

“When Life Lies
in a Great Sobbing Heap”
Sermon for 25 August 2019
Text: Genesis 16

A great sobbing heap. When the Lord God heard the weeping of a sad, sobbing heap named Hagar, he, or “his angel” showed up. Things were as Proverbs 30 says, unsettled: **Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up. . . a maidservant when she displaces her mistress.** This certainly Hagar had done to Sarai. God **found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur—** even Beer-lahai-roi, a little oasis on Hagar’s fast track to heathendom, even Egypt! (16:7) She was pregnant and she was a mess: a great sobbing heap of a mess. And, to be clear, she had herself mostly to blame for her predicament. The Lord didn’t have to point that out to her. Hagar, a slave picked up perhaps in Egypt on Abram’s late sojourn there¹. Well, Hagar was likely among the servants gifted to Abram on his way out of Egypt. The Lord heard her fear, her lamentations, and her pain—her chastisement by Sarai for pride and presumption (she wanted the standing which belonged to Sarai!). Hagar actually got what she deserved for her upstart, cheeky ways—even if they stayed this side of insolence. Hagar did not embrace the discipline, she did not see it as either loving, or correctional. *Sarai is too mean, she said, forgetting how unkind she had been herself!* I remind you, she was pregnant and in hormonal turmoil in the midst of domestic tensions. The whole fertility issue between her mistress and her master was not going well.

The Lord had also heard Sarai’s **Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.** (v.2) Her words were a mix of many things; bitterness, frustration and sorrow. These unhappy things drove Sarai to a rash act of self-will. I could put it this way: she wanted to usurp God and do his will her own way². Hagar wasn’t the only one regressing back to paganism; Sarai was reverting, too. You may have heard it said, that it is easier to get the people out of Egypt than it is to get the Egypt out of the people.

What a picture of the Christ follower today! As Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt by God’s power and grace, we are delivered from sinful habits that enslave us today! Now, the challenge is learning to be the free people we have become. Hurtful habits aren’t easy to break. That’s why God has given us His Spirit and His Word. While it’s easy to focus negatively on the restrictions of God’s commands, they were never intended to be cumbersome. John tells us in 1 John 5:3, “Loving God means keeping His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.” God gives us His Holy Spirit to enable us to live a new quality of life that has no other explanation but God, Himself, inhabiting our lives. One of my favorite verses in 2 Corinthians 5:17. It says,

¹You may remember, I’m sure, the whole **Tell them you’re my sister, Sarai** episode that cut short Abram’s famine induced stay in Zoan and resulted in his deportation from Egypt.

² And Abram was right there with her—self-will is sin.

“Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence.”

God’s design in giving the Ten Commandments to Israel and His commands to us today show His desire for an exclusive relationship with us as well as His destiny for us. Out of our relationship with Him, we become a people set apart from all other people as His very own that we may declare His love and grace to a hurting world. As a Christ follower, allow time for God to instruct you and guide you in a new way of living that others may see Christ in you!

Now put that way, as regression, we can see the rebellious independence of Sarai in its fuller, proper light. The 67th tablet of Nuzi, something from Sarai’s pagan past in Ur of the Chaldees spells out her proposal—it was not her novel, or original idea. This is a very serious matter. Doing God’s will God’s way is the requirement of obedience. Doing what is right in God’s eyes requires doing it **his way**. Before we dismiss that as Sarai’s particular and personal problem, I would suggest two things: first that her impulse to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, is an universal response to stress. Secondly, this temptation to do God’s will according to another’s will is the very familiar essence of Satan’s temptation of our Lord Jesus: remember, **all these things will I give thee, if you fall down and worship me.** (Matthew 4:9) **Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Then the devil left him . . .** (vv.10-11) Satan’s offer of all the kingdoms of the world was *a blatant by-pass of the cross and the cross was God’s will for Jesus’ acquisition of those same kingdoms!* Satan’s will was substituted for the Lord God’s will. Sarai’s will (**Go in to my servant; it may be I shall obtain children by her.** v.2) displaced God’s will (the word declares **your very own son shall be your heir**, Gen. 15:4; **No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac**, Gen.17:19). The tensions in the household came, of course, from Sarai and Abram’s ignorance of the things imparted to us by scripture. God was developing their trust, Sarai wanted a child so badly she opted out of God’s plan.

This brings us back to the sobbing heap of Hagar. Yes, **Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.** And that was not God’s will this time around. God did counsel Abram to listen to the voice of his wife later: **Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she says, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.** (Gen.21:12-13) In this latter instance, the **will of God** is for Abram to harken to Sarah’s voice. **One must listen very carefully because the will of God is precisely stated in the latter case—it is only implicit in the former case.** There is no carte blanche here for rejecting God’s counsel through one’s wife. Adam’s problem in listening to Eve (about the forbidden fruit) was the lack of divine direction to do so! Abram should not have yielded to the Hagar option but should have urged prayer and consultation with God. *Just because we can act freely does not mean you should act as if our will were our own. It is not.* Remember our Lord’s declaration: **I came not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.** (John 6:38) So should we all.

It is a quick test of our own hearts to hear our inner response to this declaration! We may respond with, “Well, this is a word for the Lord. It cannot possibly apply to

me. I wasn't sent from heaven as Jesus was—besides Jesus is plainly speaking about himself here. True. Jesus is clarifying his purpose to do the Father's will. But that is not the end of the story. As we become like Jesus, we are recovering the image of God and **we are conforming our wills to his!** Meaning we want our will to be his will. This is self-denial and dying to self. This is the fulfillment of the familiar petition: **thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!** (Matthew 6:10)

So Hagar's surrogacy, **as a wife to Abram**, was initiated. She conceived **and the earth trembled**. Then she, a maidservant, **looked with contempt on her mistress**. (16:4) It doesn't lessen the sin of it to share that Hagar wasn't the only one to look down on barren women, old childless women like Sarai. The whole ancient society was bent that way. That is a painful reality which Sarai lived daily. Daily she was humbled by it. She bore the shame and reproach of childlessness. *What's wrong with me, Sarai wondered, that I cannot conceive? Or, is it us? What is the un-health, or abnormalcy with my reproductive organs that they don't work properly?* I need not make any of this up. Scripture attests to the doubt, shame and disgrace of infertility in several disparate places. Luke 1:24-5: **After these days, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. She declared, 25 "The Lord has done this for me. In these days He has shown me favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."** Much earlier, Genesis 30:22-23 records the exultation of Rachel (Jacob's wife) upon conception: **Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and opened her womb, 23 and she conceived and gave birth to a son. "God has taken away my shame," she said.**

Now Hagar's grief came about not because she was pregnant, nor because she was complicit in the sin of Sarai and Abram, but because she was strong-willed and self-willed. Oh, dear, that's not so comforting, now is it? Most of us have the same problem! And when we are chastened, as beloved children, for our willfulness, some of us take the Hagar option and flee the house. Sarai dipped into her pagan past again to deal with the damage caused by her first retro plunge; she applies, possible, the 137th law of the code of Hammurabi so as to deal with the upstart slave girl. *This was Abram's husbandly duty, but he chose to shirk it!* This "law" was a cultural resource to her—although both were familiar with it! So Hagar is not merely a pregnant woman, she is a pregnant runaway slave under chastisement and stern demotion³—she headed for heathen Egypt, both south and away from her mistress. And she had progressed some distance (100 miles!) before she was accosted in a heap by the Lord! She was probably too angry to be properly concerned about the danger she was exposing herself to.

What happens next is truly groundbreaking: an invasion of earth from heaven! The Angel of the Lord (some say, the pre-incarnate Christ) appears and speaks to a female, Gentile slave. Someone outside the covenant! The only woman recorded as spoken to by God (angel's excluded!) and the first instance of this divine

³ I think it is important to not suggest that Hagar was raped by Abram—they were acting upon their marriage condition. And it is equally important not to saddle Sarai with abusive treatment because physical abuse was not necessarily a part of the demotion. Shaming was.

communication to a woman. Three social barriers were broken down as God expressed concern and compassion for Hagar. This suggests that there are no barriers, or hindrances to the grace, love or mercy of the Lord. And, it is noteworthy that the only champion to show up in this episode is the Lord Himself—he rescues, saves the lost, restores and comforts the brokenhearted. He knows her situation, her circumstances, her name, and he intervenes providentially in her life!

This “messenger” from heaven picks a curious time to visit! Hagar is crushed, seething with anger—self-righteous indignation. She is neither seeking God, nor in a religious place. Divine direction is the last thing on her mind. Her world is looking pretty awful, cruel and heartless. And she is a contributor to the mess! And that is when God moves to open her heart, to call her name, to engage with her saving-ly. With mercy, heaven kindly invades her. Yes, unsought mercy and mercy uninvited. God “works” over her will, her disposition, her affections and her mind. *It is transforming, she is an entirely different slave girl when the encounter is over!* Before she was sullen, selfish and useless to God—not any more! Now she is useful, cared for, supernaturally confident—convinced of her calling, placement and serviceability. *Everyone, slave or free, matters to God!* She didn’t know that, now she does. She has her God, and He is the One who sees, who owns, who loves and comes to visit. But all of that is severely tested in the years to come. in the hurt wounded-ness of her rejected son. Ishmael. The downstream consequences of the sin of polygamy are severe—hostility and hatred over many generations.

Hagar becomes a woman of God as a gift from God. If she matters to God, she matters absolutely, regardless of bondage, gender or marital status. She is sent away, but not divorced. Perhaps they reconciled after Sarah’s death.

Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going? asks the Lord. These are “the words of God,” not geographical questions. A GPS would be useless in this divine encounter, or rescue. The Lord knows the answer to both of those queries on every level, including the geographical level. And Hagar also knows, as her answer frames, the question is not one of physical location, or residence. **I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai,** (v.8) she answers. (True to her name, she is “in flight.”) The question at hand is this: Is it wise for you to flee? Is a homeless slave better off than a submitted one? What if you swallow your pride, repent of your willfulness and submit to the role and purpose appointed for you? **Return to your mistress and submit to her.** (v.9) So, her submission is the issue. This command is not a suggestion and it may have been *the last thing she wanted to hear*. It is, apparently, to Hagar’s benefit that she return to her place and be under the tutelage, care, and correction of Sarai (and of Abram). They have some business together which transcends both slavery and social boundaries—we foolishly think that God is constrained by such things. In terms of what God is doing, these circumstances are incidental.

I need to reiterate that last point: Hagar’s slavery is incidental. Our obsession with slavery is what raises that issue of social justice to the status of a hindrance to God. It is not. Nothing stands in his way. Neither human impudence, nor human insolence impress God all that much: **Return to you mistress and submit to her.**

What a slap down to human wisdom this is! How clearly this establishes the truth of Isaiah 55: 7-9:

7 Let the wicked man forsake his own way and the unrighteous man his own thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion, and to our God, for He will freely pardon. 8 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. 9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Imagine with me this ensuing monologue, an angel expounding on this text:

Listen up, Hagar, you wicked, foolish girl, forsake your willful ways! What are you thinking to run out from under the covering I have lovingly provided for you in having you acquired by this mostly godly couple⁴. When you were nothing, headed nowhere, I placed you as a slave in this household. I grafted you into my eternal purposes when you were too immature, and self-centered to know your left from your right. I took you out of the ignorance and the darkness, rescued you from oblivion and made something of you despite your slavery. You have tasted of my protection and provision, you have fed off the table that I set for Abram and his household. Was all that in vain? Did you consider these things when you entertained resentment, harbored bitterness . . . did you think I would allow the festering sore of your wretched pride and lust for self-determination to worsen until death? No. I used your own folly to call you out . . . to get you on your own so I could deal with you myself. It's you and me, Hagar. Do you think you can outrun me? Where can you go that I am not already there? Where can you hide from me from whom nothing is concealed? We've been needing this chat, dear girl—yes, dear despite your wickedness, **Where have you come from?**

Return to me that I might show more compassion, more provision, a place, and blessings. Return to Sarai for that is where I have appointed to bless you. The one you fear is the one I've chosen especially for you. She is my provision, she is my protection for you and for the child you are carrying. She will see you through your pregnancy despite your inappropriate use of it, your mishandling of this change of status. God's blessing for Hagar were not all future! If you honor her, she will honor you. You are to respect her no matter what. Even if she doesn't make it easy, she will make it right.

Do you know where you are going? I do. Hagar, I have a future for you. You are not ready to hear of it yet. Go back, get ready. Know that I hear. I always hear. I listen to all of creation, all of the time. Nothing escapes my attention. I am called ruler of all for good reason!

**11 The angel of the Lord said to her further,
“Behold, you are with child,**

⁴ They were not sinless. Remember their plan for having a son.

And you will bear a son;
 And you shall call his name [a]⁵ Ishmael,
 Because the Lord [b] has given heed to your affliction.
 12 “He will be a wild donkey of a man,
 His hand will be against everyone,
 And everyone’s hand will be against him;
 And he will [c] live [d]t o the east of all his brothers.”

Go back where you can learn more of me. My thoughts are higher, my ways are better than anything you might possible imagine. Join me in my ways. I am the Lord. I expect you to serve me, Hagar, not the other way around. Do things my way and you will do well. Now get up. Dry your eyes. Walk north . . . retrace your footsteps. They will lead you home. There is no short cut to repentance. Refresh yourself, get walking. Hagar, I promise you, we will talk again.

13 Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, “[e] You are [f] a God who sees”; for she said, “Have I even [g]remained alive here after seeing Him?”
 NASB

Let me observe in closing that Hagar *did not know the preface* to her own story. Neither did Job and neither do any of us. Job was never told that God had sovereignly chosen for his life, the life of his soul to be a battleground—that is revealed to us. It is his testimony that this was so. We learn that his suffering is not for his sake—not for his purification, moral excellence or gain in wisdom. It was simply the will of God. What he demonstrated was the glory of a faith which Satan denied was even possible. Satan’s view is that we are all on the make, all bought, all compromised and corrupted so as to deny the possibility of saving faith. But what is true of us all was not true of the sinless One. Jesus was not in it for himself, not bought, not compromised and not corrupt. And those who belong to him, those who are one with him by faith are an extension of him—we call this imputed righteousness. Christ makes believers exceptional to Satan’s damning appraisal. All who, by grace through faith, are united to Christ Jesus, are forgiven, renewed and restored, we are the glory of God’s triumph over all our enemies through the Son.

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow. (Matt. 16:24)

Amen.

⁵ footnotes to text:

- a. Genesis 16:11 I.e. God hears
- b. Genesis 16:11 Lit has heard
- c. Genesis 16:12 Lit dwell
- d. Genesis 16:12 Lit before the face of; or in defiance of
- e. Genesis 16:13 Or You, God, see me
- f. Genesis 16:13 Heb Elroi
- g. Genesis 16:13 Lit seen here after the one who saw me