

October 20, 2019 – Where Have You Come From and Where Are You Going?

Genesis 16:1-16, Philippians 2:1-11

This month we have focused our sermons on passages from the Old Testament in which God asks vital questions. We have heard God ask “Where are you?” to Adam and Eve hiding after eating the forbidden fruit. We have heard God ask “Where is your brother?” to Cain after he has killed his brother Abel. God doesn’t seem to ask questions because God doesn’t know the answers but God asks the questions for us and for our benefit.

Today we continue in the book of Genesis, moving forward to the story of Abraham and Sarah and the slave-girl Hagar.

Before we hear this story, I want to tell you about a conversation I had a few years ago. A young man who was a member of this congregation came to meet with me in a time when the elders of the church faced a difficult decision on the controversial issue of whether we would allow same-sex weddings in our sanctuary. He and I had different opinions on that decision and he wanted to talk. We had a respectful and kind conversation. He told me about another congregation where he and his family were visiting

some, a congregation that agreed with him explicitly on this issue. He asked me what I thought about that congregation and I responded, “Well, they don’t acknowledge the gifts of women that I believe God has called to ministry. They don’t ordain women as elders and they don’t allow women to be pastors.”

“So do you think they are wrong?” he asked.

“Yes obviously I do.”

“So do you think they are condemned for that?”

“What do you mean?”

He went on basically to ask if I expected that I would be in heaven and they wouldn’t be. I was taken aback. My salvation, and the salvation of any other child of God, does not depend on getting all of our opinions right. It does not depend on being on the right side of every issue. My salvation depends only on the grace of God that I believe is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I told him that if I thought being on the wrong side of an issue was condemning, then centuries of people who had owned slaves were condemned, centuries of people who denied women the right to vote were condemned, people who had tried to live faithfully in their own time with their own understanding and their own sinfulness. Is it important to discern God’s will and to live that out faithfully? Yes, but always with the

humility that our grandchildren and our great-children will judge us for something we can't even see. We are not excused from responsibility but our salvation doesn't depend on anything we do. Our best attempts at faithfulness are always held with humility and our clearest judgements are always held with gentleness. Honestly I was heartbroken as one of your pastors that this man had worshipped and studied here and never heard the good news of the gospel that our salvation doesn't depend on us getting it right. Not getting all of our behavior right, not getting all of our opinions right, not getting all of our motivations right. My salvation depends only on the love and grace of God and thanks be to God for that!

So when I read scripture, I understand that I am reading an unfolding story of God's love for humanity. I am reading the story of humans created and claimed by God, some of them trying to be faithful, but living in their own contexts of broken and sinful culture. I am reading stories written down by sinful writers living in their own broken cultures. For some people, that means they would throw the Bible out as not useful if it isn't literally good in every word. But for others of us, underneath all of that gunk of context and brokenness and sin, the love of God continues to shine through with good

news. I believe that is true for this story from Genesis 16. Let's listen together for God's word to us.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, 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. ⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵Then 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!' ⁶But 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.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And 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.' ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' ¹¹And 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.

¹² 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.'

¹³So 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?' ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God).

Abram and Sarai had heard God's call to GO, to leave behind their homeland and to travel to a new place with God's guidance. They had heard God's covenant of blessing, to make of them a great nation. But they were old and the promise to have a child seemed ridiculous. They waited and the years went on until, perhaps, Sarai could wait no longer. So she offered her slave girl Hagar to her husband Abram. Slavery was an accepted part of their culture, not questioned. And having an heir with a slave was a well-documented practice for an infertile couple. The handmaids were a reality long before Margaret Atwood wrote her novel *A Handmaid's Tale*. A woman's worth was determined by her ability to bear children. Another sinful part of the culture, not affirming the worth of a human being for who they are but only for what they can produce. Infertility was always blamed on the woman; the ancient world didn't know the science that teaches us the mutuality of conception. There is a lot of gunk in this story that we might judge but let's look for where God might shine through.

Abram and Hagar conceived a child and Hagar looked with contempt on Sarai. Perhaps she acted superior. Perhaps she was angry to be used by Sarai that way. Sarai, who seemed to have the idea in the first place, now turned on Hagar, running to Abram in anger. But Abram refused to take any responsibility for his own part in it and Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar. What a triangle, painful, dysfunctional mess. In a world in which women are treated like property and valued for having children, how quickly a woman of privilege mistreats a woman with no power. How quickly women turn on one another as enemies. Hagar ran away.

Hagar was an Egyptian and she ran toward Egypt. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water. The Hebrew word for spring is closely related to the word for “eye.” The angel asked “Hagar, slave girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?”

This is the first time in the Bible that an angel appears and speaks as a messenger of God. Did you notice that the angel found her? And the angel called her by name? Neither Abram or Sarai has used her name in the story so far but the angel does. Hagar! She was known. The angel asked about her origin but rather than naming a place or a road, Hagar responded “I am running away from my mistress.” Hagar told her truth, probably a truth

that would be ignored or easily dismissed by most people in her day. The angel of the Lord saw a woman who was powerless, voiceless, used and abused. And the angel spoke to her, called her by name and listened to her as she began to tell her story. Imagine the powerful grace of being found, of being called by name, and of being invited to tell the story. Hagar was seen by the Lord.

Did you notice that Hagar told the truth of what she was running away from, answering the first question from the angel, but she didn't say where she was going? Maybe she didn't know. And even if she had an idea, it might not matter. Hagar's life journey will be out of her control, controlled by her mistress and her husband and yet blessed by the Lord.

The angel told her, "Return and submit to her." I can't agree. I know it's an angel of the Lord but I would never say it. Never say it to a woman, a man, or a child running away from an abusive situation. Never. Going back to a harsh and abusive situation usually only makes it worse eventually.

But then the angel made promises to Hagar. I will multiply your offspring. Hagar received the same promise that Abram and Sarai had been given. God's loving concern cannot be contained to only Abram's family. The angel announced the birth of her child, in the first annunciation in scripture

– a son to be called Ishmael. Ishmael would be a wild ass of a man which is perhaps better translated as a free wild animal able to thrive in the wilderness and never be owned like a slave. He will be strong and independent and never held down or tied up. What a vision of hope for powerless abused Hagar! What a word of promise!

So Hagar named the Lord “you are el-roi,” “I have seen God,” as if to proclaim “you have seen me!!”

The good news of the powerful love of God shines through the gunk of the brokenness of this story.

In the midst of a sinful culture, in a mess of dysfunction, God sees and God listens and God claims and God blesses.

As you leave the hospital after having your stomach pumped from the overdose of pills, as you walk out of the therapist’s office where your spouse just admitted the affair, as you get in the car one more time to pick up the teenager who drank too much, as you sit in your room wearing headphones to drown out the yelling downstairs, as you walk down the hall of the health care unit when your father didn’t remember who you were, as

you put on make up to cover the bruise, as you go to the library at lunch because you are afraid you'll be sitting alone in the cafeteria...

Whenever you are the one caught in a mess. Whenever you are powerless and feel trapped. Whenever you believe the truth of your story will be ignored or dismissed. Whenever you think no one can imagine what you are going through or what you've come from.

God sees you. God calls you by name. And God asks "where have you come from?" God invites you to say the words you can barely say out loud, God invites you to tell the truth of your trauma, God invites you to speak the story of your shame. God knows you. God sees you. We name the Lord "El-roi." You see. The good news of a powerful love shines through all of that gunk. Thanks be to God. Amen.