

Proper 7, Year A  
June 22, 2008  
Good Shepherd, Berkeley

Genesis 21: 8-21  
Psalm 86: 1-10, 16-17  
Romans 6: 1b – 11  
Matthew 10: 24-39

June 1985. The cover of *National Geographic* displays the iconic image of a 13 year old girl in tattered clothes, head covering draped over her head, haunted and haunting green eyes in a somber face stare out at the world. The photographer was Steve McCurry, the location was a refugee camp in Pakistan, 1983. The child was from the Pashtun tribe. She had crossed the mountainous boarder from Afghanistan with her siblings, victim of the Soviet war in Pakistan.

As I pondered today's lessons, this is the image that kept coming to mind as I thought of the story of Sarah and Hagar. For me the face of the Afghan girl is the face of Hagar – a refugee, homeless, separated from all that was familiar and a victim of forces so much larger than she could understand.

Today's story from Genesis is another chapter in the complex family relations of Abraham and his kin. It is a disturbing story in many ways, not only because Sarah comes off looking like a selfish witch, Abraham appears more henpecked than patriarchal and Hagar is the victim of a *ménage a trios* gone bad. Our modern, Western individualism might push us to judge Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's wimpy capitulation but we always have to ask, what is God up to in such a story?

The first sentence of today's lesson opens on a view of a family celebration with the sweet scene of two little boys playing together. Last week's Hebrew scripture reading told us how one of the little boys came to be, for he is Isaac, the God-promised

son of Sarah and Abraham's old age. The Genesis writer expects that we already know how the other little boy came to be when the writer tells us that all the trouble began when "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." In our readings, however, we don't get that lesson. The lectionary tells us about Isaac's conception but not about the nameless child of Hagar the slave, though both are the offspring of Abraham the patriarch.

So here's the infill. Sarah was old and barren. Rather than allow a shameful death for Abraham who would die with no heirs, Sarah gives him her slave girl to bear a child who under Mesopotamian law would have been considered the child of Sarah and Abraham. When Sarah also bears a son, which we heard about last week, then her son Isaac would be subordinate to Hagar's son who was the firstborn and his inheritance would have to be shared. Furthermore, once Hagar bore Abraham a son, she didn't just go back to the kitchen. Apparently she was Abraham's concubine, and therefore had a certain familial status and power.

Sarah's sense of threat about this doesn't stem from simple jealousy. In that ancient nomadic culture women were completely dependent first on their husbands and then on their sons. If Ishmael as Abraham's first-born was to be his heir, then Sarah and Isaac would fare badly. For Sarah this could be a matter of life and death. One biblical commentary points out that there is a conflict over inheritance rights at *two* levels, here. "The obvious level concerns property, but the deeper level concerns the inheritance of the promise to Abraham. Through whom will that line run that leads from Abraham to the great nation (he has been promised) that will inherit the land?" (*Preaching through the Christian Year, Year A*, Fred B. Craddock et.al. page 331)

Why does Abraham come off so mealy-mouthed in this story? The only reaction he seems to have is that he is distressed about Sarah's demand that he send Hagar away because of his son but he still acquiesces to her demands. God, however, steps in and clarifies the situation: Isaac will indeed be the recipient of the ancient promise that his offspring would outnumber the stars of the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. God makes a new promise here about Hagar's son. He, too, shall be the source of a great nation, because he, too, is Abraham's offspring.

Another disturbing aspect to this story is that if ever we needed a parable of the tribal warfare between Muslims and Jews, here it is. Both Judaism and Islam view Hagar's son Ishmael as the ancestor of the Arab peoples. Isaac, according to the Hebrew scriptures, is the ancestor of the Jews. They might have been playing nicely in the nursery but they've been pretty much at war ever since.

Just about the time this story starts to sound like it is going to resolve, with each son being a recipient of God's promises to Abraham, we find that Hagar and her son are still to be sent away by Abraham to wander in the wilderness. They come to desperate straits out there in the dessert, having run out of water, they will surely die. Facing the inevitable, Hagar lovingly puts her son in the shade under a bush but goes far enough away so that she cannot hear his cries.

Yet again God saves the day. The writer of this portion of the Book of Genesis is fond of sending angels to handle God's communications with humanity. With all of God's tenderness the angel asks, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid (angels always say that in the bible); for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is..." God has heard the voice of the boy where he is..... The promise that her child will be made

a great nation is reiterated and then God's messenger shows her where the well of life-saving water is to be found. God doesn't undo the injustice of them being cast out. But God is present with them in the wilderness, responding with the compassion of a mother to the cries of a child. And God knows where the water is. Frederick Buechner says that "the story of Hagar is the story of the terrible jealousy of Sarah and the singular ineffectuality of Abraham and the way Hagar, ... managed to survive them both. Above and beyond that, however, it is the story of how in the midst of the whole unseemly affair, (God) half tipsy with compassion, went around making marvelous promises, and loving everybody, and creating great nations, like the last of the big-time spenders handing out (hundred) dollar bills." (*Peculiar Treasures* page 46)

As you listen to this story, where is the frightened, threatened, "me-first" Sarah in you? This week's story has her looking a little less lovely than the doubtful, laughing, soon-to-be-pregnant Sarah of last week. What part of you is spiritually near-sighted like Sarah, unable to trust God to sort out the inheritance dilemma, unable to trust God's extravagant promises of greatness and so you are thrown back on your limited ability to handle things by yourself?

Sarah is jealous of Hagar because she has not yet learned that the God who makes such wild promises always packages them in a love that is equally outrageous and unconditional.

What part of you is Abraham? Abraham has a great deal of power but he doesn't seem to use it in very wise ways. He seeks domestic tranquility over justice and though God acts in the end to save Hagar and her son, Abraham's actions are driven by

Sarah's anxiety, not his own self-differentiation. In family systems theory we would say he's on the out position in the familial triangle, absorbing the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and rushing to resolve it rather than hold the tension, in order to restore calm in the tents once again.

What part of you is Hagar? Where is her thirsty child? It is not enough to say that she is the victim of power against which she has no voice, though she is. But within our souls, she might be the part of us that must bear the compromise position until the true fulfillment of promise comes 'round. It is only then that the fulfillment of promises to her can occur. This is a tremendously anguished position, especially in the church, when convictions would have one choose one way but circumstances demand an alternative, less fulfilling course of action.

And who is God's messenger for you? Who shows you where the water is? The helpless part of you that cries out for water is heard by God's angel. What does that angel look like in your life? What is the nature of your thirst and what is the water that the angel brings?

I haven't touched on the other readings today, in part because there is just so much to ponder in the Hebrew scripture. There is solace for your Hagar nuggetted in this lesson: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from..." God's attention. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

But I do want to point out that if someone is looking for ideological fodder to support the family values cannon, they won't find it in either the First Testament lesson

or in the challenging Gospel reading from Matthew. It is hard to know how Focus on the Family would read the lesson from Genesis, today. My guess is that their antiquarian view of women would find resonance – property of Abraham to be retained or cast out as it suits his agenda. Hearing the story from the perspective of the women would be beyond their grasp.

But Jesus, also, is not exactly espousing family values as they have come to be bartered in the American political climate at least since Ronald Regan was president. It is not that Jesus doesn't care about just and loving relationships. What he's saying to his followers is that the demands of the Gospel supersede even these most intimate and cherished relationships. Relationship to God is the first priority and from it all other relationships are ordered. If anything, Jesus' words CONVICT those who would make a contemporary narrow, constricted view of family into an idol to be worshipped. For most of human history family did not look like its Leave-it-to-Beaver fantasy promulgated by American conservative ideologues. In any age, in any relationship, our relationship to God is the plumb line. It measures true and tells us how to construct a society where all relationship is ordered according God's promises of life fulfilled. Such a challenge scares us because we are fearful when God re-orders everything according to God's dream and not our plan. So we pass laws about who can be married to whom and get our knickers in a knot about the church's blessing of relationships as if it is the same thing as God's blessing of relationships. And we forget the lesson from Hagar's story, that the God of compassion and promise loves us without measure. This God invites us into relationship that defines all others – not as limitation, but as the core relationship that defines all others.