows my every thought. He sees (el-roi) each tear that falls, and hears me (ishma-el) when I call." Rev. Henry Admiraal