

Family stories

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Genesis 16
Genesis 21:1-20

At our house, summer is the season of family reunions. One historic summer we had three reunions. This summer we only have two, the Stoltzfus' and the Lapps'. These are similar events; large Mennonite gatherings of three generations over three days. (These reunions are without alcohol of course – I hear that is the only way some families can even have reunions!)

Over the years I have grown to see the distinct differences between these families and how they tell and retell their stories. The patriarchs and matriarchs are named, but how they took care of their families, how they exerted power over, or with, others and how they related to the larger church and society is different, sometimes depending on who is telling the story.

The Hebrew bible, much of it the story of human family interactions and God's presence in those interactions, is similar in this way. It depends who is telling the story and how. And like our own family stories, it is not only the teller that interprets the meaning but the listener or reader. Sometimes we tell the stories so that it sounds as if family life was pretty ideal or we listen only for the happy parts.

But we know from experience that there is a whole lot more going on in the family story than we let on. When we tell our family stories, we often clean them up a bit. The lectionary even does this for us with the biblical texts. The lectionary, a selection of biblical texts for a three-year cycle of reading, features passages from

Genesis in ordinary time (almost this whole summer) but they are the safer texts: Abraham following God's direction or Jacob having dreams about angels and ladders to heaven. Though it is called the "common lectionary" some of the more difficult stories hardly ever appear.

By now you can tell I find all of this intriguing so I want us to hear some of these stories this morning. To be fair, this first text does appear sometimes in the common lectionary.

Read Gen. 16

This is a very difficult text; scholar Phyllis Trible calls it a "text of terror." Slavery. Surrogacy. Banishment. Love triangle — or hate triangle — depending on what you want to call it.

This is a particularly significant text for African American womanist theologians. They read this text as the story of black slave women in this country. As they read it, they see the problem of surrogacy that slave women experienced with white slave owners and their wives. Sarai, representing white women, doesn't come off looking so good; she is cruel and unjust, mean spirited and proud. In this story, Abram the slave owner is no better. He seems to have washed his hands of the mess as if it has nothing to do with him. These are women's problems: pregnancy, children, jealousy.

But Abram is very much involved in this situation. We have to go back to Genesis 12 to see how it is that this triangle between Abram, Sarai and Hagar formed in the first place. (Feel free to follow along as we turn to a number of different texts in Genesis today.) Gen. 12:1-8 is well known. Abram is called by God, receiving the

promise of land for his descendents and he faithfully follows God's instructions to go to a new land.

The second part of chapter 12 is less well known. There is a **severe famine** and so Abram and Sarai, along with nephew, Lot, go to Egypt. Abram is afraid of what he might find in Egypt, of how he might be treated. So he comes up with a plan to save himself. Abram said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and I won't be killed because of you."

The plan is put into action and Sarai is taken into the Pharaoh's palace as his wife. Because of this marriage Abram receives sheep, oxen, male donkeys, female and male slaves, female donkeys and camels. Things look pretty good for Abram.

But then, Pharaoh and his entire household get severely ill because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Pharaoh calls Abram to him and says, "What have you done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister', so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and be gone." And Pharaoh ordered his officials to see that Sarai and Abram and their entourage left immediately.

A member of the entourage is Hagar, one of the female slaves given to Abram. Hagar is part of the reward Abram receives from the Pharaoh for having such a beautiful "sister."

Sarai has no voice in this story so we don't know if she was coerced into the trick or cooperated willingly. Did Sarai harbor anger

about this deceptive trick? How did Sarai's time in the palace with the Pharaoh affect her relationship with Abram, with Hagar? Is there any camaraderie at all between Sarai and Hagar against those in power or is Sarai just happy to now be the slave master in her own household?

Fast forward to chapter 16. For 10 years this threesome has been living together (along with all of the other slaves and wealth Abram accumulated.) Sarai has been unable to get pregnant. When she experiences this famine in her body, she looks to Egypt as Abram did in time of famine. She looks to the Egyptian Hagar to save her. Hagar, like the Egyptian land, is fertile. Sarai does now, to herself, what Abram did to her. She puts herself in a "sister" role instead of a wife role and gives Hagar to Abram as his wife. This time Abram is the silent one. He has no speaking role but goes along with Sarai's plan for him to take Hagar as his "wife."

Hagar gets pregnant. After 10 years of slavery in the house of Sarai, Hagar finds some meaning. She is no longer a worthless slave. Now she is carrying Abram's heir. She is proud of her new status and takes every opportunity to flaunt it.

Sarai cannot endure Hagar's behavior; the way Hagar taunts her. Sarai turns to Abram to solve her problem. But Abram refuses to engage in the conflict though he is of course intimately involved in the creation of the dispute between the two women.

Since Sarai can't lure Abram into the dispute, she treats Hagar ever more harshly. The Hebrew word suggests that Hagar experiences the same kind of bondage that the children of Israel later experience in Egypt. This time it is the Egyptian that escapes slavery

to the surrounding desert, not at God's command but out of desperation. The children of Israel, who seek freedom in the desert search for three days to find water, but Hagar finds water quickly. And a messenger from God meets her at the well.

God's messenger addresses her by name, "Hagar, slave girl of Sarai" and asks where she is going. After hearing that she is running away from Sarai, the messenger instructs her to return to captivity and submit to Sarai! Then she learns she will be the mother of nations just as Abram is promised that he will be the father of nations. Somehow despite the difficult words about life for her son and the directive to return to captivity, Hagar experiences God with her, at least that's how the storyteller tells it. As she was addressed by name, she now names God, "you are the God of seeing."

Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai, giving birth to a son. Abram calls him Ishmael, as the messenger of God had instructed in the desert.

This is probably enough for one day but it is not the end of the story. Hagar appears again in chapter 21.

Genesis 21:8-21

At least 13 years have passed. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah has been fulfilled; now **they** have a son, Isaac.

But let's skip back again to one of those chapters that we don't remember too well: Genesis 20. Abraham and Sarah (God gave them new names in chapter 17 as part of the covenant) are settled in a land where once again Abraham feels like an alien. He plays a

familiar old trick on the local ruler, Abimelech, telling him that Sarah is his sister, not his wife. There is no explanation of Sarah's beauty this time — she is after all, menopausal, though of course we know that does not preclude beauty. This time it is just that Abraham feels afraid. So Abimelech, thinking that Abraham and Sarah are siblings, takes Sarah to be his wife. But before he can have sexual relations with her, God comes to him in a dream and tells him that Sarah is married. If he touches her he will die. Abimelech pleads innocence and God spares his life.

Abimelech confronts Abraham with his lie, but this time Abraham protests that he has not lied; at least not about Sarah being his sister. Sarah is his half-sister; they both have the same father.

Yet again Abraham makes out like a bandit. Abimelech gives him sheep, oxen and more slaves and whatever land they want to settle on. He even gives Abraham 1,000 pieces of silver. Abraham in turn prays for Abimelech and his household, asking God to allow Abimelech's wife and concubines to get pregnant. It seems God had closed the wombs of the women in Abimelech's household just as Sarah's womb is about to be opened.

Whether or not this is the same story we heard in chapter 12, retold with different characters and different emphasis, is not clear. What is clear is that even though Abraham and Sarah have this unconventional relationship, pretending to be sister and brother when it is expedient, we are told God still smiles on them, giving them the promised son.

Each woman now has her own son, but the animosity between Sarah and her slave continues. In fact, now that Sarah has Isaac she

has no use for Hagar whatsoever. Is she looking for an excuse to get rid of Hagar or, reading very generously against the story, is she ready to release Hagar from her slavery?

On the day of the weaning celebration for Isaac, Sarah sees Ishmael treating Isaac badly. It is not clear what the offense is. Perhaps Ishmael is mocking Isaac or even touching himself or Isaac sexually. The Hebrew merely says, "Sarah sees the son of Hagar the Egyptian playing."

Whatever the situation, it is enough to make Sarah complain once more to Abraham and demand that Hagar be sent to the desert a second time. This time Abraham is not so willing. He clearly loves his son, Ishmael, and does not want to lose him. But God speaks to Abraham and so, with God's verification that Ishmael will survive, (Hagar is not mentioned in terms of survival) the next morning Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, this time toward Beer-sheba, where life is much harsher. All Abraham gives her is a skin of water and some bread.

Hagar wanders in the wilderness. It is no longer an exodus of her choosing; she is now in exile. When her supplies run out she places Ishmael in the shade of a bush and goes some distance so that she doesn't have to see him die. In her desperation she cries out to God. This time God does not send a messenger but a voice from the heavens is heard. "Do not be afraid. Hold onto your son for from him will come a great nation." This time it is not through her that the great nation will come, but through her son. Then her eyes are opened and she sees a well.

God is with the boy as he makes a home for himself in the wilderness. Eventually Hagar returns to Egypt to find a wife for Ishmael among her own people. Then Hagar disappears from the story. We are told in Genesis 25 that Ishmael, like Abraham's grandson Jacob, had 12 sons, who became princes of their tribes living near Assyria. The only further mention of Hagar is in Galatians 4 where Paul uses her and Sarah as an allegory. Hagar represents life under the law given at Mt. Sinai while Sarah represents freedom in the new Jerusalem.

Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible calls the story of Hagar one of the "**texts of terror.**" This is the title of her book from which I take some of my thoughts this morning. Trible, whose work I highly respect and recommend, would probably not approve of my trying to end my thoughts this morning by finding something redemptive in this story. She ends her chapter on Hagar this way, "All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar's story. To neglect the theological challenges she presents is to falsify faith." (p.29)

So with Trible's words ringing in my head, I hope I am not "falsifying faith" to continue. Abraham, Sarah and Hagar all have their faults, though it seems Hagar's only fault is being a proud slave trying to hold on to her sense of self and her homeland. We might not call that a fault, but it is enough to earn her negative attention by those in the tradition of Abraham.

Yet in some way God blesses all of them. Certainly the story is told that way. Sarah, though she is merciless to Hagar and doubts God's promise, has a baby in her old age. Abraham, though he is

sometimes passive and dishonest, accumulates the riches of the world as well as the wealth of many children and grandchildren. Hagar, a slave for more than 20 years, becomes the grandmother of nations, and, though in exile because of hatred and jealousy, she returns to the land of her birth.

It is one thing to understand the people of the story but who is God in this story? Hagar names God, “the one who sees.” It is clear that God sees Hagar’s pain and struggle. We also see a God who is generous even to people who treat each other badly. God, as portrayed by the storytellers, is a God of extreme patience and grace. This is a God who gives abundantly and shows compassion even to rulers, the pharaoh and Abimelech, who are not of the “chosen” people. God’s view is broad and there is the possibility of redemption for all.

Our family stories are complicated too, at least mine are. There is misplaced anger, lying, abuse, theft, violence, jealousy, greed and illness for starters. Just because we are seekers after God doesn’t mean we are exempt from being human. We all fail to live up to our own expectations or the family’s expectations or the community’s expectations or God’s expectations.

But in our families, like for Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, there is the possibility of redemption. We are all children of God no matter how dysfunctional and difficult.

Like Sarah, we live in a world that tells us we have no creative powers, that imagination is hopeless, that peace is impossible. But even when we laugh at God’s crazy notions, God can work with us.

Like Abraham, we need to carefully listen again and again for God's voice. Though we may think we have received a promise from God, we can not stop listening for the voice of the Holy One to guide us.

Like Hagar, though we may be alone in the world, God sees us. God calls us to live without fear and to hold onto those whom we love. May it be so.