
Casualties of Destiny

Genesis 21.8-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 22, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Lord Mountbatten, uncle of the present Duke of Edinburgh, was the last Viceroy of India under the British Raj. He had many dealings with Mahatma Gandhi, and saw the power of Gandhi's ascetic lifestyle and commitment to simplicity despite his demanding political role. In a moment of exasperation Mountbatten is reputed to have said, "You'd never guess how many people it takes and how much it costs to keep that man in poverty."

You could say the same about Abraham. Over the past two Sundays we've been looking at the grand super highway of Abraham's story – his call from God and the blessing that came with it, and then the promise of a son for Sarah. Today we notice the soil turned up to make that super highway, the cost of keeping that man in his blessing, the number of people it takes to keep him as a great patriarch. Today we see Abraham as the car driver who says "I never have road accidents; but I see a good many in my rear view mirror."

Today we read Hagar's story. Reading Hagar's story is like looking over the minority report of the Old Testament. Reading Hagar's story is like peeling an onion. Each layer you take off makes you cry harder. I'm going to start with the bare bones of her story and then peel down two or three more layers to see what we find.

God promised Abraham he would be the father of a great nation. But his wife Sarah was old and childless. We peel off the first layer of the onion when we see that Sarah and Abraham didn't know how a way for God's promise to be fulfilled so they took matters into their own hands. Sarah suggested Abraham sleep with his Egyptian slave girl Hagar and get an heir that way. Hagar conceived, and straightaway began to look down on her mistress Sarah. Sarah complained to Abraham, Abraham said "Do what you like," so Sarah was cruel to Hagar and Hagar ran away. An angel of the Lord met Hagar in the wilderness and told her to return and submit to Sarah and look forward to having a great many descendants. Hagar called the Lord Elroi, or the "God of Seeing," and she had a son named Ishmael. Later Sarah had a son Isaac, but Sarah still demanded Abraham throw Hagar and Ishmael out. God backed Sarah up but also promised that Ishmael would become the father of a great nation. Abraham packed Hagar off to the wilderness with meagre provisions, which duly ran out; Hagar placed her son under a bush and wept to watch him die. Feel the tears take effect when you hear Hagar say, "Don't let me look on the death of the child." But God heard the boy's distress, and called to Hagar, and she saw a well of water. Ishmael grew up in the wilderness, and Hagar eventually went and found a wife for him from Egypt. That's the story of Hagar.

Now let's look at the story a little more closely and peel off another layer of the onion. Hagar's story is Israel's story. She's a slave, just as the children of Israel later became slaves under the Pharaoh. Just as Israel became a threat to the Pharaoh when she grew in number, Hagar becomes a threat when she has a son. Just as Israel ran away from bondage in Egypt, so Hagar runs away from the cruelty of her mistress. And just as Moses met God in the wilderness, so Hagar meets God in the wilderness. Just as God promises Abraham that Israel will become a great nation, so God tells Hagar that Ishmael will also be a great nation. Hagar's story is Israel's story – but there's a crucial difference. When God tells Hagar she will have many descendants, the prophecy is not accompanied by any promise, or any blessing. It's just a stark foretelling. There's no guarantee that God will be on Hagar's side.

If the first definitive moment in Israel's story was the exodus, then the second definitive moment is the exile. Just as Hagar is like Israel in running away from slavery and having her own exodus, so later she's like Israel in being thrown into exile. Like Israel, Hagar knows both exodus and exile. And just as it is for Israel, exile for Hagar is an agonizing and purifying time. She and her son survive, and adapt, and meet God there too, just as Israel did in Babylon. And yet, again, God seems not to be on Hagar's side. As one local bible scholar puts it, Hagar "experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfilment, and unmerited exile without return" (Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* Philadelphia: Fortress 28).

But it's not just in exodus and exile that Hagar mirrors Israel's story. Genesis 21 and Genesis 22 sit side by side with one another. They're obviously meant to be read together. In the second story God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. At the last minute God intervenes and provides a ram instead. In Genesis 21, our passage this morning, God allows Abraham to follow Sarah's wishes and cast Hagar and her son out into the wilderness, where Ishmael is on the point of death when God intervenes and provides water. Over and over again we are being told that Hagar's story is Israel's story. And yet there's this constant irony and paradox that Hagar is the person steamrolled to make Israel's story possible. It's as if Israel looked into a puddle and saw reflected back the face of Hagar.

It's time to take another layer off the onion and prepare to cry a little more. The story of Hagar and Sarah is the story of Arab and Jew. Possibly the most distressing line in the whole story comes when Sarah sees her son Isaac and Hagar's son Ishmael playing together and she can't bear it. If ever there were a description of the sins of the parents being visited on the children surely this is it. Isaac and Ishmael are set at odds against one another because Sarah couldn't abide any comparison or comradeship between her son and Hagar's. But again at this point the interpretation of the story is soaked in irony. The force behind the establishment of the State of Israel is that the Jews of history have felt less like Sarah and more like Hagar. It is because they've been thrown into slavery, subject to cruelty, forced to flee and frequently cast out that they came to long for a home to call their own; and it is because in the middle of the last century they sat powerless, like Hagar, watching their offspring die, that they came to see a homeland as an unmitigated necessity and its preservation as an absolute good that continues to justify a number of things that are less than good.

And yet the sense of grievance in the Muslim world today arises because so much of the Muslim world perceives that the mantle of Abraham has passed to America. Rightly or wrongly the Muslim world does not see itself as the Abraham about to cast out the Hagar that is the State of Israel. Instead the Muslim world sees itself as the Hagar ill-used and cast aside by the feckless Abraham that it regards as the United States, aided, agitated, and goaded by the jealous Sarah that is the State of Israel. Yet again this story comes back to haunt the self-styled children of destiny. Much of the Muslim world says, "America doesn't have any road accidents – but we are the casualties America sees in its rear view mirror." Muslims tend to identify with Hagar, seeing America as Abraham and Israel as Sarah. Sure, Hagar wound up Sarah something rotten, but Hagar had far the worst of the deal. And the tragedy is that the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah don't get to play very much together. If they did, they might forget their parents don't get on. The paradox of the Middle East is that both sides think they're Hagar.

What are we to do about this disturbing story, this story that shakes us out of any simple notions of God's call, God's promises, and God's faithfulness, and leaves us crying as if we had been peeling an onion?

This story is an education in human complexity. No one comes out of it terribly well. We feel sorry for Sarah, dragged half way across the Middle East in pursuit of a destiny revealed to her husband, but never properly to her. I'm sure there's a good number of people among us this morning who know what that feels like. Sarah is childless, and that for many people is an agonizing condition. But when Sarah uses her slave woman for her own purposes and then blames the slave woman for the consequences of what were in fact her mistress' decisions, we lose sympathy with her. We feel very sorry for Hagar, but be careful before we turn this into a goodies and baddies story. Note that it was when she humiliated Sarah that Hagar's fortunes took a downturn. Some of us may sympathize with Abraham, wringing his hands as the women in his life outmanoeuvre him. Others may regard him as weak and lacking authority and any sense of justice. As for God, it's not clear whether God has it in for Hagar or simply allows Abraham and Sarah to face the consequences of their own lack of faith. Who among us hasn't doubted God's promises? Who among us hasn't turned our head from injustice and simply wanted not to look? Who among us hasn't said "Yessss" in a vindictive way when "Yessss" really meant getting one up on someone who has often been mean or cruel to us? Who among us hasn't blamed God for situations we really got ourselves into?

So to read this story is to realize that the story of salvation is not a simple story of progress from wilderness to destiny. It's a whole lot more human than that. Every character in the story is deeply flawed – just like you and me. Even the description of God the story offers is pretty uncomfortable. It's very common to see Genesis 22, the story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac, as a troubling story, because it seems to portray a God who

wants distressing things from us. But it could be that this story from Genesis 21 is an even more distressing story, because it seems to portray a God who not only lets people suffer but actually prefers some people to others. In our desire to celebrate Abraham it would be very easy to miss the troubling attitude of God to Hagar, and our own tendency to identify with Sarah, the one who bought her freedom at terrible cost to another child of God.

Why then is this story in the Bible? If the story of Abraham was a simple march to destiny, you'd think this story would have been left out. If it really is the winners who write the history, why would they bother to waste time on the losers, especially the losers they treated so badly?

Maybe those who looked back on Israel's history realized who Hagar really was. That's why the story notes that she's the first person in scripture to be visited by an angel and the only person in scripture to give God a name – Elroi, the Seeing God. She's the only woman to receive God's promise of descendants. She is the first woman to weep over a dying child. So she's a pretty special woman in many significant ways.

But we still have to struggle with why God seems to reject her. And for Christians the fact that God seems to reject her has to be the key to this story. Think about it. This is a person who was at the heart of God's covenant. This is a person who embodied Israel's exodus and Israel's exile. This is a person whose suffering seemed to be required if Israel was to live. Yet this is a person whose suffering was exacerbated and even brought about by the character flaws in those who were God's chosen people. This was a person who was cast out and, in her moment of deepest agony, wondered why her God, her God, had forsaken her. This was a person who was despised, rejected, and acquainted with grief. Sound familiar? *This* is why the story of Hagar is in the Bible. Because her story, the story of exodus and exile and rejection by woman and man and even God, is the story of Jesus.

For Christians, the story is in the Bible to make sure we remember that Jesus looks more like Hagar than he does like Abraham. For Christians, the story of Hagar means that there can be no freedom, no good news, no salvation, no gospel, that's won by treading down and expelling and abusing and exploiting Hagar. But there's not an ounce of sentimentality in this story. At the very beginning, we're told that Hagar is no angel. The point is not that Jesus identified with the honest but browbeaten oppressed peoples of the earth. The point is that Jesus is to be found among those who have may well have contributed to their own downfall, but are, in all likelihood, more sinned against than sinning, and either way are to be found today wandering, weeping, scorned and rejected.

It's a complicated story, with intense feelings, laced with cruelty, betrayal, terror and despair. It's complicated, but in the light of the gospel it's maybe actually quite simple. We've a pretty good sense of which kinds of people in which kinds of places read this story and instinctively identify not with Sarah, not with Abraham, but with Hagar. You may have come to the Chapel this morning feeling it was hard to see Jesus, hard to feel close to him, hard to know he was truly alive. We've just read a story in which one person seems to have to suffer so that God's people may flourish. We all know people who are on the underside of life, on the underside of history, who find themselves in car wrecks in the rear view mirror of destiny. You may be sitting here feeling like you're looking for Jesus. Maybe, in meeting Hagar, we just found out where to find him.