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Grace Episcopal Church, Bath, ME
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Genesis 21:8-21

Today's reading from Genesis 21 begs for the context of Genesis 16. In Genesis 16, Sarai and Abram—who will become Sarah and Abraham—are lamenting the fact they have no children.

God had previously promised Abraham, "To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen 15:18). This is the "promised land" we hear so much about. But how can descendants inherit land if there are no children?

Despite God's promise, Sarah is distraught in her barrenness. In Biblical times, childlessness was considered a curse and a punishment.¹ A husband even had the right to divorce his wife if 10 years passed without the birth of a child. Sarah is in a socially precarious spot.

Sarah seeks to remedy the situation, telling her husband, "go into my slave girl; maybe I can obtain children by her" (Gen 16:2).

So Abraham agrees and takes Hagar, his slave, as a wife, or rather, a concubine, a second-status wife. Remember, Hagar, an Egyptian, was property—and so this was not consensual. Hagar eventually conceives, and she bears a son and names him Ishmael, "God has heard".

We just celebrated Juneteenth two days ago. On June 19, 1865, the Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas, to announce that the Civil War had ended and enslaved African Americans were free. This came more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued.

¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/barrenness-and-fertility>

The story of Hagar is considered by many Black and Womanist scholars to be paradigmatic of the lives of Black women. Theologian Delores Williams describes Hagar's predicament as involving "slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God" (Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 4).

Biblical stories are comprised of human beings with all the same flaws we all have. We see Abraham and Sarah's impatience for a child, and their using another human being, Hagar, instrumentalizing her, to achieve their own ends.

For anyone who has experienced infertility, Sarah's jealousy is easy to imagine. Imagine not being able to bear a child, and then here is your husband's new young concubine and her healthy, beautiful baby boy.

My first husband and I had hoped for 3 or 4 children, but we had 2. In my 30s, we tried (and failed) to adopt through the foster system. In preparation for that process, we needed to prepare a room, so I invited my girlfriends over to help strip old wallpaper.

One of them arrived, and I can still picture it. We're standing by my front door, and she blurts out, "I'm pregnant. I thought I needed to let you know that." My thinner, prettier neighbor, whose parents were still alive, who had a swimming pool, pregnant with her fourth child.

Clearly I relate to Sarah in today's reading. And for those of you who experienced infertility or who lost a child, you might like to cast me into the sea, with my complaining I only have two children.

This is the beauty of our faith, that the whole of our humanity is in relationship with a God who can hold our negative feelings. We need not repress emotions in favor of a false veneer of cheerfulness. Our God is a god of authenticity. The psalms are a catalogue of human emotions grappling with God.

Psalm 73 is a psalm about jealousy, the psalmist revealing to God,

*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
 my steps had nearly slipped.
 For I was envious of the arrogant;
 I saw the prosperity of the wicked....
 When my soul was embittered,
 when I was pricked in heart,
 I was stupid and ignorant;
 I was like a brute beast toward you.
 Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
 you hold my right hand.*

Earlier in Genesis 16 we read that once Hagar conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress, on Sarah. Probably it was rivalry born of survival, a knowledge that she is bearing a child and still considered less-than with no agency and no claims. Sarah notices Hagar's contempt, and again treats Hagar harshly.

We can only imagine what that harshness entailed, perhaps cruel words, coldness, the withholding of food, maybe even physical violence. In Chapter 16, Hagar runs away. God calls her back. Sarah eventually does conceive, bearing Isaac.

In chapter 21, Sarah again rejects Hagar, saying, "*Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac*" (Gen 21:10). While we probably wouldn't go so far as to hurt someone, or render them homeless, most of us can relate to Sarah's jealousy, her perception of threat to her status, on some level.

At Sarah's insistence, Abraham sends Hagar away into the desert. Exiled and abandoned, she and her child Ishmael finish the bread they have, and then water runs out, and Hagar prepares for her child to die.

She casts him under a bush, the scripture says, and then goes a distance away, the length of a bowshot. Hagar is at her lowest, a single mother, abandoned, alone, realizing her child is dying. She prays, “Do not let me look upon the death of the child.”

Finally, the angel of God appears.

God hears the cry of the oppressed and the outsider. God makes a habit of finding the abandoned; he finds the baby Moses in a basket among the reeds, he finds Ezekiel sitting in exile by the river, and the Resurrected Christ finds the disciples hiding in a locked room after the crucifixion.

God is partial to the oppressed, the afraid and the forgotten. God hears those on the margins. The name Ishmael means, “God has heard.” God hears the almost imperceptible voice of the dying Ishmael crying from under a bush.

Then He ministers to the mother and child, providing a well of water and promising that He will care for Ishmael and make a great nation of him. God will continue to abide with and sustain this little family.

The scripture reads, “*God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow*” (Genesis 21:20)—meaning he will be a good hunter and he and Hagar will eat. Hagar and Ishmael will continue to live in the desert, without the social protections of being in Abraham's household, but also without the threat to their autonomy posed by belonging to wealthy slave owners (Williams, 5).

The story of Hagar is the story of God present even in despair, God revealing himself in the direst of circumstances and facilitating survival. At the nadir of her life, penniless, homeless and her son dying, Hagar has a radical experience of God.

Faith is not the promise of ease and good fortune. Faith is the greater promise of seeing and being seen by God. Of being sustained in love.