Foundational Stories #3 of 24:

"The Banished Mother"

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Genesis 21:8-21

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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This is going to be a really odd sermon for Father's Day, because it's about a father who made some poor choices – choices that really *hurt* some other people, including his firstborn son. I don't think he was *trying* to hurt people – most dads don't – but this story is an example of what can happen when fathers don't *think* about what they are doing before they do it. It's a lesson in what *not* to do.

This father is Abraham, whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look back to as their spiritual father in the faith, and who is – for most Jews and most Muslims – their biological father as well. I talked about him last week, and about a long series of promises that God made to him after he arrived in Canaan at the age of 75: "To your offspring I will give this land." (Genesis 12:7). "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted." (Genesis 13:16) "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be." (Genesis 15:5) But ten years go by, and by the time Abraham is 85 years old, he and his wife Sarah have *still* not had a child. *Not a single one* of those promises God has made to Abraham can come true if he doesn't have a child! So it is *imperative* that Abraham have a child.

Abraham and Sarah decide to take matters into their own hands. Sarah comes up with what she thinks will be a solution to the problem. She shares her idea with Abraham, and he agrees to it. Here's how Genesis describes that sequence of events (and at this point in the story, their names are Abram and Sarai): "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." (Genesis 16:1-2) Sarah is making some assumptions. She assumes that because she hasn't had a child *yet*, she never *will*. She also assumes that this is God's will: "the Lord *has prevented me* from bearing children." We really should be careful when we start *making assumptions* about what God is doing.

Abraham, for his part, seems to think his wife has had a brilliant idea, and he is perfectly willing to go along with it. Note that neither Abraham nor Sarah pray about this. At least, there's no evidence of that. There is no directive from God here; there is no *appearance* from God; there is no *voice* that they hear. In my experience, when God is trying to tell me something, God either hits me over the head with something completely surprising and unexpected, something that I would not have thought of on my own, or God sends me persistent nudges over an extended period of time, nudges that I tend to ignore or dismiss until they have happened often enough that I begin to realize they're not coming from inside me. Neither of those has happened here. Sarah just has an idea, and Abraham agrees with it.

Notice who does *not* get a say in this matter: the woman whose life will be *the* most dramatically impacted by all of this. Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave. Yes, Abraham and Sarah owned slaves. We know of at least two, and the Bible implies there were many more. We know very little about what life was like for these slaves. We just don't have many sources of information about slavery in that time period, so many centuries ago. It's *possible* they were treated reasonably well, by some masters or in some societies. It's *possible* they may have been able to purchase their freedom after some period of time. But we really don't know. Clearly, Hagar does not have much power. Abraham took her as a second wife. He has sex with her, at least once, maybe multiple times. Hagar does not have a choice in the matter. She does not have the freedom to say "no." Consent is not an option. Her body is not her own.

If this makes you uncomfortable, well, it should. Just as many of the founding fathers of our country owned slaves, so too did the founding father and mother of both Judaism and Christianity. We should not try to hide this truth, or to hide *from* this truth. It is an unfortunate, regrettable reality.

Hagar gets pregnant, with Abraham's child. How many female slaves, throughout history, have been impregnated by their male masters? How many women or girls is that happening to *right now*?

Hagar makes a critical mistake when she realizes she is expecting. "She looked with contempt on her mistress." Hagar has achieved something that Sarah hasn't been able to do, and she makes the mistake of letting Sarah see how she feels. Sarah is *incensed*. She goes to Abraham: "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" (Genesis 16:5) Abraham replies: "Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please." (Genesis 16:6) Ouch. There is *no* sympathy for Hagar. Forced to get married, forced to have sex, forced to carry a child – and now, forced to face the wrath of her angry mistress. Abraham *could* have treated Hagar much, *much* better.

"Then Sarai dealt harshly with her." (Genesis 16:6) We aren't given details. What *words* did Sarah use? What *physical punishment* might Hagar have received? Whatever it was, it was *bad*. Bad enough that Hagar can't take it any more. She runs away. Alone. Pregnant. Into the desert wilderness.

God also decides that enough is enough. An angel appears to Hagar. The angel tells her what she does not wish to hear: "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." (Genesis 16:9) But the angel also gives Hagar *hope*: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." (Genesis 16:10) And: "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael" – which means, "God hears" – "for the Lord has given heed to your affliction." (Genesis 16:11) God has *heard* Hagar. God knows she is in *pain*. God does send her *back* – it's going to be important that Hagar's child grow up in his father's house, and ultimately, many years later, Ishmael will help *bury* his dad. Hagar *has* to go back. But now, she will go back with a measure of *hope* she never had before. If Hagar gets mistreated again, she now knows something she didn't know before: she *matters* to God.

So she returns. She goes back to her mistress who mistreated her and to her master who impregnated her. But sometime over the course of the next eight months or so, Hagar and Abraham must have had an important talk, and Abraham must have listened to Hagar, because when the child is born, Abraham gives the child the name that the angel had told Hagar: Ishmael. "God hears."

Thirteen years pass. Sarah *finally* gets pregnant. She gives birth to a son, Isaac, when Ishmael is about 14 years old. "Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned." (Genesis 21:8) But

Ishmael does something wrong. It's not entirely clear what he does; the Hebrew word is somewhat unclear. A lot of older translations say he was "mocking" Isaac. Others say he was "teasing" or "making fun of" Isaac. But recent translations often say that Ishmael was "laughing *with*" Isaac or even "*playing* with" Isaac. *Ishmael might not have been doing anything wrong.* Whatever he did, Sarah saw it, and once again, she is *not* happy. She goes to Abraham, *again*: "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:10) This time, Abraham pauses. "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son." (Genesis 21:11) God intervenes, *again*, saying to Abraham: "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." (Genesis 21:12-13) Sarah's bitter feelings are not good, but *God is finding a way to make good come out of this mess.* Abraham, knowing that, by the grace of God, his firstborn son will be okay, acquiesces to Sarah's request. "Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away." (Genesis 21:14) Bread and water – that won't get them very far. But, Abraham trusts, it will get them far *enough*.

So Hagar finds herself out in the desert wilderness, a second time. Ishmael is *not* okay. "When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept." (Genesis 21:15-16)

God intervenes, again. "God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink." (Genesis 21:17-19) God has now rescued Hagar *twice*. This time, God equips them to continue on their way. *They don't need to go back to Abraham and Sarah any more.*

"God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (Genesis 21:20-21) – from her own homeland. Later, we are told that Ishmael had twelve sons, who become twelve princes, who give rise to twelve tribes. Just as there were twelve tribes of Israelites, so too were there twelve tribes of Ishmaelites. We also learn that Ishmael had a daughter who, ironically, ends up marrying one of Isaac's sons, her cousin Esau. Ishmael's children settle in the land of Arabia. Jewish and Muslim traditions say that Ishmael's descendants gave rise to the Arabian people. Muslims also believe that Ishmael was a prophet, and that he was the ancestor of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

So that is the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It is not a pretty story; it is full of human mistakes, human jealousy, and human cruelty. But it is also a story of how *God* took a really bad situation and made *good* come out of it. It is a story of how God came to lowest of the low – a female slave from a foreign country – and gave her hope. It is the first of many stories in the Bible about how God cares for the marginalized, for the oppressed, for the people who are mistreated by the powers-that-be. Abraham and Sarah were wealthy and privileged, and God looked after them, but God *also* looked after this slave woman who had no wealth, no privilege, no power, no say, no friends, no support, no *nothing*. Let this be a reminder to *us*, to *we* who are, by the world's standards, wealthy and privileged. *We are not the only ones God cares about.* Not by a *long* shot. All those people who are used, abused, taken advantage of, belittled, demeaned, hurt, even *banished – God cares about them too.* God cares about *them, too.*

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