

All in the Family

sermon digest

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Genesis 16:1-15; 21:1-3, 9-21

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Born in the muddy cellar of an inn, she was black, female, and a slave. Her name was Isabella Ardinburgh until it wasn't. Sold at the age of nine, she became Isabella Nealy. She could speak only limited Dutch, which infuriated her new master. He beat her, leaving her small body scarred for life. Sold soon thereafter for \$105, she became Isabella Scriver. After three years working in a tavern and unloading boats, she was strong, tall, and proud and brought \$300 at her next sale. Now Isabella Dumont, she fell in love with Robert, a slave on the adjoining estate. He was beaten and forced to marry a slave on his own master's estate, as was Isabella, so that clear title could be established for the children and they could be sold. She would bear thirteen children in the coming years; most would be sold away from her. Although her parents were freed, they had nowhere to go. Her mother was found dead in the same damp cellar where Isabella had been born, and her father was turned out of his "home" and forced to wander. He was found frozen to death one winter morning only a few years later.

Finally freed herself, Isabella determined to move up and down the land fighting evil wherever she encountered it. In service to a new master, whose love transformed her very sense of being, she took on a name descriptive of the nature of the God who called her travel the land speaking truth to power. Her new name, given to her, she insisted by this God: Sojourner Truth. She would go on to befriend and advise Frederick Douglass, Ulysses Grant, Abraham Lincoln, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. She would work for land grants for blacks, temperance, child labor laws, women's rights, and equal pay for equal work. Her unrelenting efforts won her the scorn of many. Because of her strong voice, obvious intellect, and large size she would be accused of being a man—a charge she answered in all simplicity by opening her blouse. "I dar'st show my breasts to the whole cong'agation. It ain't to my shame that I do this, but yourn. Here den, see for yourself!" [Ann Weems, *Searching for Shalom*, 134]. She would bring two lawsuits in the New York courts—one when a slave trader stole and sold her small son and another for slander when she was falsely accused of poisoning a man. She won them both! Increasingly esteemed (and scorned) for her dignity as a fearless champion for justice, she received a standing ovation in the U.S. Senate.

Keeping in mind Sojourner Truth's move from slavery to fierce advocacy on behalf of the oppressed, turn with me now to the story of another slave, an Egyptian slave named Hagar. Her role in the continuing saga of Abraham is about more, far more than the isolated experience of one family. It is a metaphor, a parable, if you will, about the tragic breakdown in relationship within and between human families and the abuse and violence that accompanies that breakdown. Viewing the slave Hagar and her son Ishmael as representing the forebears of the Arabic peoples who were Israel's neighbors, Hagar and Ishmael's story is a story about the enmity of neighboring peoples. It is also about the family relationship that persists in spite of it.

God is a God who sees and hears the suffering of all of God's children. She is, of all things, an *Egyptian* slave and the similarities of her plight to that of the Israelites in Egypt are almost too numerous to mention. You might suspect it is not by accident. Seemingly consumed with jealousy toward the young woman she has provided to bear Abraham a child, Sarah "afflicts" or "oppresses" Hagar. The Hebrew word, *'anah*, chosen by the storyteller, speaks of particularly bitter treatment. It is the same word used to speak of Egypt's harsh treatment of the Israelites (Exodus 3:7). Just as God sees and hears the sufferings of the slaves in Egypt, God sees and hears Hagar's torment. "You are El-roi," Hagar proclaims. "You are the God who sees." The wilderness becomes for her, as it becomes for the fleeing Israelites, a place where God provides water, care, promise. "You shall bear a son," the messenger of God assures Hagar; and "you shall call him *Ishmael*"—"God hears."

Hagar's story is in the terminology introduced by Phyllis Trible several decades ago a "text of terror." She is a foreigner; she is a woman; she is a slave. She is the lowest of the low in Palestinian society. Given to Abraham according to the accepted practice of the day, she is a breeder. According to custom, the child she bears will be Abraham and Sarah's. Not hers. The trouble Sarah has with the situation is not surprising, but turning her wrath upon Hagar and Ishmael is more than a little disappointing. After all, according to the storyteller, Sarah herself was given to another man. Passed off to Pharaoh as Abraham's sister in the pretext of saving Abraham's life, she was in a position to understand Hagar's plight. Instead she turns upon the very two people she has herself been party to victimizing. Despite biased earlier translations, which were perhaps trying to save face for Sarah, Hagar's infraction is

merely that of “taking Sarah lightly,” literally translated, not “holding her in contempt”; and Ishmael’s error is that of “laughing” with Isaac, just as if they have something in common, just as if they are brothers. And perhaps it is just that, the reminder that Hagar and Ishmael are family that sets Sarah off. The son of this slave woman,” Sarah insists, “shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

Sarah forgot, but God, the storyteller instructs us, did not. Admittedly, the promise of the future for Isaac was superior to that for Ishmael. According to God’s promise to Hagar in the wilderness, however, Ishmael, too would be a great and powerful nation. Sarah may have forgotten Ishmael was family, but according to the storyteller, Ishmael did not forget. When Abraham died, both sons, acting on their common parentage, their common family, came together to honor and bury their father (Genesis 25:7-10). Admittedly, there would be generations of enmity and division between their descendants. Sarah might forget, their descendants might forget, but God would not forget, for God sees and hears all of God’s children, particularly those who are suffering.

God claims all of the uncherished peoples of our world as family, and so should we. It is unfortunate that Sarah forgot her own experience of humiliation at the hands of social custom devaluing her and using her as a pawn. It is unfortunate that forgetting, she did not treat Hagar with kindness. It was a lapse in memory, we would be sure that the Hebrew scriptures did not permit Israel herself. Again and again, the Torah calls for Israel’s remembrance of her suffering in Egypt and to act in love and mercy in celebration of the god who saw her there and heard her pleas and delivered her. “You shall love the stranger,” Deuteronomy proclaims, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:19).

And so should we. The society around us may define individuals and whole groups of people as dispensable and their cries of anguish as unworthy of consideration, but as those who have encountered a gracious and merciful God, we do not have that option. Reflecting on the temptation churches confront today in their race to the top, David Stancil observes that in our competitive bid for bigger crowds, bigger buildings, and bigger budgets, “the uncherished,” the devalued persons of our world may seem able to contribute little. “God’s supreme valuing of us in the Cross,” however, “will not let us live in peace and wholeness unless we affirm there that we are brother [and sister] to all the broken ones” [David Stancil, “The Uncherished Child: A ‘Modern’ Wilderness of the Heart,” *Review & Expositor*, 1994].

Sarah may have forgotten her family connection to Ishmael, but according to the story, God did not forget but acted in delivering love toward one of God’s own. Society may categorize and dismiss as undeserving a myriad of people—single mothers struggling on poverty level wages to care for their children, the homeless mentally ill roaming our streets, the undocumented immigrant seeking to earn a living for his family, and inner city minority children cut off from a hopeful path to the future. As children of a God of active love and mercy, we do not have the option of conveniently forgetting their plight.

But what, we ask, can one person or one small congregation like ours do? Reflecting on the example of Sojourner Truth, Ann Weems draws some conclusions:

One person can listen to the word of God and believe in the fire of the spirit of God within her and set out to tell the truth to the people.

One person can believe that the Holy Spirit does pour out gifts, and that these gifts can be used to change impossible situations.

One person can believe that the Church of Jesus Christ has the courage of its convictions; that together we can burn with a spirit of love that is so great we can look the impossible in the face and say, Change! [137]

Imagining a perceptive young Ishmael looking around him and observing the favor bestowed upon his brother, David Stancil, puts Ishmael in the role of the brother Esau. Seeing that his brother Jacob has stolen his father’s blessing, Esau weeps piteously, “Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me! Bless me!”

Observing the suffering of the many uncherished children and people of our world, we should hear and respond to *their* cry: “Have you no blessing for me? Bless me! Bless me!” And I ask you, dare we not use every tool, *every tool* at our disposal to do bring blessing to their lives? They are, you see, a part of the family.