

SHE WAS DESPISED AND REJECTED
GENESIS 16:1-16; 21:9-21
FEBRUARY 15, 1987

Page 1

Abraham gave Hagar some food and water, put her baby Ishmael on her back, and sent her away, where she wandered about in the wilderness. The Hebrew word translated "wandered" implies more than walking about aimlessly, with uncertainty, lacking direction; it also implies destitution. Hagar was banished and wandered about until she ran out of water. There in the desert, she laid her baby down, could not bear to watch him die, and began to cry, to weep. She was despised and rejected.

One of the most moving chapters in the Bible is Isaiah 53 which we often read during the Lenten season. (vs. 2-3) "He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Christians apply these words to Jesus. We believe Jesus, through his suffering and death, fulfilled these words of Isaiah. Originally, the author was thinking of the nations Israel and Judah. Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians; now Judah suffered humiliation. Judah was conquered by the Babylonians and dragged off into captivity. The author weeps over his nation, pictures his people as a suffering servant, and laments, "He was despised and rejected."

Throughout the Bible and history, there are many examples of persons and groups suffering--despised and rejected. One of the first was a woman, an Egyptian woman slave of the Hebrew matriarch, Sarah. Hagar was the first woman in the Bible to experience use, abuse, and rejection. In the ancient world, child-bearing was the chief role of a wife. It was critical for the man to have children, particularly male children, so Sarah was desperate. She had been married to Abraham for many years. She was getting old and admitting to herself that she would never have children. Sarah had power and position in that society. She was the wife of a wealthy herdsman. Sarah also was clever, so she decided to find a surrogate wife for Abraham, a woman who would bear a child to Abraham.

She went to Abraham with her plan, and began by exonerating herself. Not daring to blame her husband for not having children, and not wanting to blame herself, she blamed the Lord. She told Abraham, "Yahweh--the Lord--has prevented me from bearing children." A clever tactic. When you find yourself getting blamed, tell them the Lord did it! Sarah continued, "Therefore, go to my maid. Perhaps she can have a child for me." But when Hagar became pregnant the plan began to spoil.

Some of the translations say that Hagar despised her mistress, or looked with contempt on Sarah; but a less harsh reading is also possible. "Her mistress was lowered in her esteem." In a society where child-bearing is a wife's chief function, often there is jealousy, strife, and enmity between barren and fertile women. Now that Hagar was pregnant, she felt she had achieved a new position in the family. A reordering of relationships was possible. There was the possibility for a new relationship between the women, one of mutuality and equality; but Sarah could entertain no such new vision. Hagar was her slave. She was the matriarch. Hagar was an Egyptian. She was a Hebrew. Hagar had to be kept in her place.

SHE WAS DESPISED AND REJECTED
GENESIS 16:1-16; 21:9-21
FEBRUARY 15, 1987

Page 2

So Sarah went storming to Abraham and, again using the ancient method of self-justification, said, "It's your fault Hagar despises me!" Rather than argue or defend himself, Abraham acquiesced and told Sarah, "She is your slave and under your control; do whatever you want with her." With the passive support of Abraham who did not want to get involved, Sarah treated Hagar so cruelly that Hagar ran away. Inequality and conflict breed violence. "Sarah afflicted her." The Hebrew word translated "afflicted" or "treated cruelly" is a strong word meaning very harsh treatment, even torture. Hagar ran into the wilderness. Later she returned, had her baby, and named him Ishmael, but Sarah again became jealous. By this time Sarah had given birth to her own miracle baby--Isaac--and wanted to make certain that none of the future inheritance from Abraham was shared with Ishmael, Hagar's son. So Sarah convinced Abraham to reject Hagar, and Abraham sent Hagar and her baby out into the wilderness, banished.

Hagar became a suffering servant, despised and rejected. Some 800 years later, Abraham and Sarah's descendants would suffer in Egypt, held in bondage by the Pharaoh. Ironically, here in this earlier story, a lone Egyptian woman is tortured by her Hebrew mistress. Some 2000 years later Jesus, despised and rejected, suffered torture and death at the hand of the Romans. Some 2000 years after Jesus, over six million Jews, despised and rejected, suffered torture and extermination at the hand of the Nazis. And today in the Mideast, Afghanistan, South Africa, and Central America, people are captured, tortured, imprisoned, held hostage, and executed. Will it ever end? When we will learn?

The experience of Hagar is one of the first recorded, but her experience is by no means the last. Phyllis Trible in *Texts of Terror* writes, As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structure, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.

Will it ever end? When will we learn to treat people with respect and dignity? Not once did Abraham and Sarah treat Hagar with respect and dignity. Nowhere in the story of Hagar as it comes to us in Genesis did either Sarah or Abraham say Hagar's name or speak to her. They call her the maid or the slave. They talk about her but they never talk to her. Hagar is an instrument, not a person. She is treated as a thing, a possession, a sex object, a child-bearer; not a person with feelings. Hagar was oppressed because of her nationality--she was an Egyptian; because of her class--she was a slave, a maid; and because she was a woman.

SHE WAS DESPISED AND REJECTED
GENESIS 16:1-16; 21:9-21
FEBRUARY 15, 1987

Page 3

It is only in the wilderness she had an identity. In the first wilderness experience, where she escaped while carrying her unborn child, an angel appeared to her. In fact, this Egyptian slave is the first person in scripture who is visited by a divine messenger. A foreigner, an Egyptian, a woman, a slave--oppressed, despised and rejected--is the first person to receive a divine messenger. God reaches out to the rejected. The angel spoke to her and called her by name. "Hagar," said the angel. What a beautiful thing is your name! To be called by your name singles you out from the entire human race. You are a person. You are real. You are significant. You are important. You have a name. The angel asked her, "Hagar, from where have you come and where are you going?"

Hagar is confronted by the most important questions of life, questions of destiny, questions that everyone must answer, or at least begin to answer, before a person can begin to grow. You will flounder, you will be blown this way and that by whatever wind comes along, you will be victimized and oppressed by other people, until you ask yourself, "From where have I come and where am I going?" The answers need not be profound. Rosa Parks launched the Civil Rights movement because she decided she had come from a hard day's work, her feet hurt, and she was not going to stand up, move to the back of the bus, and give her seat to some white man! She was a person of dignity, and no longer was she going to the back of the bus!

In the second wilderness experience, Hagar again is not left alone. So far in the story, God has been on the side of the oppressors, at least that's the way Sarah and Abraham told the story. God sided with Sarah. God told Abraham to obey Sarah, and banish Hagar and her baby to the wilderness. When the Hebrew slaves were mistreated by Pharaoh, God sided with the slaves. When Hagar was mistreated by Abraham and Sarah, God sided not with Hagar, but with Abraham and Sarah. God led the Hebrew slaves into the wilderness, and they eventually found salvation in the promised land. Hagar went into the wilderness alone, and stayed there. Hagar did not experience exodus, but exile. Unfair! But God did meet her there.

The wilderness was an arid and alien place. When the water was gone, Hagar could not go on. She laid the child under a bush, retreated a distance away, kept vigil over the child, and began to cry. Hagar wept. She didn't cry out to anyone. She did not even cry out to God. Alone with her dying child, the mother wept. And a voice spoke to her, "What troubles you, Hagar?" Again, her name was spoken. "Don't be afraid. Get up. Go pick up the boy, comfort him, hold him by your hand, for I shall make him a great nation. I will make a great nation out of your descendants." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the leather skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. Life overcomes death.

Phyllis Trible concludes her chapter on Hagar by saying, "Hagar is a pivotal figure in biblical theology. She is the first person in scripture whom a divine messenger visits...She is the first woman to hear an annunciation, the only one to receive a divine promise of descendants, and the first to weep for her dying child...Hagar is Israel." She foreshadows Israel's pilgrimage of faith, yet with major contrasts. She stayed in the wilderness; she was not allowed to return after her exile. Ishmael was promised descendants, yet God made a covenant with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac,

SHE WAS DESPISED AND REJECTED

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 15, 1987

not with Hagar and Ishmael. She wandered in the wilderness but never reached a promised land.

Some people do not get the breaks. Life isn't always fair; it isn't always peaches and cream. Not every story, not every life, has a happy ending. Hagar was despised and rejected, left in the wilderness. Yet God was with her. God spoke to her, gave her water, and promised that her descendants would make a nation. Have you ever felt like Hagar, despised and rejected? Alone, frightened, banished, forced to wander in the wilderness? In the wilderness you may find your identity, as did Hagar. In the wilderness, you may find God. God may call your name and lead you to water.

I imagine many of us have felt like Hagar at times; but perhaps many of us are more like Abraham and Sarah, especially we who are of the majority in our American society. Phyllis Tribble challenges us with this disquieting lesson from Hagar, "All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar's story." When will we learn? When will we create families, churches and societies where everyone is accepted and treated with dignity and respect? Have you ever treated anyone like Abraham and Sarah treated Hagar? Who are the Hagers today? Who are the despised and rejected, the ostracized, in your family, school, workplace, community, state, nation and world? What are you doing about justice?