

Genesis 16

This chapter offers us another example of Abram and Sarai's lack of trust in God and a glimpse into God's care and compassion for those who are not directly in the line of promise.

We begin with the lack of trust. Abram and Sarai have been promised that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven and the grains of sand on the sea-shore. Unfortunately, this has not come about. Sarai is still barren and is becoming increasingly frustrated by her lack of children. Seeking "the child of promise," she follows the custom of the day and gives her maid Hagar as wife to Abram. While we might think this a strange thing to do, it was widely practiced in that day and time. If the outcome of this union were successful, the child born would belong to Sarai since Hagar was her servant. Thus, Sarai would have "the child of promise." Hagar conceives, but almost immediately begins to look down on her mistress. Frustrated, Sarai is given permission by Abram to mistreat Hagar, causing Hagar to run into the wilderness. For the story reader or listener, this event not only signals both a lack of trust on Abram and Sarai's part (not being willing to wait for the child God promised), but also the possibility that if Hagar dies, there may be no "child of promise."

What happens next ought to take the listener/reader by surprise. It should, because God not only protects Hagar, but issues her a promise similar to Abram's; that her child will be the father of untold numbers of offspring. This occurs when an angel of the Lord finds Hagar in the wilderness and tells her to return to Sarai and that in exchange for so doing, God will multiply her descendants such that they cannot be counted. These events offer two critical messages. First, God blesses others who are not directly in the line of the Promise. While the child to be born (Ishmael) will not be the inheritor of the Promise, he will still be blessed with his own place and his own people. Thus, all of humanity matters to God. Second, God is also concerned with those who are the "least" in the world. Hagar as a slave, by the social structure of the day, is nothing more than a possession. Yet God treats her with great respect and demonstrates that she is of great value. She is of such great value that God not only saves her but also blesses her. These stories remind us that God's work is about the salvation of the world and not merely the blessing of one family.

The chapter ends with two vignettes. First, Hagar declares that she has seen God and in the process names God, though we are not exactly sure what the name means. Second, Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, which will greatly complicate the ongoing struggle between mistress and slave, and who will end up with the promise.

Reflection: Abram and Sarai reflect one of the great difficulties of being human beings in relationship with God. How long do we wait for God to act and when do we take charge? For many of us this might not seem like an issue, since many of us are very proactive people. We assume that whatever we are doing is what God wants us to do. Where this struggle arises though, is when we are dealing with something that is outside of our ability to bring about; healing, reconciliation or forgiveness, perhaps. How long do we pray? How long do we wait for God to act? How much time is enough time before we begin to question God or our assumptions? There are no easy answers to these questions, but the good news of this story is that God does not abandon Abram and Sarai, and continues to keep the covenant promises.

Questions:

1. How do you balance waiting for God with acting on your own?
2. How does this story, if it does, make Abram and Sarai seem more human?
3. How do you see God's care for Hagar reflected in Jesus' care for the "least"?