

“Letting Every Story Speak”

A Sermon by Rev. Betsey Moe – August 3, 2025
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Genesis 15:1-6

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5 He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 16:1-16

1 Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar, 2 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. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, “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!” 6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

*7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her,
“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,
for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*

*12 He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone’s hand against him,
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.”*

13 So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi," for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

15 Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

The Abraham saga is about a promise. Last week, in Genesis 12, we heard for the very first time this promise given by God: that God would make of Abram a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. In the first scripture lesson today, from Genesis 15, we hear the second time Abraham hears the promise from God. This time, it's attached to an image; God led Abram outside of his tent to look up at a black night sky full of stars. As Abraham was standing on solid ground, probably feeling really small, God said to him, "Your descendants will be as numerous as these stars." And, just to clarify with Abram who was feeling quite old, probably questioning if he was hearing things, God said, "And they will be from *your* blood line."

The rest of Genesis, and arguably the rest of the Old Testament, is a story of that promise unfolding, but always being in jeopardy. I think of the feather floating through the story in Forrest Gump – *look! It's about to land...nope!* It's actually a gripping story, and why I love Genesis and Exodus. There's famine, there's deceit, Abraham almost loses Sarah through his own deceit – twice. There's more famine, there's violence. We think, if this promise of descendants as numerous as the stars *ever* becomes fulfilled, it will be a miracle. (Which is the whole point.)

But one of the first threats to the promise is Abram and Sarai themselves thinking it's never going to happen. Sarai is never going to get pregnant. God must not have known just how barren Sarai was. So it's time that they take matters into their own hands.

And that's when we meet a character who was arguably never supposed to have airtime in the Bible. Her name was Hagar. She was Egyptian, she was young, she was a slave, she had no rights, no voice, no special bloodline or outstanding qualities. A throw-away character. And in Sarai's mind, she was just a convenient alternative womb.

Sarai certainly didn't think Hagar had her own story. Sarai didn't even refer to her by name. She only called her, "the Egyptian," "my slave-girl." Hagar was supposed to be an invisible part of Sarai's story. She would bear the child promised to Abram, Sarai would raise the child, and that would be that. But as soon as Hagar conceived, she had feelings of her own. Imagine that! And Sarai, the woman who was used to being in control, couldn't handle that. Sarai started acting cagey and quick to blame, like the first humans in the garden: *"May the wrong done to me be on you!* And Abram did, too: *"Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please."*

Neither Sarai nor Abram viewed or treated Hagar like a fellow human being. A person with feelings, a person with a story, a person hoping for a future as well.

You would think this was an irredeemable situation. But for God, there's no situation that cannot be redeemed, and there is no such thing as a human being that is dispensable. Plus, in God's world, blessing doesn't have to be hoarded; there is more than enough to go around. Abram and Sarai would still be blessed with a son, but now, Hagar would, too.

The woman who was supposed to be a silent, invisible, throw-away character, got her own story.

This week, a photojournalism piece in the New York Times caught my eye. It was a short story about 36 Guatemalan women, now in their 80's, who were victims of extreme human rights violations back in 1982 and 1983. Guatemala's armed conflict was at its height. The Guatemalan army, backed by the U.S. military, turned on its own people and carried out acts of terror and violence that are unthinkable. And many of the survivors, like these 36 women, are left to deal with the trauma, while members of the army who committed the crimes, are still alive, walking free as if nothing happened. In recent years, the women banded together with the help of a legal aid society. It's harder to ignore the testimonies of 36 than of one. It's hard to pretend that these women are dispensable, that their past pain doesn't matter, when they take their testimonies to the Supreme Court and demand justice.

At the end of this story, which was told mostly through stunning black and white photographs, the journalist talked about one woman in particular named Candelaria. Candelaria bore a child, a daughter, from the sexual assault she experienced. The girl growing up would ask about her father, and Candelaria told her the truth. Nevertheless, her daughter said to her, "I'm going to take care of you when I'm older. I've come to save you."

Indigenous women whose stories were never told, finally got to tell those stories. And a woman who perhaps had been whispered about her whole life, a woman who should have never been conceived, who some people think should have never been born, got to deliver the punchline.

God worked out the mess that Abram and Sarai created. God often does. God *saw* Hagar in her suffering. After Hagar fled into the wilderness, God called her by name and gave her her own promise: "*I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.*" In fact, Hagar is the only woman in the Old Testament who directly received a divine promise of descendants.

I find it amazing that the Bible includes the voices of the downtrodden and oppressed. Especially stories like Hagar's, whose descendants aren't even a part of Israel's line. Think about that: why would anyone in Israel want this story to be preserved and told? It doesn't exactly paint their forefather Abram and their foremother Sarai in the best light. To me, it's evidence that there were people in Israel who were convinced that God honors humanity of all; God honors the experience of all – because God's promise, God's blessing, is for all. And THAT is a powerful testimony! God often repairs and redeems the messes we create by our unfaithfulness, but God also exposes the hurt and lets the story of the oppressed speak to us on

its own terms. There is no sweeping the hurt under the rug like it never happened, no whitewashing of history to make Israel seem more pure.

In fact, God doesn't stop at exposing the hurt and pain that God's own people bring on the world, God enters into it. Hagar's actions actually anticipate the actions of God in Christ! Think about the connections here: In Jesus Christ, God enters the wilderness. In Christ, God becomes the oppressed who is dealt with harshly by those in authority. And In Christ, God submits to powers, but in order to subvert and undo them.

Because of who God has shown himself to be in Christ, we know that every person matters to God. Every life is precious – young and old, no matter what country they come from, what “status” they have, slave or free. We know that there is no wrong that God cannot overcome, no story that God cannot redeem.

The story of Hagar is not just a story of the havoc that can occur when we try to wrest control from God; it is a story that lifts up the graciousness of God in the midst of human history, which is full of twists and turns and good intentions and bad intentions and deceit and blame and anger and violence. It is a story that shows God's own belief that every story has value. Every person matters, everyone was created in the image of God and is beloved.

In these present times, we, like Abram and Sarai in their seventies, are waiting on the promises of God to be fulfilled, for the world to find its completion in Christ. May we not forget in this waiting time that God's blessing is big enough for all. And may we engage with the people God has placed around us – people we know and people we don't yet know – with great anticipation that we will see and experience God's grace through them.