

An Ugly Story of Hope

June 25, 2017

Do you ever catch yourself asking, “after all that a certain person has been through, how could they possibly act the way they are acting?” Those thoughts are pretty typical as we observe victims of abuse become abusers, as we see death row inmates who are exonerated leave prison only to commit crimes, as we see the recipient of a lightning strike who does not see this as a second chance at life but rather goes back to spending her evenings channel surfing on the couch.

One of the things that I love about the scriptures, and the Old Testament in particular, is that the heroes are multi-dimensional. Part of what helps these writings to continue being relevant today is that the people are so real – there are times that they are agents of God’s grace, times when they are profoundly courageous, and times when they falter, even stumble over one another in their race to make bad decisions. David the unifying King of Israel was also a philanderer and murderer, Noah piously listened to God and built the ark, but later abused alcohol to the point of waking up naked under a tree, Jacob steals the birthright from Esau. So brilliant, and yet so flawed!

Enter Sarah. The passage Joey read today is one of those instances in scripture that I say, “after all that she has been given, how can she be so small?” Sarah, after giving birth to Isaac after decades of waiting, does not rest in her proclamation that “with God all things are possible.” Sarah does not trust that God knows what God is doing, even after this miracle birth. (I hope that if I have a baby at 90 years old, I’m going to stop second guessing God. I hope.) No, the glory of the scriptures is that they do not give us stories of perfect, unattainable lives, but rather offer us glimpses of real lives which are almost always a weaving together of sacred and sinful acts.

We usually think of Sarah as the matriarch of Judaism and Christianity, someone who was deeply loyal – she followed Abraham when God told him to go – she was shrewd in her dealings with Pharaoh in Egypt. Yet, in today’s story, we catch a dark side of her. If we look back, we see that Ishmael’s whole existence is due to Sarah’s attempt to “help” the plan of God. God had made a covenant with Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, but after decades of trying, Abraham and Sarah were still childless. In fact, in that culture, the term would have been much more harsh and the blame would have been more focused – she would have been called barren, and the people of the time would have said that she had a “hard womb.” It would have been her fault, and hers alone. So Sarah decides to help God’s promise along.

Now before we get to the meat of the Hagar and Ishmael story of today, it may be helpful to take a detour through Sarah’s motivation. Have you been there before? Wanted something soooo badly, and it just doesn’t come your way. Maybe you, like Sarah, have waited years. I’m not talking about wanting a sports car or a hunky date, but something that you really believe that is part of God’s plan for you. Maybe it is career related or family related. Maybe it has to do with finding a partner or having a baby or being the

kind of parent that you want to be. Maybe it has to do with finding an answer. Have you done everything that you are supposed to, and still...nothing?

That is where Sarah is when she hatches the plan to suggest Abraham have a child with Hagar, thus granting him a descendant. Great idea, right? God helps those who help themselves, right? God likes it when we think of others ahead of ourselves, right? When we're creative, right?

Well...Sarah's plan doesn't work out so well. Oh, Abraham does what needs to be done and Hagar does give birth to an heir, but that was not God's plan. God's plan was that Abraham and *Sarah's* offspring would number among the stars. So the question becomes, how do we know when we are living into the truism that God helps those who help themselves, and when are we manipulating things to fit our timetable, our agenda, our desired outcomes?

If we look to Sarah's story as our model, we see two things. First, she acted out of desperation, and second, she suggested a course of action that she couldn't abide with in the long term. She felt backed into a corner, and she felt this was the only way out. Now, that happens sometimes in life. There are times that we are backed into a corner. The problem with the gymnastics that Sarah uses to get out of the corner is that she couldn't live with the inevitable results.

A question we might ask ourselves when we are in these tight, constricted places is, "What would my healthy self think of this?" If I weren't desperate, would this still seem like a viable option? This, in effect, separates out the wheat from the chaff. Someone fleeing domestic violence can ask that question and say, "yes, my healthy self would think that getting out of this situation would be appropriate." Whereas the young adult contemplating getting out of debt by selling drugs can ask what her healthy self would think of this and see clearly that turning to a life of crime is not a viable financial strategy. Ignatius of Loyola taught his students to think of both particularity and universality when making difficult decisions. In universality you contemplate what the world would be like if everyone were to choose the course of action you are proposing; in particularity, you contemplate how you would react if someone very close to you were to choose that course of action.

All of this serves as back story to our passage for today which began, "Sarah noticed the son whom Hagar the Egyptian woman had borne to Abraham playing with her son Isaac, so she demanded of Abraham, 'Drive out that slave and her son! No son of that slave is going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac.'" Sarah the loyal, Sarah the patient, Sarah the clever, now becomes Sarah the greedy, Sarah the jealous, Sarah the cold.

Then, in two of the most grace-filled verses in all of the Hebrew scriptures, God tells Abraham, "Do not be distressed about the boy or about your slave woman. Heed the demands of Sarah, no matter what she is asking of you; for it **is** through Isaac that descendants will bear your name. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a great nation of him also, since he too is your offspring."

God draws straight with crooked lines. It is at Sarah's suggestion that Abraham has a child with Hagar; now it is Sarah demanding that the woman and child be sent out into the wilderness to die, and God says, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. I'll handle it. Heck, since I promised that your son would father a great nation, and now you have two sons, I guess there will have to be a couple of great nations." That, my friends, is heady stuff. God can take our twists and turns, and still bring us to the promised destination. What I hear in this story is that we can go fabulously off track, can even do some downright horrible things, and God can work through them. This is an ugly story of hope, friends.

Many of us know that Abraham's second son's name is Isaac, which means, "God Laughs," but do any of you know what Abraham's first son's name means? What does "Ishmael" mean? It means, "God hears." Hagar's story of desperation cuts to the quick – after days of wandering in the desert with her baby, she is out of water and desperate. She sets him down under a shrub and then walks a bowshot away, because she cannot bear to hear her baby cry himself to death. Then God hears both her prayer and the baby's cry, and saves them both. Even when a bad choice was made, God wove the story back together.

So, too, when we make bad choices, God weaves us back into divine beauty. Whether we are Sarah or Abraham or Hagar or Ishmael, our lesson is the same today: trust in God's ways, and do not despair. Our Gospel passage reminds us that if God cares about the simple sparrow, God surely cares about us. Or as the hymn tells us "Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest." Amen.

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