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Genesis 16:1-16 & Genesis 21: 8-21

“Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Sarah and Hagar - Mixed Blessings”

Sunday, June 4, 2023 – Rocky River Presbyterian Church

### Old Testament Lesson

### Genesis 16:1-16

### NRSV

<sup>1</sup>Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup>and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go consort with my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup>So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. <sup>4</sup>He was with Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup>Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl 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!’ <sup>6</sup>But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. <sup>7</sup>The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup>And he said, ‘*Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?*’ She said, ‘I am running away from my mistress Sarai.’ <sup>9</sup>The angel of the Lord said to her, ‘*Return to your mistress, and submit to her.*’ <sup>10</sup>The angel of the Lord also said to her, ‘*I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.*’ <sup>11</sup>And the angel of the Lord said to her, ‘*Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*’ <sup>12</sup>*He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.*’ <sup>13</sup>So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’ <sup>14</sup>Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup>Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup>Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

### Old Testament Lesson

### Genesis 21: 8-21

### NRSV

<sup>8</sup>The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.’ <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, ‘*Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you.*’ <sup>13</sup>*As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.*’ <sup>14</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. <sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance

of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, '*What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.*' <sup>18</sup>*Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.*' <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. <sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

This the Word of the Lord  
**Thanks be to God**

### **"Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Sarah and Hagar - Mixed Blessings"**

This week we begin our summer sermon series on the women of the Hebrew Scriptures. After rereading these scriptures again in preparation for this service, I have to be honest and ask, "What was I thinking?" I love character studies in the Bible – I think we learn so much when we pay attention to who is singled out in the stories of our faith. But y'all, these stories about Sarah, the matriarch of our biblical tradition, and Hagar are tough. They underscore unjust power structures present in the world, there are interactions with God which seem to imply an endorsement of suffering, and portrayals of women characters which pit them against one another. Like I said, today's stories are tough.

So, you might be asking why? Why did you choose these stories? Why not the story about Sarah when she laughs when God tells Abraham she's going to become a mother? That's a great one. I love that story about Sarah, it is the story which inspired my youngest daughter's name. But these stories about Sarah and Hagar are important and we don't spend time with them too often. I keep referring to Sarah with an H in her name, but in our first reading she and Abraham are still names Abram and Sarai. At that point in the story Abram and Sarai have been called out of their country to trust in the Lord to guide the way to their promised land with the promise that through them God will make a great nation. When they began their journey, they were 75 years old and childless. Their journey brought them down into Egypt where Sarai was taken as a concubine for the pharaoh. God intervened and Abram and Sarai fled Egypt to safety where their household grew in property and people – but no children.

I am sure that throughout this sojourn the blessing of God was weighing on their minds...where is the promised land? How will we become the parents of a great nation when we are only getting older? God visits them again and reaffirms the covenant and blessing saying, "no one but your very own issue shall be your heir" and your offspring shall be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. (vs 15:4b-5).

I bet that blessing was always present in Sarai's mind – a constant cause of comfort but at the same time an agony that couldn't be voiced. Throughout my ministry I have spoken with many couples who have had troubles conceiving as they watched the families of their friends and others in the community grow and expand with reckless abandon. They have shared with me how painful and frustrating it was to want to share in that joy while at the same time enduring the heartache of wanting that joy for themselves. And that is without the promise of a divine blessing layered on top of their lives.

The text tells us that it has been more than 10 years since the first covenant – they are now at least 85 - **For Sarai, it had been too long** – she was not feeling like a spring chicken; she wanted to speed things along. If she wasn't going to get pregnant, she was going to adopt some local customs. As much as we want to ignore this reality, Abram and Sarai were building quite a household for themselves on this sojourn to the promised land. As they followed God, they also adopted some customs of the people whose lands they traveled through. This included slavery. Sarai believed that since Hagar was her slave, her child would become Sarai's and this would allow God's promise to come to fruition. Forget the consequences – Sarai was ready to make things happen. A lot of interpretations of this text lay ALL the blame for what is to come on Sarai's shoulders, but I would like to point out that Abram didn't say, "wait Sarai, my beloved! Let's trust God, let's wait for God's promise to play out in our shared life." No, he didn't say a word of protest. He saw Hagar and the dimwitted man said, "Oke Dokie!"

So, he and Hagar conceive a child and the dynamics between Sarai and Hagar change – How could they **NOT** change?!? That can be a very complicated family dynamic today - before the power dynamics of slavery are introduced into the emotional equation. Abram again claims no responsibility for helping to mediate a solution – instead he says, "She's your slave girl, you deal with this." Sarai does not handle the situation well or in the most emotionally intelligent way. It is so bad that Hagar flees.

While out in the wilderness, Hagar encounters the Angel of the Lord. I have to say, it is a weird encounter and the promise she is given is that her son, Ishmael, will be a "wild ass of a man." Aren't those the exact words every soon to be mother would be thrilled to hear? The angel also promises that her offspring will be greatly multiplied. But the angel tells her to return to Sarai.

During the time between the first and second passage, Abram and Sarai officially become Abraham and Sarah and they are even older. 99 and 90 respectively. God's promises continue and get more specific – clearly identifying that Sarah will give birth to the future of the covenant relationship. And that is what happens. Isaac is born to Sarah. After Isaac is born tensions rise once again resulting in Hagar and Ishmael being sent away, but this time with promises from God. These promises ensure that there is a future of Ishmael, that a nation will rise through him. The rest of the text is perplexing – because this journey into their new future is perilous – with Hagar fearing for the life of her child. Like I said earlier, this is a very complicated part of God's story for God's people. Why do Hagar and Ishmael have to go through such events?

The issues at play in these texts are multi-layered...ancient societal norms, power dynamics, patriarchy, suffering and God's role in that suffering and comfort. All of this stems from the blessings of God. So many people crave the blessing of God and we see in most of scripture

how that blessing provides a way out of no way for God's chosen people. But I think the gift of these complicated passages is that we can see that blessings also come with complicating factors – blessings have baggage that we don't anticipate. Blessings can be messy and cause disruptions.

I am often asked what it was like to grow up in Charleston, SC – what it was like to grow up in such a beautiful place. The truth is often hard to explain. It is a beautiful place – every time I go home my breath is taken away when I cross a bridge or catch sight of the sunset. But there was a lot of pain growing up in the shadow of such a blessed place. A place where that blessing became an obsession with “perfection,” which was perverted into an obsession with antebellum customs. Blessings can have unexpected consequences – sometimes humans grow impatient with waiting for the blessing to come true or try too hard to direct the way blessing unfolds so we take over, we try to control the unfolding of God's blessing and people like Hagar, the powerless and overlooked, get devalued and hurt. Because of God's faithfulness and grace, the blessing still comes, but as we see with Sarah and Hagar, along the way things can get messy and people can get hurt.

As Cleveland celebrates Pride this weekend, I have been thinking about the blessing of all my LGBTQ friends and family who are in my life. Created in God's image, these faithful friends hid themselves trying to control and pretend. Things have not always been easy for them in the church or in the world in general. I have journeyed with them through some tough times, but I have also seen the transformation that has taken place in their lives and in the lives of some of their families by living authentically as the people they were created to be. The blessing of their authenticity allowed other members of their families to let go of the human made standard of perfection that had been created. This openness has invited these families to grow closer and share more fully in each other's lives.

That same human made standard of perfection is alive and loose in many other places in our world. I think the invitation of Sarah and Hagar is for all of us to let go of our need to reach that standard at all costs and instead to trust wholeheartedly and with reckless abandon in the promises of God – to embrace the cliché “let go and let God!”

This is not an easy path to follow which is why God calls us to make the journey together – to spend time in community and to spend time in God's presence being renewed by God's grace to recognize where we are grasping for control.

Friends, let us trust in God's promise of blessing as we move forward to embody God's covenantal promises, remembering that God's blessing is not for us alone, but that we are blest to be a blessing – that we are blest to make known God's love for all people and all creation.

So Let go and let god.

Amen.