



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Waiting on the God Who Sees Genesis 16:1-16

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This morning we'll be looking at a new "act" in the drama of Genesis and in the story of God's interaction with Abram. In the last act—the last part of the story—we saw God working out his promise of the land of Canaan to Abram. God promised it to Abram, but there were obstacles in the way: first Lot, then the Canaanites and Perizzites themselves. God overcame each of those obstacles and as he did we saw Abram's faith in God's promise at work. Finally, in Chapter 15 we saw God respond to Abram's faith in the solemn covenant ceremony in which he assured Abram that his descendants would possess the land after spending 400 years in Egypt. And we saw God not only make another promise, but he invoked a covenant curse on himself, pledging his own destruction—pledging the impossible—should he fail to be true to his covenant promises.

But that's not the end of Abram's story. The land wasn't the only part of God's promise. He had also promised a son and that Abram's descendants would be like the dust of the earth and like the stars in the night sky. When is God going to make good on that part of the promise? And so far we've seen how Abram and God respond to each other: God calls and promises; Abram responds in faith—and when he doesn't, God corrects him and puts him back on track. Again, God calls and promises; this time Abram trusts and walks by faith and, in return, God gives him further assurances of the sureness of his promise and gives Abram reason to keep walking in faith. But is Abram's faith now perfected? When his faith was weak we saw him abandon God's promise

and stray into Egypt. Is Abram done walking by sight now? And what about Sarai, his wife; what does she think about all of this? These are the questions that lead us into Chapter 16. God's not finished with Abram (or with Sarai).

The setup for this new episode comes in the first verse of Chapter 16:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.

The problem: God promised Abram that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars, but so far Abram doesn't have any children. This has come up before, but this time we see it from Sarai's perspective. She was Abram's wife and as a wife she had failed in what was, for women in that culture, her single most important duty: bearing children to carry on the name of her husband. It may not seem like a big deal to us, because our culture places much less value on children than theirs did, but for someone like Sarai it was a very *big* deal. Not only that, but barrenness was seen as a curse from the gods. No doubt she wondered how that fit in with God's promise to her husband. God had called Abram to walk with him and had promised his blessings in return, but as far as she was concerned, he had cursed her when it came to her most important duty as a wife.

Verse one also introduces a possible solution: "She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar." How is her maidservant a solution? In Mesopotamian and Canaanite culture it was common for the husband of a barren woman to conceive a child with a surrogate, usually his wife's servant or slave. We have marriage contracts from the time stipulating that if a wife fails to bear children, she is obligated to provide a surrogate. The Code of Hammurabi addresses the specifics of

this kind of situation as well.¹ To us—especially to Christians in light of the sexual ethics that the Bible teaches—this sounds totally crazy and wrong. But remember that Abram didn't have the benefit of all those teachings. He didn't have the Bible. He simply had God's call: "Follow me and I will bless you." And Abram and Sarai lived in a culture where this was the norm—even the expectation. Remember that these people didn't understand the full mechanics of fertilisation. The role of a woman in childbearing was little more than that of incubator for the man's seed. So long as the man produced an heir, one incubator was pretty much as good as another.

So here we see, from Sarai's perspective, God's promise of children; we see the obstacle of her barrenness. It's easy to conclude that she would have seen this as a major failing on her part. But there's an obvious solution: her maid, Hagar. This is the setup for the story. And seeing the setup, we know what's going to happen. And you and I want shout at Sarai (and at Abram): "No! Don't do it. This isn't the solution to the problem. It's only going to get you into trouble." And the Israelites, hearing this hundreds of years later would be saying just the same thing. Not only does this kind of arrangement go against God's law, but we know that when God promises something, he doesn't need us using worldly methods to help him out.

Again, Abram didn't have the benefit of knowing that this sort of arrangement was a violation of marriage as God had instituted it. It was the norm in his culture; it was perfectly proper and respectable. But that's really a moot point, because he and Sarai should have known that God's promise don't require us to compromise our faith in order to bring them about. Never. Abram had

¹ *The Code of Hammurabi* §146; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 444.

lamented to God that the only heir he had was his servant, Eliezer of Damascus. And in response, God assured Abram that his heir would not be a slave, not an adopted son, but his own *natural* son. Sarai should have understood that promise as applying to her just as much as to Abram. As it was to be his natural son, it was also to be her natural son. But Sarai isn't willing to wait any longer. It's possible that she had waited, but has finally now passed through menopause and now sees no hope. Look at verse 2:

And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

This isn't good. Yes, in that culture, God was seen as the one who blessed women with children or saw fit to make them barren, but as Sarai approaches Abram about this problem she shows us her lack of faith. God had made a promise, but since he hasn't made good on it—and Sarai's first mistake is to expect God to work on her timeline—she's going to sort it out for herself. That's never a good thing. To underscore this the storyteller actually stages this story in a way that takes us right back to Chapter 3 and to the fall of Adam and Eve. See if you can see the similarities:

So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. (Genesis 16:3-4a)

Just as Eve did, Sarai takes the initiative and usurps her husband's position. It starts with her taking God's role of “seeing” on herself, and, of course, because she lacks God's knowledge and wisdom, she gets

herself into trouble. Just as the fruit looked good to Eve, using Hagar as a surrogate looks good to Sarai. As Eve gave the fruit with its false good looks to Adam, Sarai gives Hagar to Abram. And as Adam obeyed his wife's foolish offer, so Abram foolishly obeys Sarai. And at first it looks like Sarai's scheme is going to work. Hagar conceives. But that's just what things take a turn for the worse. Look at the second half of verse 4:

And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

Sarai really should have seen this coming. It would have been the natural reaction of most slave girls in that situation. In fact, this sort of reaction on the part of slaves used as surrogates was common enough that the lawcodes of the day addressed how to deal with it.² And so Sarai, in her anger, goes to Abram and blames him for the whole problem; just as Eve did, she tries to shift the blame.

And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant 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!” (Genesis 16:5)

We can tell just how angry Sarai is, because she really blows Hagar's “contempt” for her out of proportion. She uses the word *hāmās*—the same word for violence that we saw back in Chapter 6, the sort of evil violence that caused God to bring the flood. And not taking any responsibility for this herself, she ends with what is practically a curse on her husband.

I can certainly sympathise with Abram not wanting to get in the middle of Sarai and Hagar's feud. Hagar was Sarai's maid. The whole scheme was

Sarai's idea. But the fact is that Sarai is his wife and, legally now, so is Hagar. Abram should man up and sort this out, but he doesn't. Laws were in place to protect women in Hagar's position, but Abram leaves the poor girl to Sarai's mercy and Sarai isn't ready to show any mercy.

But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. (Genesis 16:6)

Sarai accused God of failing his promise; she tried to take his initiative on herself; Abram failed in his role as spiritual head and went along with her plan; the whole thing blew up in their faces; and now the woman carrying the child they went to all this trouble to conceive has run off. What now?

The story doesn't end there. In verse 7 the storyteller catches up to Hagar, probably about a week later and about 120 kilometres to south, near the Egyptian frontier. Imagine this poor pregnant woman, probably on foot, making her way alone through the Sinai desert.

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

First, who is the “angel of the LORD”? The title shows up in one form or another almost seventy times in the Old Testament. The Church Fathers tended to see him as a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ, but the text doesn't really support this idea. Unfortunately, in the midst of the controversies in the early Church to sort out the person and nature of Christ, the Fathers sometimes read Jesus back into the Old Testament in places where it wasn't justified. The “angel of the Lord” often brings messages from God and usually, but not always, speaks in the first person as if he were God himself. Because of

² *Code of Hammurabi* §146; *Laws of Ur-Nammu* §22-23 (ANET); cf. Proverbs 30:21-23.

that some people have argued that this *is* a manifestation of God.

In both Hebrew and in Greek, the word “angel” literally means “messenger”. And in the ancient Near East, kings sent out messengers in ways very similar to the ways that modern rulers send out ambassadors. These messengers spoke directly for the king, in his name, and as if the king himself were speaking. The messengers were also expected to be received with the same kind of courtesy that would be afforded to the king. We don’t really need to read anything into the text that isn’t here. The angel of the Lord is simply God’s messenger who comes to speak on his behalf. Sometimes it’s angel—as with Gabriel who came to Martha to announce the birth of John the Baptist and to St. Mary to announce the birth of Christ—or, sometimes, it’s a man—a prophet—as in the case of Haggai of whom the same title is used (Haggai 1:13).

So this angelic messenger from the Lord catches up with Hagar, the runaway slave girl at a place called “Shur”. “Shur” means “wall” and probably refers to the line of border forts that the Egyptians built along their frontier. Hagar was fleeing to her old home in Egypt.

And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8a)

Notice that the angel calls to Hagar by name. It might not seem like much, but the fact is that this is the only instance we have in ancient Near Eastern literature—including the rest of the Old Testament—where a god or his representative addresses a woman by her name. That God seeks out a runaway slave girl and calls her by name is a big deal, and in doing so he establishes trust with her. Hagar knows that this isn’t just a man who has happened on her at the spring.

Only God could know her name and that she was Sarai’s servant. And he asks Hagar where she’s come from. It’s not that God didn’t know, but his asking parallels his questioning Adam and Cain after their sin. “Adam, where are you?” “Cain, where is your brother?” Now he comes to the runaway slave: “Hagar, where are you going?” In contrast, however, to Adam and Cain who were not up-front with God, Hagar is immediately honest:

She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” (Genesis 16:8b-9)

This seems harsh. When the angel tells her to submit to her mistress, he’s using a word that in other forms refers to oppression and humiliation. God knows what’s in store for Hagar at Sarai’s hand, but God also promises her blessing in return. It’s a reminder that in God’s economy freedom and status don’t come by trying to throw off our lot in life, but by accepting with humility the place in which God has put us and allowing *him* to lift us up. Look at verses 10 to 12:

The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction.

He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

Hagar’s son is Abram’s son and as Abram’s son God promises that he will take part in Abram’s blessing. He

tells her to name her son “Ishmael”, which means “God has heard”. God heard Hagar. He saw her affliction and her desire for freedom from a harsh mistress. God promises that that freedom will belong to her son. God describes him as a “wild donkey [or ass] of a man”. Those words didn’t have the negative connotations for her that they do for us. We think of the donkeys we know as stubborn and thickheaded. The Hebrew word that’s used here refers to the “wild ass” that lived in the desert. It was more like a horse than a donkey and in the Old Testament it was characterised an individualistic lifestyle that wasn’t stuck in social conventions. But Ishmael’s desire to live free, God says, will lead him into conflict with others. He’ll live on the fringe of society and God hints that as much as he will inherit Abram’s blessing in part, he is not the offspring through whom God has promised to work out his covenant promises.

Now, realising who it is that is speaking to her through the messenger—through the angel—Hagar responds in faith, naming God. Look at verses 13 and 14:

So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

Do you remember the importance of “seeing”? Not only is “seeing” God’s role. He’s the only one with the knowledge and wisdom to “see” and to know whether what he sees is good or bad. But for God to “see” is always *also* for God to “provide”. Hagar ran away because she saw her situation as lacking in goodness. But God has wider vision than she does. And so he sends her back, but assures her that he will bless her. He has seen her affliction and he will provide her with what is truly good. And so in

addressing him as El-Roi—the God who sees—she’s also acknowledging him as the God who provides. And having encountered God, having been called by him to return to her mistress, she returns—she walks by faith and trusts the God who has seen her affliction with provide for her.

The chapter closes with an epilogue in verses 15 and 16:

And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Abram was no doubt happy. For Sarai, Ishmael’s birth was no doubt bittersweet. Things didn’t play out the way she had anticipated when she tried to engineer the fulfilment of God’s promise. Hagar’s son was supposed to be her son—and legally he is her son—but because of what’s happened, because of the harshness with which she treated Hagar, because Hagar had fled, and because God had intervened on Hagar’s behalf, Ishmael is truly Hagar’s son. He is *a* child of promise, but he’s not *the* child of promise. Three times the text reminds us that it was Hagar who bore Ishmael. Sarai isn’t even mentioned.

The story reminds us of the importance of faithfully waiting on God. Sarai knew God’s promise. And yet eleven years passed after the promise had been made and she still hadn’t borne Abram a son. Maybe this story takes place at the point when she passed beyond her childbearing years. Whatever the case, she became anxious about God’s promise and decided to force God’s hand using worldly means. It reminds us of Abram’s own loss of faith in the promise when he decided to travel to Egypt during the famine. It wasn’t that going to Egypt was morally wrong; it was that God had called him to Canaan, had promised it to him, and had given him the guarantee of his

care. Leaving the promised land to seek bread in Egypt was to abandon faith in God’s promise. This episode in the story now shows us Sarai’s own failure to walk by faith. Whether it was morally right or wrong to use Hagar as a surrogate isn’t the point. The point is that God had promised a son and when the son didn’t come, when it seemed impossible, she tried to engineer a solution on her own. She trusted in what she could do for herself, not in what God could do for her. Her hasty and faithless action is now going to put off God’s promise for another thirteen years.

At the same time, the story reminds us that in his grace, God redeems our mistakes. Ishmael does become Abram’s much-loved son. In Hagar we’ve seen how God cares for the poor and downtrodden and especially for a slave in Israel who is downtrodden by one of his chosen people. Hagar’s suffering becomes a counter-type to the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. What the Egyptians would later do to Sarai’s children, Sarai first did to an Egyptian. And yet God heard the cries of both; he had compassion on both. Consider God’s declaration to Hagar: “You shall bear a son and call his name Ishmael for the LORD has seen your affliction.” Two thousand years later the angel of the Lord appeared to Mary to declare: “Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” Like Mary, Hagar stands as an example of one who trusted in God and in his promise and became a part of God’s gracious blessing on people too numerous to count.

We need to ask whether or not we have the faith to wait on God. He has promised to take care of each of us. How often do we get impatient and compromise our faith—maybe even using worldly or sinful means—to bring about what he promised. He has promised to build his Church. How often do we try to help him out by

compromising our doctrine, our message, or our witness; how often do we use worldly or pragmatic means to fill our membership roles or the offering plate? Sometimes it’s easy to see where we compromise; sometimes it’s not. Abram and Sarai teach us the need for *discernment* as we follow God and trust in him. Remember that when it came to the morality of using Hagar as a surrogate, they had no idea that such a thing was wrong. When Abram fled the promised land to buy bread in Egypt he was simply doing what everyone else was doing. There was nothing morally wrong with it. Neither was a case of moral compromise; they were both cases of compromising faith in God’s promise. This is why discernment is so important. Discernment makes the difference between stepping out in radical faith and stepping out of God’s will. The longer we walk with God, the more our discernment will be refined. We’ll see this with Abram. And this is why God surrounds us with older and wiser saints in his Church—he doesn’t expect us to rely on our own judgement. Brothers and sisters, consider the blessing that comes as we truly walk in faith and wait on God—on his timing and his way of doing things. Sarai had great plans to produce an heir for her husband, but as the story pans out, God had even greater plans—plans she and Abram couldn’t image from their limited perspective. Remember: Our God is El-Roi. He is the God who sees and that means he is also the God who provides. He sees more than we can imagine and if we will only trust him, he will provide more than we can conceive.

Let us pray. Gracious Father, God who Sees, see our need for faith and provide, we pray. Remind us that our sight is limited and that yours is infinite. Teach us to trust in your sight—in your knowledge of what is truly good for us—and let us rest in your promises. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.