



"Hagar and Ishmael Driven Away"
By Frederick Goodall (1822-1904)

Unintended consequences. Change of heart. A request made in good faith that doesn't work out the way you thought and now what you wished for has become a source of jealousy and regret. Where is God in this situation, you ask?

Some background to today's reading from Genesis is needed to fully appreciate where and how God is working in the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac. First, Genesis contains many of the most important and foundational stories of our faith. We need to read and understand Genesis to make sense of what comes after – our origins of faith are as important as the origins of our family.¹

Genesis contains what is commonly referred to as an "ancestral history focusing on Abraham and his descendants. We, like the Jews and the Muslims, consider Abraham as a patriarch or father of our faith. The promise of God to Abraham is to create a great nation from Abraham's offspring. Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew which we are focusing on this

liturgical year A, starts the genealogy of Jesus with Abraham.

The story of Abram, as he was known originally, begins following the flood and the Tower of Babel. Abram goes with his father, Terah, and Abram's wife, Sarai, to the town of Haran where Terah died. The Lord then told Abram to "go to the land that I will show you and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-2). Abram picks up and goes and has some interesting adventures along the way.

Among the conversations that continue between God and Abram is God telling Abram to "raise his eyes now and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you can see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth..." (Gen. 13:14-16). But how can this be when Abram and Sarai have no children to inherit all the wealth that they have been blessed with? Sarai is barren and Abram is old. God confirms to Abram that Abram's heir shall be a child of Abram's body and God tells Abram to "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be. And Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:5-6). God has again promised Abram what Abram wants most and what is most valued in the culture of the time: a child of his blood to inherit his lands and wealth.

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) 3rd Edition (Oxford University Press, 2001), 9 et seq

And so into the picture comes Hagar, an Egyptian slave-girl, who served Sarai. Since Sarai is barren, she does what she believes is the next best thing- and something perfectly within the norms of that day. Sarai begs Abram, at age 86, to take Hagar as wife and to get a child on Hagar. And so it happens. But then Sarai regrets doing so and wants Abram to send Hagar away. And God speaks to Hagar this time and tells her to submit to Sarai. The Angel of the Lord promises Hagar that God “will so multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude” (Gen. 16:10). Offspring upon offspring all arising from Abram, through Hagar and through Sarai.

Well, God appears to Abram once again and after promising the desired offspring, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham “for I have made you the multitude of nations, I will make you exceedingly fruitful ... and the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and Abraham’s offspring is circumcision at 8 days old (Gen. 17), the tradition that is still followed in religious Jewish households. At this same time, because Abraham has continued to believe in God’s promises, Sarai becomes Sarah. At this point, Abraham is 100 years old and I think can be forgiven for laughing – just like Sarah did in the tent at the oaks of Mamre. God takes their laughter in stride and repeats his promises.

And so, as we know, it comes to pass that Sarah does indeed bear a son who is named Isaac. And thus we come to today’s reading from Genesis.

Sarah, acting according to the culture of her time, asked Abraham to take Hagar to wife so that a child- a son- might be born and be Abraham’s legitimate heir. And even though it was hard to see, as long as Sarah did not birth a child it was bearable for the greater good of the family and tribe. But when Sarah had Isaac, her jealousy and fears for her own child’s place in the family and tribe came to the forefront. Hagar and Ishmael had to go so they would be no threat to Isaac.

As a father, Abraham struggled with Sarah’s instructions but God comes to the rescue once more, assuring Abraham that both sons will carry on Abraham’s name and lineage. So out Hagar goes with bread and a skin of water. Meager rations in a desert for two people even as they trusted God when God said that a nation would come from Ishmael.

“What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast, 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. God was with the boy and he grew up” (Gen. 21: 17-20).

God was actively present with Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac in ways that I suspect none of us have quite experienced. They saw God acting in their lives and believed in the promises that were made to them. Perhaps that is a difference that makes faith so hard for so many. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1). It makes me jealous sometimes that our ancestors sometimes got to see things that I have to take on faith. Wouldn’t it be easier to keep the faith if at least now and then we got to see with our own eyes and ears the very things we pray for? Sometimes we do when we pray for some to heal and their health returns. Sometimes we do when we pray for a child to “straighten up” and they do – not through what we have done but rather because something changed for that child and the behaviors that were so destructive stop. And sometimes our prayers are not answered in the ways we hope for.

God is always present in our lives and perhaps most especially when we don't see evidence of God's action. When we are grounded in our faith, we can take comfort in the stories of our origins- our genesis- our starting point. These stories show us struggles similar to ours that sometimes do have happy endings. Sometimes they don't, especially if you think about God promising to make great nations out of both Ishmael and Isaac. And if you think about God promising all the land that he could see to Abraham and then realize the land that Abraham could see was what we know today as the Holy Land. No wonder both Jews and Arabs and Palestinians and others all claim that land as given to them by God! That is a struggle that needs God's intervention more than ever today and we may not see a resolution but we can pray for one.

Part of what makes the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac so enduring is that we can place ourselves in it. Not detail for detail, but rather in seeking the good of our family and tribe. Working within our culture so that all may prosper. Claiming a relationship with God and a faith that continues even in hard times, such as when Hagar is cast out for no sin other than having a child that Sarah not only condoned but encouraged to come into being by giving Hagar to Abraham. And Sarah for being human and wanting the best for her child.

The story gives us hope. We do not have to be perfect. We do not have to have everything the world holds as essential. We can celebrate being human. We can celebrate being loved by God, who wants the best for us at all times and in all ways. And we can bolster our faith by knowing the stories in our Bible that remind us of where we came from and how God is working in our lives even when we don't see a burning bush or we don't talk with God's angels under a tent at the oaks of Mamre or when we don't have God telling us that our descendants will be as numerous as the grains of sand or the stars in the sky. Regardless of our circumstances, God is present and God loves us. And that's a reason to say "Alleluia. Amen."