

The Real Thing: Accept no Substitutes
Genesis 16:1 – 16
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
May 8, 2016

Educating Father Abraham: Marriage and the value of Wife – Genesis 12:11- 13; 16:1- 2

¹¹When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.”

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ²And 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.”

Preparing this sermon this past week raised some interesting questions for me as a preacher, as a pastor. My job is to preach Christ. The message of the Bible points to the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Today is Ascension Sunday. This past Thursday was the fortieth day after Easter, Ascension Day, the day Jesus Christ rose to his heavenly throne, at the right hand of God the Father. I am called to proclaim Christ and invite people to place their faith in him as Savior and Lord.

Related to that, my job is not to make bad people good; or good people better. I am not here to preach personal morality, societal ethics, leadership, social justice, personal improvement, lifestyle choices or politics. These are each important arenas of life. And, we touch upon them sometimes as a consequence of our scripture study. But these topics take a secondary place to the task of preaching the gospel of Christ. I know that I must resist the temptation to replace the preaching of Christ with the promotion of personal morality or the pursuit of a vision of social justice. Jesus Christ can be found on every page of sacred scripture. I look at the book of Genesis and I see the gospel of Christ revealed.

The story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar that we look at today will lead us to the gospel message. But surprisingly, their story begins with an exploration of the place of marriage in human life. In the book of Genesis, we see God’s education of Father Abram’s understanding of the place of marriage. What we find are repeated threats to Abram and Sarai’s marriage. And we find God’s guidance and intervention in order to keep them as husband and wife as they face these threats.

Briefly, Abram and his entourage are about to enter the land of Egypt. Worried about his safety given Sarai’s beauty, Abram contrives to lie about his relationship to her. “Say you are my sister,” he tells Sarai. Pharaoh does take notice of Sarai and brings her into his harem. At this point, God intervenes, Sarai is rescued, and her marriage to Abram is saved.

Now, in the passage before us, Abram and Sarai's marriage is again threatened, though this time it is Sarai who opens the doorway to temptation. Her frustration in being childless has taken its toll. She proposes to give her maid Hagar to Abram as a wife, that I shall obtain children by her.

Take note a couple of things from this passage. First, remember that Sarai is a woman of faith. When she speaks of her barrenness, she does so acknowledging God: "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children." Second, note that Genesis highlights that Hagar is Egyptian: She had a female *Egyptian* servant whose name was Hagar. This is the beginning of a theme we see throughout the Bible: God's people, the people of the covenant, are threatened by the temptations of Egypt.

Abram was 75 years old when he heard God's promise and left his father's home in Haran to travel to the land of Canaan. Abram believed that God would give him a son in his old age. God had promised to make him a 'great nation.' It never occurred to him *how old* in his old age he would be before that son arrived. Ten years pass since they have left the closeness of family and the familiar world of Haran behind. Sarai is ten years farther away from her years of fertility. Ten years of waiting for God to fulfill his promise. Tom Petty is absolutely right, '*the waiting is the hardest part.*'

In waiting, we are tempted to take matters into our own hands, as we see Abram and Sarai doing. This leads to the next observation: cultural approval is not the same thing as divine approval.

Cultural approval is not the same thing as divine approval

³So, 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. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.

Note that Sarai gives Hagar to Abram as a 'wife.' We know from the Code of Hammurabi and other ancient documents that there was cultural precedence and acceptance for Sarai's proposal. This is not a matter of sexual impropriety. Hagar was being *elevated* to the status of 'wife.' Her role was not equal to Sarai's. Sarai was the primary wife. She took precedence. Under ancient law, children born out of this arrangement were under the authority of the chief wife – Sarai. Let me add quickly that, in contrast to the religion of Islam, the taking of multiple wives is never encouraged in the Bible. The Bible recognizes and reports social realities. In doing so, it is not giving its stamp of approval. Just because the culture says something is okay, does not mean that God says it is okay.

Sarai's and Abram's actions are socially, culturally and morally acceptable. They have not acted outside the bounds of propriety. The issue at stake is not a moral issue. It is a faith issue. Sarai was not willing to wait upon God, to wait for his perfect timing. She believed she could do it on her own. Sarai has had enough of waiting. God has promised a son. She conceives a plan whereby that son might be gotten by her own initiative. She will use Hagar as her surrogate. She steps outside the right boundaries of

wife. She expects God to bless her efforts. Sarai has the right motivations. She is not doing this for herself alone. God has given his promise. She and Abram will have a son. She will get to the goal by an alternate pathway. It is simple, straight forward, and it accomplishes what God has intended all along. What can possibly be wrong in that?

This is the dominant attitude of the world. We want God to bless what we want. We want him to bless what we are already doing. This is why Frank Sinatra's song, 'My Way' is the national anthem of the modern world. We want to do things 'my way.' And we expect God to enter into our plans, bless our efforts, endorse our rights and give his benediction to the things our hearts desire.

The major obstacle we face in doing things "my way" is that we are fallen people and we have no choice but to live in the world as God has created it.

We are fallen people and we have no choice but to live in the world as God has created it

And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵ 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!" ⁶ 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.

God has created and ordered the world. God's character, wisdom and purpose are woven into the reality of creation as he intends it. Humans are free to choose how to behave and live in God's world. However, when we step outside the parameters of God's will, wisdom and guidance, there may be unintended consequences. Sarai's mistake was to focus primarily, exclusively, upon her hunger and desire for a child to call her own. Few desires of the human heart run as deep or as strongly as that. We can sympathize with her. The problem is not her desire. It is good and proper. The problem is her initiative. She failed to consider how giving Hagar to Abram as wife would undermine her marriage. Now there is competition amongst the women of Abram's household. Hagar's attitude is haughty. Sarai's marriage to Abram is weakened, threatened. The proverb is true that *'if you could kick the person most responsible for your troubles, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week.'* That said, we rarely admit it to be so. Most of the time, when we face trial and trouble in life, we prefer to blame somebody, anybody, for the difficulties we face.

Sarai takes the initiative. The plan was hers, not Abram's. And when the plan sours, Sarai blames Abram. '*You are responsible,*' she says. This tendency is called 'projection' by psychologists. We take what we know to be true in us and we project it onto someone else. The blame we lay is the blame we bear. This truth should give us pause before we lay blame before anyone else's door. The charges we lay at another's door may belong at ours.

A second, related observation is that simply because someone claims God for their side does not mean that they are in the right or that God is in agreement. Sarai, in

her anger, lashes out at Abram. She invokes God as judge between them. She is angry at Hagar's haughtiness. She feels hurt and humiliated. She blames Abram. But nothing in the text suggests that God is in agreement with Sarai's words. She invokes God's name, but that does not mean that God endorses her accusation.

Abram and Sarai have created this mess and now they seek a way out of it. Abram tells 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. Hagar understandably flees. She reveals to us that in a crisis we go back to what we know.

In crises we go back to what we know

⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

We are told that Hagar is found by the angel of the Lord at a spring alongside of the road to Shur. This is significant. It suggests what was in Hagar's mind. We are not told how she came to be a part of Abram's household, but we are told that she is an Egyptian. 'On the road to Shur' tells us that she was on the road back to Egypt, back to home, back to what she knows. This is the natural human response when we encounter bitterness, trial and turmoil in life. We long to turn back the clock. We want to go back to the way things were, to a time when things were simpler and sure. Hagar feels hurt and mistreated, she wants to go back to a place that is familiar.

The angel sent by God seeks her out. He finds her. Hagar is not to be abandoned by God. Angels are messengers from God. The angel's message to Hagar is that God's will for her will be found in her submission to Sarai.

God's will is revealed to us as we submit

⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her."

Hank Williams Jr. sings a song about sometimes needing an *attitude adjustment*. The Lord rescues Hagar, but he sides with Sarai. He tells her to return to Sarai and to adjust her attitude: "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The solution to life's difficulties is often found in submitting to them. I know that we do not wish to hear that. God's will is often revealed to us when we willingly submit to what is required of us. A negative consequence of our wealth and technology is that it is easy for Christian men and women, like Hagar, to run from the problems of life. The angel counsels Hagar to swallow her pride, ignore her hurt, and return to Sarai, submitting herself to her as her mistress.

In the modern world we do not want to submit to the problems of life. We want them to go away. A child is born with Down Syndrome and the doctor asks, 'Do you want the child fed?' A young career woman finds herself unmarried and pregnant and all she can hear is the siren call of the abortion clinic. We don't like our boss, so we change jobs rather than ask how God may be at work in the situation. A little girl acts like a tomboy and the school authorities counsel that she must be transgendered. A young man struggles with same-sex-attraction: and the world says to him, "Do not fight it. It is who you are."

For God's people, problems are our classroom. The angel of the Lord speaks the same words to us: go back, submit and see how God will be at work in your life through this trial. Sometimes we have to wander, in order to have our attitudes adjusted. Sometimes we must get lost in the desert in order to realize how precious and sweet the oasis is. Sometimes God lets us wander, in order that he might meet us as we learn again how important it is to cling to him, and him alone. We submit to the struggles God gives us because in them, we meet God.

And one important truth God teaches is that human moral and spiritual failure does not mean that God abandons us.

Human moral and spiritual failure does not mean that God abandons us

¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” ¹¹And 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.”

The name Ishmael means “*God hears*.” Hagar is given a hopeful word from the angel, the LORD has listened to your affliction. No one in Genesis 16 is as he or she should be. Sarai is presumptuous in thinking she can force God’s hand. Hagar is first haughty and proud. Then she runs away. Abram is weak and indifferent, a passive head of the household. Many believe that God writes us off when we fail to live up to what is expected of us. Some religions teach this idea. If you walk away from the religion, God abandons you. It is a capital crime in some places in the Muslim world to leave the faith of Islam. Fail God and your life is forfeited. There is no redemption. No hope. No return.

Thankfully, that is not the message of the Bible. In the midst of the turmoil and strife Hagar runs away. She is sought and found by an ‘angel of the Lord.’ God does not abandon her. He does not write Hagar off. Hagar is heading off alone on the roadway to return to Egypt and God sends his angel, his messenger, to give her specific guidance and direction as to what she should do and how she should act. God wants Hagar to know him. She grows in her understanding of God. ¹³So 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.”

Sarai’s initiative in this passage bears fruit, a bitter fruit, even today. Ishmael, the child born to Hagar, becomes the father of the Arab peoples. The promised son, still yet to be born, Isaac, will become the father of the Jewish people. The rivalry of their two mothers was passed on to their sons and it continues into today.

What is the spiritual truth taught to us in this passage? It reminds us that physical descent is not enough.

Physical descent is not enough

¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

A basic principle of Biblical interpretation is called the analogical principle. It means, simply, that we let scripture interpret scripture. Again and again the Bible teaches that there are two paths in life. All men and women follow one or the other. In the story of Abram, we have two sons: Ishmael and, coming later, Isaac. One is the child of the promise. The other is the child of human effort. They represent two covenants. One is the old covenant, the covenant of law and slavery. The other is the new covenant, the covenant of promise. One is born to slavery. The other is born to freedom.

Take note: both Ishmael and Isaac can claim Abram as their father. But physical descent alone is not enough. Jesus said the same thing in John 3, when he said that we must be born of water and the spirit. Water is a symbol of physical birth. But added to the physical birth must be the spiritual reality. It is not enough to be simply born into a Christian family. It is not enough to have faithful parents or grandparents. There comes a moment in each person's life where, if they are to be born again, they must embrace the faith for themselves alone. There comes a moment when we add our voice, individually, publicly, in confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The job of the Christian parent is to raise their children into honorable, faithful adulthood. Honorable adulthood is to take one's place in your family, community, state and nation. But for Christian parents, we pray and encourage our children to also take their place in faithful adulthood: be present each week in worship; gather with other believers in a small group; deepen your knowledge of the Bible's message; and serve others joyfully in the name of Christ. The goal is that our children be disciples, followers of the way of Christ. Physical descent is not enough. We pray and strive for spiritual descent as well.

There is a mystery in all this. God has his purposes. We know what Abram did not know: that God was deliberately delaying the arrival of Isaac in order to make it clear that the child born was born miraculously, by God's power. Ninety-nine-year-old ladies do not give birth to bouncing baby boys unless God has his hand in the matter.

In this way Isaac's birth is also emblematic of every spiritual birth from above. It is a miracle of God. Every rebirth is a miracle. Every rebirth is accomplished by God's power. Every person who is born again is born again by the intervention of God. He gives life where none was before.

What this means for us, practically, is that spiritual descent is also needed.

Spiritual Descent is Needed – Genesis 17:18 – 19

¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" ¹⁹God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

Let us jump ahead a few verses as I bring this message to a close. Hagar returns to Abram's family. Ishmael is born. The years go by. God returns to Abram to tell him that the time has come. He, God, is about to fulfill the promise fully. Sarai will be pregnant and give birth to a son, Isaac. And then something surprising happens (Genesis 17:18): And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" Abram is satisfied with status quo, with Ishmael he has his descendent. Sadly, this is human nature. We prefer what we give to God, rather than what he offers to us.

But Ishmael is not the child of the covenant. Isaac is. God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. In this we are all like Abraham. We are not interested in his promises. Rather, we want to offer to God our offspring. We

focus on our efforts, our offerings. What we have done. What we have accomplished. What we need is to take our eyes off of our own accomplishments and instead turn to the gift God has given.

Where are you spiritually today? God has provided a way of salvation for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Have you embraced Christ? Do you trust and believe in him? Or are you like Abram, speaking back to God. "Oh that Ismael may live before you!" "God, I have led a good life. I am a moral person. I have done my share to make the world better." And God says back to you, "I have established my covenant through Jesus Christ. Trust in him, not in yourself, your goodness, or your good intentions."

Believe in Christ today.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

Prayer of Response

O Lord, our God, you have given to us the glorious gospel of our risen Savior and Master: Grant that as we joyfully receive the good news for ourselves, so we may gratefully share it with others, and ever give glory to you, by whose grace alone we are what we are: through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Genesis 16:1 – 16

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ²And 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. ³So, 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. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵And 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!" ⁶But 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.

⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her,

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his hand against everyone
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and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

¹³So 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." ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.