

Covenant Word

God's Favorite Family Sitcom

Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

honesty shocks us, because we have become accustomed to easy answers and quick solutions as put before us on TV. No matter how bad it gets, however, these stories also remind us that God still seems to show up with enough grace to keep our lives sacred.

And so today's story begins with an old couple. I mean, they are really old. He is 100, and she is 90. And yet, they are promised that they will give birth to nations. It's not some imagined promise. It has come from the Divine over and over again. Sarah, however, is barren. In her culture, this makes her a failure. Respect and honor are given to women who are mothers of sons, and so without a son, it is believed that Sarah has incurred divine displeasure. The thought is that she is being judged and punished by God for some obscure sin in her past. So she stands in the shadow of her husband, Abraham, who experiences, with regularity, conversations with God about great promises and fertile news. Yet nothing comes to pass. Remaining childless, she must surely have wondered if Abraham is thinking that his wife is the liability. Is Sarah the reason that the promise has not been fulfilled?

*A Message by
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Sunday
June 25, 2017*

Raise your hand if you have ever watched these shows: "All in the Family." "Full House." "The Brady Bunch." "Everybody loves Raymond." "I Love Lucy." "My Three Sons." "Mayberry RFD." "Modern Family." "Leave it to Beaver." While I do not know exactly what draws your family to gather around a TV set to pause just long enough to enter into the drama of another family, I suspect that it is because we enjoy seeing one family enter into a predicament with resolution provided within a thirty – sixty minute time frame! If only life were so neatly dispensed!!

It is the power of a story really. We are invited into the complexities and depths of a character's life. We see our own conflicts and problems. We may even find comfort for and solutions to our dilemmas by being in the company of these fictional characters that feel larger than life. While I sometimes wonder which sitcom would be God's favorite, I don't have to look too far into the chapters of Genesis before I know this answer.

The stories of Biblical families are raw and uncensored. They will never receive a favorable Nielson rating, because what they lack in humor they gain in horror. In fact, scholar Phyllis Tribble entitles most of these family stories in Genesis as being "texts of terror." They are graphic in their mystifying social customs and remind us of just how awful family life can be when rivalry, favoritism and deception come into play. Maybe the stories of Genesis are startling, because reading them feels like looking into a mirror where we see a reflection of our own messy and troubled escapades. (Flawed Families of the Bible, David and Diana Garland, p. 13)

Looking therein, we are reminded that family challenges have not changed much. The blunt

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So, to force the promise's fulfillment, Sarah comes up with her own scheme. She proposes to Abraham that they resort to surrogate-motherhood. Her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, can be her stand-in. As Sarah's handmaid, Hagar is committed to be a life-long companion to Sarah, and, if asked, she is prepared to bear children for her companion. Hagar is asked to do just this so that Sarah is "built up," or so that Hagar's child will be Sarah's descendent. ("Hagar's Holiness," Lauree Meyer, Brethren Life and Thought, summer, 1992) Hagar's very presence in scripture is due to her association with Sarah.

No matter how the story is framed, it is almost impossible to miss the power discrepancy and sense of threat that infiltrates the text. Sarah is a Hebrew, married, rich and free. Hagar, on the other hand, is Egyptian, single, poor and enslaved. Sarah is old and barren. Hagar is young and fertile. And so even though Abraham does what he is told in order to bring about a solution, to Sarah's dismay, this solution only develops into more embarrassment. You see, Hagar's obvious fertility silently proclaims that

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Hagar is a “complete” woman while Sarah is not. And Hagar is not so silent about it. Apparently, indiscreet words are dropped here and there making Sarah feel even more inadequate.

Her misery boils over one day. The encounter of Sarah complaining to Abraham about Hagar is shown on the front of your bulletin. There stands Sarah, haggard and drawn, while Hagar is young and fresh with a hand protectively on her stomach reminding all observers that the promised heir resides within her body, not Sarah’s. Abraham’s back is to us as he points back at Sarah putting the ball in her court to “do as she sees fit.” And so she is “harsh,” says one translation. Another says Sarah “afflicts” Hagar, and yet another says Hagar is abused. However you choose to believe how it happened, we know that it is bad enough that Hagar runs away.

She flees into the wilderness with the thought that she will return to Egypt. She comes to a spring of water, tired, thirsty, hungry and with a baby kicking in her womb. She collapses in a heap unable to go any further. It is in this state that the Lord finds her. She is addressed by name clueing us in to the fact that the Lord is fully informed of the movers and shakers and the manipulations transpiring in this comedy of errors. Prior to this point, angels have only visited Sarah and Abraham. Interestingly, with this divine visitation, we see another plan unfold that involves Hagar. (Jessica Grimes, *lectio difficilior*, “Reinterpreting Hagar’s Story,” 2004) Hagar responds by being the first person in Scripture to give God a name. She calls him “the God who sees” or “the God who understands.” I think it is important for us to let this detail sink in. Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman, an object of abuse and scorn, is the very first person in scripture to give God a name.

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I struggle with the fact that God sends Hagar back to the camps of Sarah and Abraham, back to the hands of her abuser, back to the gossip and ridicule. She is being asked to do the very thing she abhors the most. Catherine Kroeger, founder of Christians for Biblical Equality, says that we must, however, remember that Hagar returns as a different person. For one, she knows God in a very personal way and for another, she has also become heir to a divine promise. Her son, Ishmael, will also be the father of a nation which means, Hagar is as blessed by God as Abraham and Sarah!

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that catches Sarah’s attention.

The boys are “playing,” most translations read. The Hebrew verb actually means “laughing.” The children are laughing together. Shared laughter usually occurs between mutual friends. It puts the boys on equal standing, and with Sarah’s keen insecurities, she acts to avoid any commonality that puts Isaac’s inheritance at risk. She does not want Ishmael – even though he is Abraham’s first born and rightful heir by the rules of primogeniture – Sarah does not want that boy to take away Isaac’s future. So once again, Sarah turns to Abraham. She insists that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out, and God agrees! (Kathleen O’Connor, “Abraham’s Unholy Family,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 1997)

If God’s insistence that Hagar return to camp after her first flight doesn’t get our attention, then God’s vote of confidence to turn Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness should stand our hair on edge. This portrait of God is difficult to witness. God is taking part in the seeming mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael. What has happened to the God who liberates the oppressed; the God who lifts up the lowly; the God who brings life to the barren; the God who, as the gospel reading for today promises, knows how many hairs are on our very heads? This other side of God is a tension with which we must wrestle. What must Hagar think, what do we think, when God instructs Abraham to leave both Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness to die? (Shannon Kershner, June 22, 2014, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago)

Predictably, before it gets better; it gets worse. Their water runs out. Ishmael begins to cry, and Hagar cannot bear it. She believes she will have to watch her son die, so she places him under a bush and leaves him. It is at this dark moment that the God who sees, as she so rightly calls God earlier, is also the God who hears, which is the definition of Ishmael’s name. An angel speaks to Hagar. And what do angels always say? “Do not be afraid!” The angel assures Hagar that God hears the cries of Ishmael, and that God has not forgotten the promise of the nation yet to come. A well is sighted, and Hagar and Ishmael live. They live free of Sarah’s jealousies, free of slavery, and free to be who they understand themselves to be in God’s sight. (Garland)

Sarah’s story teaches us never to give up on God. Hagar, however, helps us see that God’s care and presence permeate every human condition – even that of a

The other thing that plays to Hagar’s advantage is that about the time she returns, is about the same time that Sarah discovers she is pregnant at last. Chapter 21 of Genesis begins with the birth of Isaac to a very post-menopausal Sarah and a dilapidated Abraham. This child of laughter, whose name means “laughter,” causes laughter all around. And it is the laughter that Isaac and Ishmael share

hopeless, helpless runaway slave girl and her baby.
(Garland)

This is as
close to a
fairy tale

ending as we get. I can't help but think how much more profound the resolution could have been if only Hagar, Sarah and Abraham had worked together to find a way to live with one another in peace; where petty jealousies are put aside, replaced by celebrations of each one's worth. Isn't there more to be gained by acknowledging each has gifts and that there is enough love, enough kindness, enough of God's inheritance, enough grace and forgiveness to go around? It is, after all, what we encourage within this body of believers and, I pray, within our individual homes. It is why I have placed family covenants of peace in the bulletin for you to take home, so we can discuss and consider implementing them in our homes, our Sunday School classes, and our friendships. What possibilities exist for peace and reunion should we work for mutuality rather than the easy judgment and quick abandonment of Sarah and Abraham? While we, like them, may not be capable of agreeing that all are included in God's covenant, we can, if we stop long enough, see that all are recipients of God's blessing.

So what purpose does it serve for Scripture to include such flawed and broken families? What is the point of putting treasure in a dollar tree pot? Why put flowers in a jelly jar? ...because then all the attention goes to the flowers themselves...all the attention is put on God's grace rather than on the flawed human. The strength to endure, to forgive, to be strong and to be wise comes from God.

These stories are written to remind us that it is God's promise we are dealing with NOT mere mortals' mischief. God's power is most easily seen when God works through the plain, ordinary, weak and broken, and so God's family tree is a whole series of cracked pots (no pun intended). God isn't prone to use beautiful, heirloom china that is easily broken when handled. Their stories, and

our own, reveal how God works through darkness, through struggle, and through shattered dreams. God's grace often seems hidden, but it works like yeast that silently and imperceptibly brings about change in us and through the larger systems of which we are a part. We find hope not in the larger-than-life perfect families, but in the twists and turns and plunges-into-crisis of the biblical family story.
(Garland)

Richard Rohr says that the Navajo Indians weave beautifully handcrafted rugs. Purposefully placed in one corner of each rug, however, is an obvious flaw. When asked why all the rugs have an out-of-place thread, the reply was, "This is where the spirit moves in and out." Our

families, and the families in ancient Israel, are flawed by physical and emotional violence, infidelity,

petty jealousies, and mean-spiritedness. We are far from perfect. Yet it is exactly in these flawed places that the Spirit of God finds a way to move in and out to help us catch a glimpse of Holy Presence. (Garland, p. 14) It is in the flawed places that we discover God's Spirit imparting grace and healing; of God silently reaching in to heal a wound; and often, of fragile and broken people, moved by the Spirit, that step up to do what is right.

Bill Coffin once said, "We may be able to kill God's love, but we cannot keep it dead and buried." (Kershner) It is this Presence at work that we encounter in the Biblical story and in our own. For God's presence rises up in the abandonment and the abuse. God's presence rises up in the wilderness and under the plush oak trees of Mamre. God's Spirit rises up to provide presence and comfort, fulfillment and life, because God sees. God hears. And God weaves divine influence through the ins and outs of Spirit. May this be our story as well. Amen.

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