

FRESH START - HAGAR AND ISHMAEL - A NEW PERSPECTIVE
A SERMON BASED ON GENESIS 16:1-16
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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10:00 a.m.

Abraham and Sarah need to talk more.

Abraham should have talked to Sarah.

Just last week in chapter 15 we had been through it all with Abraham,
back when he was still Abram
and God's promises hadn't been fulfilled yet.

He'd been on quite the journey.

Called out of Ur of the Chaldeans to the land God promised in Canaan,
which, when he got there, wasn't quite ready.

He went on through the Negev desert and when a famine hit,
to Egypt.

There Abraham told everyone his wife Sarah was his sister.

It was a way to protect himself from getting killed
in case they decided they wanted Sarah for themselves.

Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's household,
which likely means she was part of the harem.

When it was learned she was married to Abraham,

they were kicked back out of Egypt.

and made their way back to Canaan.

They had made out like bandits in Egypt,

so now Abraham and his nephew Lot had to split out the tribe

to support everyone they were so wealthy

and there were so many of them.

However, Lot was overrun and capture by other kings in the area

But Abraham was powerful enough to rescue him.

Recognizing his growing power,

kings came to have meetings with Abraham.

There was a lot happening in Abraham and Sarah's life.

What wasn't happening, was any progress on God's promise

that Abraham's descendants would be like stars in the sky,

or sand on the shore,

more than could be counted.

Abraham had made progress

on the land, on the wealth, on the power,

but there was no progress on the heir.

This was a cause of concern.

Last week we overheard God say to Abraham,

‘Don’t be afraid.

I am your shield.

I am your very great reward.’

To which Abraham had two questions for God.

What can you give me?

How can I know?

God assured Abraham.

Abraham believed God.

God made covenant with Abraham,

walking through all those sacrificed animals cut in half.

Basically, God signed on the dotted line,

left a deposit and his credit card number.

He would be good for this promise.

God expressed his trustworthiness.

Abraham should have talked to Sarah.

Told her about the covenant God had made with him.

“Sarah, listen I know I’ve taken you all the way from Ur,
and that your parents were mad when we moved.
I know I said this was going to be the place we settled,
the place God was going to give us,
and then we went to the Negev desert.
And yeah, the whole Egypt fiasco.
That was awkward wasn’t it. Sorry about that.
But great that Pharoah
let us keep all the herds
he gave me for you though, right?
So there’s that.

But listen, no need to worry about us having descendants.
I had an encounter with God and not only did he give me his word,
stars in the sky
sand on the shore,
he signed the contract.
He did the covenant thing
and walked between the halved animals.
He didn’t even make me walk through them.

So we're all good.

No need to worry.

God told me not to be afraid.

God is our shield.

God is our very great reward.”

But I don't know that Abraham mentioned it to Sarah.

Because by the looks of things today,

she was plenty worried.

Worried to the point where having borne no children,

she took it upon herself to get done

what God was taking far too long to get done.

She figured out her own strategy to accomplish

what was taking God far too long to accomplish.

Sarah had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

I am guessing she acquired Hagar on their way out of Egypt.

Looking at Hagar gave her an idea.

Being a woman who was essentially queen of the tribe,

first lady,

a woman who was used to be deferred to,
and obeyed,

Sarah made a move to get done
what God and Abraham weren't getting done.

Covenant or no covenant.

Sarah said to Abraham,

'The Lord has kept me from having children.

Go, sleep with my slave;

perhaps I can build a family through her.'

Abraham had been just as worried about having an heir.

We heard last week that he was fretting that Eliezer,

a servant from Damascus,

was going to inherit all their wealth.

But God had made covenant with Abraham.

Stars in the sky, sand on the seashore,

so shall your descendants be.

So whether Abraham told Sarah or not,

she was taking things into her own hands.

Faith is nice, but proactive gets things done.

I have to confess, Sarah does puzzle me here.

She says to Abraham,

Go sleep with my slave.

Perhaps I can build a family through her.

Sarah puzzles me for a couple of reasons.

First reason,

she's just been a slave in Egypt herself, part of Pharaoh's harem,
used for another man's purposes.

I know the culture was different,

and what was considered acceptable was different then,
but at the core of the human heart,

we generally know when we are being used or mistreated
to another person's ends.

As one woman to another,

I would hope for a little more empathy from Sarah,
about what it is like to be the means

to someone else's end.

Second reason Sarah puzzles me is this take charge woman

hasn't considered what happens if her plan works.

If Abraham does go and sleep with Hagar, what then?

Will she end up resenting Abraham for sleeping with Hagar,
even if it is an accepted cultural practice?

Will she end up on the sideline

if Hagar does indeed get pregnant, carrying the heir?

It seems like a big risk if the plan works.

Third thing that puzzles me,

is the wondering why Sarah wouldn't accept God's covenant.

Assuming that Abraham had told her about

his latest encounter with God,

the repetition of the promises he had heard from God

the assurances God had given him

and the experience of God making covenant,

assuming she knew this,

then why take things into her own hands

in such a risky way?

Does it really make sense that a person would not trust God
would take things into her or his own hands
regardless of the risks of doing so?

I mean,
we would never be so foolish right?

Because of our trust in God's promise to provide
we would never take things into our own hands,
we would never overreach our current position
and spend more than we had,
because we didn't have all we thought we deserved
at the time we thought we should have it.
We would never take things into our own hands
and tap the card on the machine so many times
that credit would lead us to risk slavery to debt.

I mean, it's a puzzle right?

Taking things into your own hands, following your own plan.

We would never do that.

Because of our belief that God knows best for us,

when he gives us a command such as

to keep Sabbath

or to not commit adultery

or to not lie or to not covet,

we keep it.

We would never take things into our own hands

figuring that we know better what we need

and do those things that lead us back into slavery,

slavery to our work

to our hungers,

into slavery to our manipulations.

Given what could happen to the the people around us

who could be steamrolled while we power toward those things

I mean, we would never do that

stop trusting God and take it into our own hands right?

Maybe Sarah isn't such a puzzle.

What is it that has you refusing to trust God,

refusing to listen to God,

refusing to wait on God?

Perhaps Sarah isn't such a puzzle after all.

She has a human heart,

with all of its hidden chambers

of insecurity, mistrust, greed, fear and

desire for control that bleed into our souls.

So, disregarding the repetition of the promises of God,

the assurances God gave to Abraham

the ironclad contract, the covenant given to Abraham

Sarah comes up with a plan of her own to make sure

that there will be an heir and descendants.

Despite the fact that this is likely to go poorly,

and make Sarah herself a slave

to potential consequences she hadn't intended,

Despite the fact that she will steamroll

some people in the process,

rather than trust God, Sarah blames God.

'The Lord has kept me from having children.'

Sarah takes the pilot seat.

Sarah starts to steer.

Forgetting whatever that experience of being

a woman at Pharaoh's beck and call had been like

steamrolling past an empathy of what it is like to be used

for someone else's end

Sarah tells Abraham to sleep with her Egyptian slave Hagar.

Perhaps I can build a family through her.

I will build the family.

God has been set to the side.

Abraham,

the dog, does.

I wish I could say

it is a puzzle that Abraham didn't push back at Sarah,

remind her of God's repetition of the promises

of the assurances and covenant with him.

But his wife had just told him to go sleep with another woman.

There are those who would not wait around to ask,

‘Are you sure?’

Abraham agreed to what Sarah said.

Now, to be fair Scripture is silent on what is in Abraham’s head at this point.

This is always great for preachers,

because it means we can put whatever motive we want in there.

So maybe Abraham was just a dog, thinking with

the body part not known for its high IQ.

Maybe Abraham just still wasn’t able to lean into God’s promises.

Scripture does tell us they had been in Canaan for 10 years.

10 years is a long time to be waiting for an heir,

when you aren’t getting any younger.

Maybe he was still having trouble trusting God.

Whatever his motive, Abraham agreed to Sarah’s plan.

Sarah brought the slave Hagar to Abraham.

He slept with her, and Hagar became pregnant.

Hagar began to despise her mistress.

Again, we have the behaviour, not the motive.

Was Hagar resentful that Sarah had made her breeding stock?

Did Hagar see an opportunity here?

In a culture where multiple wives was a reality,

was this pregnancy her chance to take the top position?

Was Sarah just impossible to be around

with her bossy, controlling, micromanaging ways,

and so Hagar despised her?

We don't know.

But she really didn't like Sarah.

Despised her.

Now, I love this part.

Get a load of Sarah as her plan starts to come back to bite her.

She said to Abraham,

“You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

I put my slave in your arms,

and now that she knows she is pregnant,

she despises me.

May the Lord judge between you and me.'

We've all been watching Sarah,

and while you are asking for the Lord to judge

we can see this one is mostly on you.

This was your idea.

Deflecting blame and responsibility to others

for the mess we are in.

That's unusual right?

No one does that right?

Abraham steps up to own his part in things.

I'm being sarcastic. Of course he doesn't.

He passes responsibility too.

"Your slave is in your hands.

Do with her whatever you think best."

You can see how Abraham mans up to his responsibility

and collusion in this newly created mess.

You know, the same way we always do.

Sarah treated Hagar so badly that Hagar had to flee.

So much for building a family.

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert.

In the Old Testament,

particularly in the first five books of the Bible,

'Angel of the Lord' often seems to be a way to refer to God himself.

There are long theological papers written about it,

the angel of the Lord actually being God himself.

I will spare you the long theological explanation,

but for our purposes today,

because of the way the 'Angel of the Lord' speaks,

and the content of what is said,

this appearance is referring to God himself appearing to Hagar,

a slave woman from Egypt.

God appears to Hagar and asks just the best question.

Hagar, slave of Sarah,

Where have you come from?

And where are you going?

If you hear nothing else this morning,

let yourself hear God ask you those questions.

'Where have you come from?

Where are you going?'

Hagar answered,

"I am running. Running away.

I am running away from my mistress Sarah."

God said,

Go back, and submit to her.

Now. Before you throw God under the bus,

for sending Hagar back,

I want you to understand this word submit.

We are highly reactive to this word.

We think submit is the tap out when you are pinned to the mat.

We think submit is calling out uncle when your older brother has

your arm twisted behind your back.

We think submit is a humiliated, powerless, 'taking it'.

Submitting has a powerful, noble, servant side to it.

You submit to your infant when she cries in the night,

and you get up and go to her when you would rather sleep.

You submit to your spouse

when she wants Chinese and you were hoping for pizza,

but you go pick up Chinese.

You submit to your friend,

when you let her pick the movie Tuesday night.

Submitting can be submerging your own entitlement or desire

to accommodate another's.

God says to Hagar, go back to Sarah.

God reveals that he will incorporate Hagar into his promise.

God makes promises to Hagar in the midst of the mess

that has landed on her.

I will increase your descendants so much they will be too

numerous to count.

You are pregnant and you will give birth to a son.

You shall name him Ishmael.

Ishmael the name means 'The Lord hears.'

So Hagar,

a slave, a woman from Egypt,

is brought into the promise of God to Abraham.

and told, God hears.

The promise of descendants too numerous to count carries to her.

God keeps promises.

God keeps covenant.

Hagar called God,

You are the God who sees me.

So even here in this situation

where a Sarah has taken things into her own hands

and where Abraham has been complicit

and Hagar has been used,

God hears.

God sees.

God is at work.

Though we turn his promises into a complicated,
consequence ridden mess,

God hears.

God sees.

God is at work.

Though someone else runs over us with a steamroller
and we end up having to submerge our own entitlement or desire

God hears.

God sees.

God is at work.

My hope for you this morning,

is that you will trust God enough to listen to him the first time.

Spare yourself the drama and the trauma and complications
that can come

when you start taking things into your own hands.

My hope is that someone else's mess won't land on you.

But if it does, see here this morning,

is even in trying to run away

even landing in the desert,

God hears.

God sees.

God is at work.

God will keep his promises,

even if, more likely when

we add in levels of consequence and complication

that make everything so much harder than it needs to be.

Submit to God's love.

Submit to God's promise.

Submit into worship. Give yourself to worship.

Submit into God's word. Give yourself to God's word.

Submit into obedience. Give yourself to God's commands.

Remember that no matter how messy and how complicated

it all gets,

whether you've caused it,

or it's happened to you.

God hears.

God sees.

God is at work to fulfill his promises
and wants to bring you home.

Amen.