

# MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "And Baby Makes Three! Or Was That Four? No, I Think It's Five!"

Based on Genesis 21:8-21

A perfect family at last! Abraham, his wife Sarah, and finally, a son, Isaac. Abraham's lineage was secure and Sarah's status had been restored from 'barren wife' to 'mother of a first born son.' The possibilities were endless!

But along came 'the other woman.' In fact, Hagar had been on the scene a long time; long enough to have given Abraham a son as well. Granted, this son would never be heir to the family name or fortune. But until Isaac came along, Abraham had treated the boy Ishmael with the care and attention of a favoured son.

Now it might offend our sensibilities today, to think that the great 'father of many nations' from our Old Testament had a complicated family life. But we must remember, that in biblical times, it was quite normal for a successful man about town to have one or more 'wives', and an array of concubines and slaves at his beck and call. Children were often born out of these arrangements, and while

they would never be considered legitimate, or inherit, they were cared for, and had a hot meal at the end of the day. In a time when options were few, especially for women, there could have been worse outcomes than being a protected concubine in the camp of a wealthy shepherd. And Hagar was about to find out just how harsh those other options could be. As soon as Sarah gave birth to a healthy son of her own, Hagar knew she was on borrowed time.

**Sarah** did not like Hagar. **Sarah** did not like the attention that Abraham paid to Hagar. **Sarah** did not like the fact that Hagar had birthed a son before she had. **Sarah** did not like it when Abraham spent time with the 'illegitimate son of an Egyptian slave.'

**Sarah** was in charge of the women's tent, and she made her views known to Abraham: *"Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."* (v10)

There was little Abraham could do. Hagar and Ishmael were sent into the desert to perish. The water ran out. The sun was hot. Hagar became lost and could not find the next well of fresh water. Or more likely,

became despondent and stopped walking. Think about it.

- She was a slave.
- She had an illegitimate child.
- She had been cast out.
- She was a foreigner.

What hope was there for the two of them now? "Better to accept the realities, than drag out the inevitable," Hagar thought. She'd had a good run, but fate had turned the tables. There was only one outcome to this situation. So she stopped running. As she surrendered herself, a thin whisper on the wind became stronger:

*"What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."* (v17-18)

She was shown water. She cared for her son. In time, she likely found safety with a travelling caravan also using the water from the well. Hagar and Ishmael found a village where their story was not known and they were not recognized. They lived in the desert, hidden from the world (and from Sarah). Ishmael grew to be a strong man, a hunter, and in time, a prophetic voice in his own right.

What should you notice about this story?

**You should notice...** that there are some similarities to between this story and the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, as they fled the wrath of King Herod, and hid in Egypt. Scholars and great readers of scripture generations later would claim that Christ's story is not an easy one, because Christ served and serves people who did not live easy lives.

**You should notice...** that YHWH promised to bless Isaac, from the 'perfect and proper family', but equally promised to bless Ishmael, the illegitimate son of an Egyptian slave (you did get the 'three strikes' against him, right). Everyone is promised a blessing, if you are willing to hold out your hand and receive it.

**You should notice...** that angels hovered near Hagar and Ishmael in their darkest hour: when all hope was lost. Even when they had given up on themselves, God remained close. Even when we give up, God never gives up on us. Period.

**You should notice...** that Hagar is restored in her later years. And you almost miss it, if you don't read the last verse carefully:

*While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. (v21)*

Not only did Hagar find a way out of the desert where she thought she would die, she found a community to raise her

son; she made her way back to her people in Egypt or at least, was able to connect others of her ethnic and cultural background. In time, she arranged for a proper marriage for her son, which made her: a mother-in-law: a woman who now had status in her son's home, and an obligation by biblical society, to be cared for, protected, and given food and shelter for the rest of her days.

- A concubine
- Who became a cast out slave
- Who became a single parent
- Who became a respected mother-in-law.

That's quite a journey. In Hagar's final years, she would have received more respect, than the rest of her life put together. Food for thought.

Families have always struggled, with the rules we keep placing upon ourselves, in an attempt to make our homes look 'proper' or 'correct.' In church families, we have always preached the Good News of grace and restoration of the spirit, but then done a very good job of turning people away or turning people off, because our rules (and our unspoken rules, and our glances and our raised eyebrows) have clearly indicated, who is welcome, and who is not. We're getting better at it. But we still need to work at it. Every church, in every community, in every denomination.

Today's story reminds us that life gets complicated, and families (or church families) even more so. Life get messy and life gets mixed-up. We get our feelings hurt, we get angry with the world, we begin to think about how unfair things are. We make bad decisions. We don't like other's decisions. We make the best choice we can in a bad situation. Or sometimes, we don't make the best choice in a bad situation. And right now, as we live in this 'wait-and-see' time in our COVID Recovery Stage 2 (almost 3), it is even easier than usual, to let these 'complications' become emotional, over-exaggerated, or hit us harder in the heart than usual.

But remember this:

- There is a blessing for each of us in the midst of all this, if you are willing to receive it.
- God hovers near, always, and does not waver in His attention.
- Restoration may take some time to arrive, but it's worth the wait, and worth the effort.

So a family of five became two. And the two became three. And the three became more. Do you think in the end, that Hagar would have changed one moment of her story? I don't. So don't change yours. Live it. Amen.