

Encounter at the Well: Hagar and the Angel of the LORD

Introduction

I'd like us to think tonight about a story of an "encounter" - the story of a young run-away slave girl who met an Angel by a well in the middle of the Judean desert. She was pregnant and scared and trying to get away from a painful and confusing home life. But then she met an Angel, and this encounter changed her life. Her life did not magically become a fairy tale that ended happily ever after; even after meeting the Angel, Hagar still experienced plenty of pain and confusion. Yet, her meeting with this Angel did bring about a profound change in her, because from that point on, her life was not ultimately defined by the pain and confusion, but by the reality of this Being whom she now knew personally.

Ok, so tonight I'd like to read this passage for us - **Genesis 16:1-16**. But before I read from God's word, let's pray together. . .

I love this story, but at first, it may seem very foreign, because it took place over 3000 years ago, in the Middle East, when there were still masters and slaves and polygamy, etc. So let's think about this story in three parts. **First, how did Hagar end up pregnant and exhausted at this well? Second, what was this encounter that Hagar had with "the angel of the LORD"? And third, what was the result of Hagar's encounter with this Being?**

First, how did Hagar end up at this well, pregnant, exhausted in the middle of the desert?

To start with, Hagar was a slave, the maidservant of Sarai, the wife of Abram. Maybe some of you have read Margaret Atwood's novel which is loosely based on this story "The Handmaid's Tale". While I haven't had the chance to read this novel myself, I'm going to venture a guess that she did *not* intend her novel to be an accurate rendition of Genesis 16. One thing that Atwood captured well in her novel, though, is that for someone like Hagar, being a slave would mean that her life, and even her body, was under the authority of others. That is a scary thought, isn't it? When Sarai decided to give Hagar in marriage to her husband Abram, Hagar didn't really have much leeway to say no. She was simply expected to do what Sarai told her to.

A lot was at stake in Hagar's being given in marriage to Abram. Abram and Sarai, like most people of their time, wanted to have children who could carry on their family line. But Sarai was barren, and now Sarai was about 75 and Abram about 85. Abram did not have much time left to father an heir. So Abram and Sarai basically decided to use as a *surrogate child-bearer* for Sarai. It must have been painful for Sarai to see her husband sleep with another woman; and it must have been very awkward for Hagar as well. But it was fairly common for slave-women to become surrogate child-bearers in ancient middle-eastern cultures. *Most people* in Abram and Sarai's time, if faced with similar circumstances, would have done exactly the same thing.

But Abram and Sarai were not exactly the same as *most people*. They worshiped a God who was different from the "gods" that other people worshiped. Abram claimed that his God had spoken directly to him. This God was the Ruler of heaven and earth. This God had promised that Abram would be a blessing to all the nations of the world and that he would have many descendants. But God had not specifically said *how* this would happen. Abram and Sarai had probably believed that God would miraculously enable Sarai to bear a child, and they were right to believe that; that is exactly what God was going to do. At this point, however, after waiting in the land for 10 years, Abram and Sarai became increasingly anxious and uncertain. They came to the conclusion that, well, maybe God could fulfill his promise to Abram through Hagar, the surrogate child-bearer. Sadly, Abram and Sarai's fretful reasoning led them astray. As we see from this passage, their decision brought a great deal of pain and confusion on them and on Hagar. To be fair, there were times when Abram and Sarai displayed extraordinary wisdom and kindness, but this was not one of those times

For her part, Hagar had probably never heard directly from Abram's God. Since she was originally from Egypt, she might have worshiped the gods of Egypt. But whatever she believed, and however she felt about it, Hagar became Abram's second wife. In due time, she became pregnant by Abram. Then, Hagar began to despise her mistress.

Perhaps Hagar felt superior to Sarai because she was biologically capable of having children whereas Sarai was not. Or perhaps, Hagar came to believe that since she, not Sarai, would give birth to Abram's heir, she would rise in social rank above Sarai. Whatever motivated Hagar's disrespect toward Sarai, Sarai felt it and she was furious. Hagar's disrespect touched painfully on Sarai's insecurities and her jealousy, and also trampled on her sense of dignity as Abram's first wife and as the marriage partner who had been willing to make a personal sacrifice in the first place. She vented her pain and frustration to Abram. And Abram, who was not prepared for Sarai's outburst, basically told Sarai, "You deal with it." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar. The Bible does not go into specifics about what Sarai did to Hagar. But given the fact that Sarai was furious, and given also that Sarai had almost total power over Hagar, I'm sure it wasn't pretty.

The whole situation was very ugly and very tangled, and the atmosphere in Abram's household must have been toxic. It was especially sad, because Abram and Sarai, who should have been examples of faith to Hagar, actually caused her bitter anguish and suffering. Hagar was not entirely guiltless, but she was probably the least to blame, and she, perhaps, suffered the most. Now Hagar had basically two options – to just take the suffering or to run. Understandably, Hagar ran. She ran from the tents of Abram and his household out into the Judean desert.

Second, what was this encounter that Hagar had with the "angel of the LORD"?

Hagar stopped near a spring in the desert, the spring beside the road to Shur. It seems that she had been running south, maybe hoping to get back to Egypt. But by the time she stopped at that spring, she was exhausted – physically, emotionally, and mentally. If she had brought any food with her, it was probably gone. And in all likelihood, she did not know where she would be able to find her next source of fresh water. There was still over a hundred miles of formidable desert between her and Egypt, not to mention potentially malicious travelers and wild animals.

It is out here in the wilderness that Hagar has her encounter.

Verse 7 & 8 say,

The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?'

'I'm running away from my mistress Sarai,' she answered

There's a lot going on in these two verses. So let's take our time with them.

First of all, who is this Angel of the LORD who finds her and begins a conversation with her? The LORD has many angels in his service – powerful spirits like Gabriel or Michael who are sent out on missions both in heaven and on earth. But the Angel of the LORD, who appears intermittently throughout the Bible, seems to be more than just one of these spirits. Many Bible scholars believe that *the Angel of the LORD is actually God himself who takes on the form of an angel at key moments in history in order to personally carry out some special task*. More specifically, many Christian scholars believe that the angel of the LORD is actually the Second Person of the Trinity, that is God the Son, who would one day enter the world as the human being named Jesus of Nazareth. In this passage – Genesis 16, we see some strong indications that the angel of the LORD is indeed God. In verse 10, for instance, the angel promises, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." Who has the authority to promise this kind of thing? Only someone who is sovereign over the course of history and over life itself. Also, verse 13 says, "She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" To hear from the Angel of the LORD meant to hear from God, and to see the Angel of the LORD meant to see God.

So this angel who found Hagar in the desert was actually God himself. God came down from heaven to where Hagar was. God got personally involved in her life. The Bible does not say whether or not Hagar prayed while she was out there alone in the desert. If she did pray, maybe she prayed to the gods of Egypt. But one thing I'm pretty sure about is that she probably cried. And God heard her.

Then God started a conversation with her. He said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” The first word God spoke to Hagar was her name. Only then he addressed her by her social title – “servant of Sarai”. So what does this mean? For one thing, it meant that God knew her name; God knew and cared about her unique identity, her particular story, her specific suffering. To God, she was Hagar first and servant of Sarai second. Yet, God did also address her as servant of Sarai. And in fact, God would also tell Hagar to go back and submit to Sarai. What does *that* mean? It means that when God looks at us, he also takes into account our social reality. *How we are related* to other people, whether as classmates or siblings, children, students or in Hagar’s case, as a slave, matters to God and is also part of our identity.¹

After calling Hagar by name, God asked her two questions – “Where have you come from and where are you going?” to which Hagar shot back, “I’m running away from my mistress Sarai.” What a loaded exchange of words! It makes me want to laugh and to cry.

When God asks a question, it’s not because he needs information. He already knows everything – he already knows what we’ve done behind closed doors, he already knows what we have hidden in our hearts - he does not need us to inform him about anything. So when God asked Hagar “Where have you come from and where are you going?” it wasn’t because he needed information from her. God was gently helping Hagar to take account of her own bleak situation. Hagar knew where she was running *from* – from Sarai. But Hagar did not really know where she was running *to*. Now she was running in a general south-ward direction, probably toward Egypt. But trying to run over a hundred miles through a howling desert is not really much of a plan. She was alone and pregnant. If she stayed out there in the desert, chances were that she and her unborn child would die of hunger and exposure. Even if she did make it to Egypt, her prospects as a pregnant run-away slave would probably not be too great. Hagar did not have real direction or hope, and God was helping her to admit that.

But God’s question was more than a polite reality check. God’s question was also an invitation to Hagar to speak her mind. My guess is that when Abram and Sarai decided that Hagar would be their surrogate child-bearer, they probably didn’t take a great deal of time to find out how Hagar felt about it. I think they just decided for her; after all, she was their slave. But God’s approach to Hagar was different. He *asked* her, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” And then, God *listened* to Hagar’s answer. It was as if God were saying, “Hagar, let me hear *you* tell this story. Let me hear *you* explain how you got here.” God was interested in what Hagar had to say because God respected her as a person. When Hagar blurted out, “I’m running away from my mistress Sarai”, her answer wasn’t entirely logical or very eloquent; it didn’t have a key verse and one word and three prayer topics. But it was real. It came from her heart. And God *heard* it. God heard Hagar when no one else had ears to hear her. And God is still the God who *hears* today. God hears what you are afraid to admit to anyone else. God hears what you’ve shouted at other people till you were blue in the face, but they just didn’t understand. God hears. God hears.

After hearing what Hagar had to say, God gave Hagar direction and hope. He directed Hagar to go back to her mistress Sarai and submit to her. Following God’s direction would be hard because Hagar would have to humble herself before Sarai who had wronged her. Hagar would have to step back into an imperfect and painful reality – where she was a slave, and where she would continue to experience tension, hostility and hatred. God did not offer Hagar a Disney-esque ending. But as hard as God’s direction was, it was life-preserving. Going back to Abram’s household would ensure that Hagar and her unborn child were protected and provided for.

¹ I don’t mean to say that God is well pleased with every social situation. The Bible clearly teaches us that God is angered by all forms of injustice and that he has a special concern for those who are powerless in society (Ex 22:21-23). However, God, who is sovereign over all things, can even use injustice as part of his good plan (Gen 50:20).

In addition to direction, God also gave Hagar hope. God gave Hagar an extraordinary promise, to make her descendants too numerous to count. Her child would become the father of a great and powerful nation, the Ishmaelites. In Old Testament times, they would be a people distinct from the Israelites and, sadly, often at war with them. Yet, they would also trace their ancestry back to Abram. And they would have an important role in history. Hagar could find some measure of comfort in the fact that her suffering and her obedience to God would not be in vain.

The name of Hagar's son, Ishmael, which means "God hears" would be a constant reminder to her that God had met with her in the desert and that God cared about her. In fact, her story has been and continues to be a source of hope for multitudes of people through the generations, because God who heard Hagar's cry will also hear our cries. During my seminary studies, I had the chance to read the writings of some African American women theologians. If you know the history of the United States, then you know that many African American women had terrible things done to them, things even worse than what Hagar experienced. But in the story of Hagar, African American women met God who was not too proud to talk to a slave woman. And in this God, they found comfort and hope.

Third, what was the result of Hagar's encounter with God?

The resolution of the story is given in verses 13-16 . . .

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi (which according to the footnote means 'Well of the Living One who sees me'); it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

The Bible says that Hagar gave the LORD a name, "You are the God who sees me". This is a remarkable event in the Bible. Often, God gives people names; but here we see Hagar, a slave woman, giving a name to God. And this name is recorded for the generations to come. When we give someone or something a name, it means that person or thing means something to us. Hagar giving God a name was like her testimony; if you want to bring Korean into this, it was like her sogam.

Hagar spoke these words from her heart. Her words expressed heartfelt gratitude and awe. She was filled with gratitude because God had come down to speak with her. And though, in the eyes of other people, she might be just a slave, she understood that in the eyes of God, she was a human being; she was somebody worth talking to. Hagar was filled with awe because she had caught a glimpse of the Living God. This God was not like the gods of Egypt – not like the statues of stone that stared blankly out at the world with unseeing eyes or even like Pharaoh, who sat in a sheltered and splendid palace, far removed from the pain of his people. This God, Hagar realized, is Lahai Roi – the Living One who sees me. I'd like to point out the fact that Hagar did not call God, "The God who SAW me" (past tense) she called him "The God who SEES me" (present tense). Hagar's encounter with God in the desert was not just a momentous event that she would look back to. It was not just that Hagar would recall, "I remember that one time I met with God. That was really something." No, Hagar's encounter with God was *the beginning of a relationship that would never end*. For the rest of her life and into eternity, Hagar could testify, "I KNOW (present tense) the Living God. I saw him in the desert. And even though I don't see him with my eyes now, I KNOW that he is still watching over me." Hagar clung to this truth – that the LORD is the God who sees her. It was her way of clinging to the relationship that God had begun with her. And this truth would bring her through all the pain and all the confusion that she had to face. When the people around her put labels on her and consigned her to categories, when Sarai saw her as "a threat" and a "rival", when Abram saw her as "surrogate child-bearer" or "problem I don't want to deal with", Hagar could say, "**But God sees me.**" And when people mistreated her, she could say, "**God sees what I'm going through.**" I have a feeling that part of the reason Hagar's son Ishmael grew up to be a warrior was that he had a warrior for a momma. Hagar's life would still have plenty of pain and confusion. That is crystal clear in the rest of Genesis. But her life was not defined by the pain and

confusion. It was defined by the reality of the God whom she knew personally, the God who met her in the desert, the God who continued to hear her cries, continued to watch over her.

So Hagar went back to Abram and Sarai as God told her. And just as God promised, she bore a son, whom Abram named Ishmael. There is a little poetic justice here, I think. The fact that Abram named the boy Ishmael means that Hagar got to tell Abram what to do. In fact, Hagar became a prophet of God to Abram by delivering God's directions to Abram.

Application/ Conclusion

So why does Hagar's story matter for us? It matters because God who found Hagar in the desert is looking for us. He asks each of us, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" And he wants to hear what you have to say. He wants to hear from you. He wants you to know that he hears you. He sees you. He wants you to know he cares about you. He wants to be with you always.

God wants to be with you so bad that he came down to the earth as a human being and dwelt among us. John 1:14 tells us that the Son of God became one of us and pitched his tent among us as the man named Jesus of Nazareth. He experienced what it means to be disrespected and labeled. People despised him because he was poor, and because they thought that he was an illegitimate child. He experienced what it is like to be mistreated, abused, and even tortured. He was put on a cross; he was shamed and insulted and spit on. As his blood poured out of his body, he experienced desperate thirst. Jesus felt overwhelmed by the pain and injustice of his situation and wept to God the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus went through all that because he wanted to be *with us* - *with us* in our pain and confusion, *with us* in the royal messed-up-ness of life in this royally messed up world.

And Jesus still wants to be with us – *with us where we are*. Where have you come from, brother? Where have you come from, sister? From a dysfunctional family? From a divorce? From the ravages of sickness, either in your life or in the life of a loved one? From an abusive relationship? From being stomped on? From being left out? From being discriminated against and disrespected because of your ethnic background or because you're a foreigner? From being hated and feared because of your sexual orientation? From being looked down and dismissed because you're not smart enough, because you're not spiritual enough, because you're not pretty enough, because you're not man enough? Jesus wants to be with you where you are.

And he wants to give you a definite destination – heaven. You know what heaven is? It's a place where we're with God and he wipes all our tears away (Rev 21:3, 4). God wants to be with us so bad that he came down as a human and brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. You know what the kingdom of heaven is? It's where people like you and me love one another the way that God has loved us (Jn 14:23).

If you want that, if you want God to be with you, then do what Hagar did. Tell him what is on your heart. Cry out to him. God hears you. God sees you. We're going to have a time of prayer. I invite you to cry out to God tonight. I invite you to encounter him tonight.

Before I close this message, I want to say one more thing. 3,000 years ago, God came to Hagar in the form of an angel. 2,000 years ago he came to the earth as the human being named Jesus. Today, God says that he wants to be present in the world through the people who believe in him. God wants to be *with us in the way that we love one another*. He wants us, the Church, to be his Body in the world. 1 Jn 4:12 says, "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, he lives in us and his love is made complete in us." I pray that we would be a community where God is present, where people know that God hears, where people know that God sees, where people know that God loves them.

Let's pray.