

Hagar: The Girl Who Didn't Get to Go Home (Genesis 16:1-16)

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I guess I was a bit of an over-achiever when I was a kid. I'm thinking of the time I was 8 years-old and won two free weeks at camp. I won the first week for doing all sorts of achievements at Christian Service Brigade, a boys club that met every week at the Baptist church down the road. There wasn't really enough room on my uniform for mom to sew on all the little badges, so they kind of wrapped around under my arm. I got the second week for memorizing a truckload of Bible verses during a Sunday School contest. That first week at camp...was the longest week of my life. When mom and dad pulled into camp on visitor's day, I was waiting for them in the parking lot. Lots of tears. I was done. I wanted to go home! One week was more than enough. Our old station wagon with the fake wood panelling on the sides was not leaving without me. Sometimes all you want to do is go home.

Perhaps some of you are feeling that way right now. Perhaps you feel like there is a Berlin wall and a wide chasm between you and the ones you love, and that there are armed guards preventing you from escaping to freedom. Or perhaps you're feeling more like Dorothy, the little girl from Kansas who was carried away on a tornado to a land of Munchkins and flying monkeys. Dorothy had to reach the Emerald City, to get help from the Great Wizard because she wanted something with all her heart. She wanted to go back to Kansas, back to the United States of America; she wanted to go home. Sometimes all you want to do is go home. You make your way to an exotic city full of strange and wonderful creatures and exotic buildings, but all you really want to do is go home. But you can't. Cause you're on Europe Semester.

As it turns out, there's a story in Genesis 16 about a girl who didn't get to go home. Listen to how it goes.

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl 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-girl; 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-girl, 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-girl 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-girl 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-girl 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.

It's really a story about two women. One woman was the wife of Abraham. She was married, rich and free. She was also old (now about 75 years of age)...and barren. Her name was Sarah. The other was a lowly servant girl from Egypt. She was also the personal property of Sarah. She was single, young, and powerless. Her name was Hagar. Verse one says Hagar was a maid servant from Egypt. Hagar was probably one of those 'female servants' that Abraham got from Pharaoh during his sojourn in Egypt. She was one piece of the loot, the stuff, that Abraham acquired for quietly donating his wife to the royal harem of Pharaoh! (Read about it in Genesis 12.)

Sarah first shows up back in Genesis 11 where her one claim to fame is that she was "barren." She couldn't get pregnant. By the time we get to chapter 16 where today's story is found, years have passed, perhaps 50, but Sarah's burden of "barrenness" has not gotten any lighter. So verse one of Genesis 16 has all the ingredients for a fierce battle between two women.

Sarah had been handed over to Pharaoh; Hagar was a gift from Pharaoh.

Sarah had power and status; Hagar did not.

Sarah was old and barren, Hagar was young and fruitful.

It is bad enough to want desperately to have children, when you can't seem to get pregnant. It is another thing entirely to be a barren woman in a world where having children is the mark of success. In Sarah's world, there was one sure way for a woman to gain respect; she could make babies. But Sarah hadn't made any. If you walked by her tent and listened closely, the one thing you would not hear was the sound of children at play. What you might hear instead were the muffled sobs of a woman longing to be a mother. So Sarah does what many wealthier women in her day would have done. She proposes that Hagar, her maid, become a kind of second wife for Abraham. The plan was that when Hagar had a baby, it would count as part of Sarah's family. As Sarah puts it in verse 2: "perhaps I will obtain children by her." In Hebrew she says: "perhaps I will be built up through her." Hagar's job as a slave was to build up a family but that family would belong to Sarah.

What did Hagar think about the idea of bearing children for her mistress? We don't know. Abraham had to be convinced. But Hagar? Her voice is silent. Like many slave women in the ancient world, she was simply a possession, an object, a womb that Sarah "gave" to Abraham. In verse 4, we learn that Hagar, now pregnant, begins to "despise" Sarah, or show "contempt" for her. Hagar sees herself differently now, and no longer feels she has to look up to Sarah. Hagar is carrying Abraham's child! She had proved her worth as a woman while the other woman, her mistress, was merely old and barren. Maybe Hagar saw this as her chance for a promotion, as a chance to go from being a lowly maiden to being a full-fledged wife and mother of Abraham's child.

Everything explodes in verse 5. But as it turns out, Sarah's biggest gripe is with Abraham (not Hagar) and she demands that he make things right. As far as Sarah is concerned, the problem is that this bouncy, perky, young Hagar has forgotten who she is, and Abraham has done nothing to remind her. Conflicts like this were common in the ancient world: mistresses mourned their childlessness and maids gloated over their pregnancy. We even have a Proverb that warns us about it:

21 Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: **22** a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when gluttoned with food; **23** an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress.

Abraham could have written this proverb. His verdict comes in verse 6: “Abram said to Sarai, ‘Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please.’” Abraham sides with Sarah, and confirms Hagar’s status. She will remain a slave.

Abraham did what many ancient Babylonians would have done. We know this because 100 years ago French archaeologists discovered a massive black stone, on which were chiselled a detailed list of laws in force during the reign of King Hammurabi of Babylon. We know it today as the *Code of Hammurabi*, and one of its laws fits Abraham’s dilemma perfectly. It says that:

if a woman gives her female slave to her husband, and if the slave has a child
and then she tries to claim equality with her mistress...,

then the “mistress may not sell her;

[but] she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves.

So the Code of Hammurabi sides with Sarah. If Hagar had hoped for equality and the privileges of being a wife, her hopes were dashed. And not only did Abraham reconfirm that Hagar was Sarah’s slave, verse 6 tells us that “Sarai dealt harshly with her.” Sarah began oppressing Hagar, mistreating her, abusing her. If Sarah couldn’t send her slave away, she could at least make things so ugly that the poor girl would leave on her own. Hagar gets the message. She flees from her oppressor and heads south for Egypt, for home.

Hagar wants to go home. But she doesn’t get to. In verse 7, she gets as far as a spring somewhere along the caravan route to Egypt. Alone, pregnant, defenseless..., a runaway slave wending her way south through the wasteland. She was probably feeling sorry for herself. Certainly feeling scared. Derailed and desperate, hanging precariously by the tatters of her faith. . . when the angel of the LORD finds her. God’s message for Hagar comes in waves. First a question: “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?” Then a command: “Return to your mistress.” Hagar, you don’t get to go home. You have to go back to Sarah.

This was not at all what Hagar wanted to hear, and it gets worse. Look again at verse 9. In the Hebrew text, the angel of the Lord actually says: “Go back to your mistress and submit to her ill-treatment.” The angel of the Lord is telling Hagar, not just to go back to work for Sarah, but to return to the mistreatment and suffering from which she had just fled! Just when Hagar is most vulnerable, most justified in putting her own needs ahead of everything else. Even then: God instructs her to return to a hostile, unwelcome place knowing this would mean suffering at the hands of her mistress. She doesn’t get to do what she wants. She doesn’t get to escape her troubles. She doesn’t get to seek her own comfort. She doesn’t get to go home. I love the way the Bible refuses to sugar-coat the story. It doesn’t pretend that life is easy. It doesn’t promise that God’s people will always get to go home. From slavery in a foreign country. From concentration camps.

How could the Lord’s angel send Hagar back into a life of pain? Isn’t God supposed to be on the side of the weak, the orphans, the fatherless, the homesick? Isn’t God a God of mercy? a God of compassion? Thankfully the story doesn’t stop right there for hope is on its way. First, Hagar learns that her future will be filled with good gifts—with children! Hagar eventually has 12 grandsons and probably even more granddaughters, and she is the only woman in scripture ever to hear the promise of verse 10: “The angel of the Lord also said to her, ‘I will so greatly multiply

your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.’” In her darkest moment, God shows her the light up ahead: God promised her that she, Hagar, an abused Egyptian slave girl, would be a mother and a grandmother and a great grandmother ... of children too numerous to count. That kind of hope might be just enough to carry her through the hard times that still lay ahead. With this hope in her heart, Hagar returns home and gives birth.

I love verse 15: when the time came, Abram, not Hagar, gave the child his name. Ishmael was not going to grow up fatherless. Abraham has embraced this little one as his own son. Notice something else: in verse 11 God reminds Hagar that she is not alone. God was there and God was listening: “Now you have conceived and will bear a son; you shall call him *Yishmael*, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.” *Yish-ma...el*: God hears. God listens. God is paying attention. In the midst of her afflictions, God heard Hagar’s cry. For the rest of her life, *Yish-ma...el* would be Hagar’s very tangible, constant, in-your-face reminder that the Lord God hears.

Think of how it sounded everytime she called Ishmael’s name, for him to come in for dinner, for him to do his chores, for him to stop bugging his little brother. “God-is-listening! God-is-listening! Are you listening to me, God-is-listening?” Hagar’s child was no longer merely a sign that she was a real woman, that she was better than Sarah, that she deserved to be promoted, exalted, liberated. Now her child was the sign of something far more profound: “God could hear her cries.” This story would remind the Israelites for many years, that God would not stop listening. Exodus 22:21-23, part of God’s law for Israel, says:

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.”

God did not promise to end Hagar’s troubles. God didn’t fix her problems, or make them go away, or let her go home. In some ways, Hagar’s life just gets harder. Hagar’s life is not a fairytale. She didn’t get to wear the magic slippers. The knight in shining armor never arrived. Hagar had to learn, like all of us, that God’s kingdom is so often more about weakness, suffering and endurance than it is about power, wealth and personal comfort.

Hagar was called, like some of us, to live out her days “at the boundary of consolation and desolation.” [Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 17] But she also got to live out those days in the presence of God, knowing that God was listening. Was it enough to know that God is listening? For Hagar..., I think it was. For no sooner has the angel of the Lord departed than she cries out: “You are *El-roi*.” *El-roi*. “God-who-sees-me” Hagar got to name God! For Hagar, God is the One who hears her cries and who sees her affliction. That, I suspect, was more than enough.

I wonder, as a footnote, what difference it might make to read this story as a community of believers, as a family of God’s redeemed children? Perhaps this story could call us, here, to a different sort of life together: one that strives to create a safe place, somewhere in between the isolation of the desert, and the abuse of the city. A half-way house, a refuge, a place where God can meet us. One of my dreams for all of us is that we will increasingly be a community where the fragile and vulnerable Hagar’s (which probably means all of us), and the heartbroken and weary Sarahs as well, can take refuge and be safe.