

God Remembers the Outcast

Part 9 in the Series Faithful Saints

The Reverend Renée Marie Rico

Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

Sunday, August 1, 2021

Genesis 21: 8-21, Galatians 3:23-29

Introductions

When we think of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Old Testament, we think of the couples – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. Of course, this imagining leaves out the actual family and marriage practices of the Ancient Near East. Men of means married more than one wife, or took to bed with his slaves. It wasn't the modern version of marriage we are familiar with today.

Our look at the character of Hagar is going a bit deeper into the biblical narrative. Hagar is not one of the primary matriarchs in our bible, but her story is important. It tells us that not only the "important" people matter to God, not only the ones that are considered "chosen," not only the ordinary, but even the ones cast out by those who were chosen.

In doing so, we will find God revealed as the Divine One who sees and hears those who are in distress.

In our story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, it's a complex and not always pretty narrative. Abraham and Sarah are not having any children (sons) despite the promise God makes to Abram in the 12th chapter of Genesis that his descendants with Sarai will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. This is no small matter in a patriarchal society dependent on sons to inherit. So, Sarah gives her servant/slave Hagar to Abraham and she bears a son, Ishmael. This doesn't really fit the promise of God giving him sons through Sarai, but Abrahams is glad for any son.

Later, after Sarah has her son Isaac, she throws a fit about Ishmael and Hagar, who are now just inconvenient reminders of her own time

desperately trying to have a child herself, and because Ishmael would receive the double-portion of Abraham's inheritance as the first son, she demands Abraham set them "free" by casting them out in the desert.

Sarah demands that Abraham "throw out that child and her slave mother, too." The narrator claims that Abe is "angry on account of his child," but makes it none too clear exactly which child he means. Neither is the source of that anger very clear either; is he mad at the child or at Sarah or at himself for the whole mess? Whichever it is, he gives Hagar a bit of bread and water and drives her and her child, Ishmael, out of the camp, dooming them to a terrible death in the desert. Thank YHWH, Ishmael is spared, due to the gift of God, but no thanks to the couple, Abraham and Sarah.

Some wonder why this story is in our Bible at all. It doesn't bring the "first family" any honor to note how vindictive Sarah seems to be, nor do we find ourselves on Abraham's side as he casts off his first-born son and Hagar, the ones who are innocent in this story.

But it does seem full of human frailty and describes the challenges we have in families today. In my own family there's an "evil" step-mother back a couple of generations that disinherits her stepdaughters. Today, families struggle with estrangement, cut-offs, anger over inheritances and their distribution. Abraham and Sarah are flawed, human people that we frankly resemble more than we'd like to admit.

Hagar and Ishmael are delivered by God – the outcasts are heard and seen.

Maybe we don't have this exact pattern in our lives, but we do experience circumstances like that of Hagar that are often incomprehensible, that seem so out of the blue that we simply do not understand why they are happening to us. Some years ago, when my mom was in her last months of her life, my job at a church came to a sudden end. It was a confluence of a couple of terrible things happening at the same time. Like Hagar, I cried out to God to help me in that awful time.

God Sees Us and Hears Us

That's when we want to know the God who sees and hears us. This God of Hagar and Ishmael is the same God who will hear the cries of the Hebrew slaves under the Egyptian Pharaoh and deliver them to freedom through the work of an escaped slave named Moses. This God of Hagar and Ishmael is the same God who will protect Ruth and Naomi as they come to Judah as foreigners, and Ruth will become a grandmother to the first King of Judah. This God of Hagar and Ishmael will send a son into the world to save the world, a son named Jesus, and bring a new way of living abundant lives.

See, I think our impression of the Old Testament is that God was busy selecting the people of Israel as his chosen and special ones, and rejecting everybody else. We almost get the picture of a fraternity-God who blackballs certain people and tribes just because they were not the Chosen Ones. Cain's offering is not accepted, but Abel's is. Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt just because she looked back at Sodom. Noah and his family were exclusively selected to survive the great flood. Israel was chosen but not the other tribes of the world. Isaac was chosen but not Ishmael.

But today's scripture shows a picture more consistent with the actions of Jesus in the New Testament. While God may have had a chosen people and his preferred plan, God is also the God of the outcasts.

Jesus lived to reach out to the outcasts. Most people feared the lepers and insisted that they stay far away from them and announce their presence by shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" But Jesus welcomed them and even touched them. While most people hated the tax collectors, Jesus invited Matthew to be one of the twelve disciples and stopped a parade under Zacchaeus' tree so that he could go have dinner at his house. While everyone looked down upon the prostitutes, Jesus welcomed them and cared for them. When the woman was taken in the act of adultery and all the religious leaders stood in a circle around her pointing condemning fingers at her, Jesus looked on her with compassion and said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Everywhere we turn in the New Testament, we find Jesus looking for the

outcasts of society and welcoming them into his presence. And Jesus is always easier on those who have fallen into sin than he was on those filled with pride and eager to condemn those with sins more visible than theirs.

This same God of Hagar and Ishmael and Jesus is here today for you and for me, for us all. This God sees and hears us when our trials come, and this God will provide us what we need. God will remember the outcast.

Fred Craddock tells of the time he and his wife were in a restaurant and a man came to their table. Learning that Fred was a minister, he insisted on telling them his story.

The man said he had been born just a few miles from that spot, across the mountain. His mother had not been married when he was born, and the criticism directed at her also hit him. His schoolmates learned from their parents how to ridicule, and the boy learned to stay to himself at lunch and recess, lest their insults strike too hard. Even more difficult were trips to town with his mother when he could feel the looks and the shaking of heads, and he heard the question, "I wonder who his father is?"

When he was about twelve, a new pastor came to the little community church. People talked about his skill as a preacher, and the boy began to go hear for himself. He was fascinated by the preacher, but he was always careful to slip in late, sit in the back and leave early, lest someone catch him and ask, "What's a boy like you doing here?"

One Sunday, though, he was so caught up in the service that he forgot to slip out before it was over. Suddenly he felt a big hand on his shoulder, and as he turned around he saw the face of that preacher. The preacher said, "Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?" His young heart sank at the question, but then the preacher went on: "Wait a minute. I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. You are a child of God!" And with that he patted the boy on the back and added, "Boy, that's quite an inheritance. Go and claim it."

As the boy changed to manhood in that restaurant, the old man said to Fred and his wife, "That one statement literally changed my whole life." He explained that his name was Ben Hooper and he had twice been elected governor of the state of Tennessee. His had been a successful and respected life, made possible by a small-town minister who cared enough to encourage a little boy.

God hears and sees the outcast, friends. Amen.