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Today we're going to learn about a woman named Hagar (hay'gahr). **Genesis 16.1-15**, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and 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. 3 So, after Abram had lived 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. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then 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!"* 6 But 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. 8 And 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."* 9 The angel of the LORD said to her, *"Return to your mistress, and submit to her."* 10 The angel of the LORD also said to her, *"I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."* 11 And 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." 13 So 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?"* 14 Therefore 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.

There are some places we kind of expect to find God – like in a worship service, reading the Bible, when we’re serving others to share the love of Christ. There are other times when we may not be expecting God to speak to us or to touch our lives. Often it’s when we’re down, when we’ve been mistreated, when we’re tired and can’t sleep, when we have to start over in life because something bad has happened, when we’re sick or just can’t seem to get over a chronic physical challenge – these are just some of the circumstances that we don’t necessarily anticipate turning into life changing encounters with God. However, it’s precisely in tough times such as these that God may speak to us or show up in ways that we didn’t anticipate and lead us to deeper faith, stronger hope, and greater love. In the Bible and perhaps in many of our lives, God seems to show up more often in the middle of adversity than in prosperity because in times of adversity when we haven’t been able to make it on our own we may be more open to the Lord than in times of prosperity when we don’t think we need any help.

You’ve already heard the first part of Hagar’s story from **Genesis 16:1-15** and you should know that after Hagar gave birth to Ishmael and as he was growing through childhood, then Sarah finally ended up getting pregnant and giving birth to Isaac. Listen to **Genesis 21:8-21**, “8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, *“Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”* 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, *“Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”* 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.

16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a

bowshot; for she said, *“Do not let me look on the death of the child.”* And as she sat opposite him, **she lifted up her voice and wept.** 17 **And God heard the voice of the boy;** and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, *“What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for **God has heard the voice of the boy** where he is.* 18 *Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”* 19 **Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.** She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.”

Abraham and Sarah are two of the most important people in the Bible because God chooses to make a covenant with them. In Genesis 12:1-3 God told them to set out on a journey of faith and promised to make a great a nation of them and be with them. Many years passed, however without Sarah being able to have a child and by the time of the two scriptures we've heard today; Sarah decided to take matters into her own hands rather than continuing to trust God and being obedient to God's will. It sounds a like a soap opera. Sarah tells Abraham to produce an heir for them with Hagar, an enslaved woman from Egypt. This kind of surrogate pregnancy was not uncommon in that part of the world at that time. Hagar quickly gets pregnant. It's tough to say whether she really mistreated Sarah or if Sarah felt angry watching this younger woman walking around with a baby growing inside her and the fact that she was going to bear a child to the leader of the clan surely must have elevated Hagar's status in the eyes of everyone else and may have improved her living situation. Sarah gets mad and treats Hagar badly. Sarah and Abraham argue and he in a kind of cowardly way says, *“She's your servant do what you want with her.”*

Hagar flees into the wilderness to escape her abusive situation. What do you think was going through her mind? Try to imagine, as difficult as it is, what it would be like to be enslaved – to be the property of another person who controls your life and holds the power of life and death over you. It's very hard for us to fathom the total lack of freedom, the powerlessness, and hopelessness of being enslaved. Hagar had to have sex with someone much older than she was who owned her and she gets

pregnant. Then she gets mistreated by Sarah and she runs away. Imagine being young, pregnant, alone in the desert as a runaway slave. That's a tough situation. Hagar followed the road to Shur, which was one of the trade routes passing through the Sinai peninsula. Alone and unaided, it was a heroic effort and a tribute to her tenacity that she got as far as she did. The country is intimidating: eroded hills like bare bones in the arid landscape, the ground swept by constant wind. Despite all this, Hagar very nearly made it back to Egypt. But eventually, exhausted, she stopped at a spring of water in the wilderness of Shur. Worn down and stressed out, I doubt Hagar was thinking she was about to have a remarkable spiritual experience that would change her life. Most of us, when we're tired, stressed, and exhausted aren't necessarily thinking, *"This is a time when I'm going to have a great spiritual experience."* Some of us, if we're confessing, might acknowledge using God's name in those situations, but it might not always be in the form of a prayer.

At this moment of desperation and need – God shows up. **The extremity of our situation may be God's opportunity to connect with us.** The angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar, telling her to return to Sarah and have her baby among the Hebrews. It would be a special child, a child with a great future. How stunning this must have been for Hagar! Not only the news about the destiny of her child, but the fact that in her moment of dire need, she had the assurance that God saw her. What difference would it make to us to know in our moments of despair and need that God sees us and we're not truly alone? How would that knowledge help you face an uncertain future? Inspired by this experience, Hagar retraced her steps and returned to Abraham's tribe, and to Sarah. Hagar was able to return because she now had a purpose in life: **to bear a child who had an important destiny and to raise that child who would have descendants without number.** Don't you love a happy ending? Unfortunately, that's not the way the story ended.

Once Sarah gives birth to Isaac she wants Hagar and Ishmael permanently banished so there is no competition for her son. Abraham has come to love his first son, Ishmael, but God assures him Isaac is the one through whom his offspring will come but God promises also to make a nation of Ishmael also. So once again Hagar heads off in

to the wilderness with only some bread and water - almost a death sentence. When the water runs out, Hagar places her son in the shade of a bush and goes off a little distance because she can't bear the sound of his crying and the thought of her child dying and she begins to weep. I think it was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who said, *"When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on."* Hagar is near the end of her rope when - in what she believed were the last moments of her life, she lifted up her voice and cries to God for help. God heard her, and heard the weak voice of her son. Then her eyes were opened, and she saw something she had missed before: a well of fresh water. She refilled the skin that Abraham had given her with water and took it to her son, gently coaxing the water through his lips. Then she drank the water herself. She and her son continued on their journey, knowing they had only God and themselves to rely on. They spurned life in a town but lived in the wilderness of Paran instead, where Ishmael grew to manhood. When it came time for Ishmael to marry, Hagar found him a wife from her own people in Egypt, not from the people of his father.

There are a lot of lessons we can learn from Hagar's experience. She was resilient and brave and she was a survivor. She had the determination to flee abuse and to try and find a better life for herself and her son. In the most difficult moments in her life when she was enslaved, God showed up more than once and gave her comfort, reassurance, and a vision of the future that gave her hope and the energy to go on. She was open to God and sought the Lord's help and she was obedient to what she was told to do. Sometimes when we're really hurting we can miss the resources and the help that God may have placed within our view or near our grasp, but with the Lord's help we may discover there are wells of water available to us right nearby if we have the eyes to see them. All this happened with Hagar and it can happen for us also. I'm grateful for the work of Independence House a local resource that Hagar could have used.

When we've been mistreated or abused it's important to remember that just because a person or people treat us poorly that doesn't mean we're not of value. It doesn't mean God doesn't see us and hear us. It doesn't mean we've been abandoned. Like Hagar, we may need to find inner reserves of courage, faith, and determination to keep going. Like Hagar, we may cry out to God in our time of deepest need and the

Lord may speak to us and show us there is a way when there seems to be no way. When we've tied a knot in the end of our rope and are hanging on that's when God may show up.

There may be a person or two here this morning who've been thinking, "*What does this ancient story from the Bible have to do with our 21st century world?*" It's somewhat amazing to think that the conflict between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar over their sons Ishmael and Isaac has been unfolding ever since. Muslims look to Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael as their ancestors. Jews and Christians look back to Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Three of the world's major religious faiths all look back to five people and have the same father, Abraham. The story of this family not being able to work out relationships and get along lies deep in humanity's past but it's still reflected in our present when people kill those they see as enemies rather than grasping or seeing that we're all members of the same human family. In Genesis 21:9, Ishmael and Isaac are described as playing with one another. There was no enmity between them. How different might history have been if Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, could have supported one another in love and encouraged their sons to laugh, play, and grow together as brothers? Maybe one day we'll try to learn how to do that

Let's pray: God who sees us and hears us in our times of need, especially when we've been mistreated or we find ourselves in the desert and feeling we can't go on; grant us we pray the faith, strength, and courage we need to go forward in life with renewed hope, deeper faith, and stronger love. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What are your impressions of Abraham and Sarah based on their actions and words in Genesis 16.1-15 21.8-21? Would you say they act wisely, maturely, faithfully, poorly, foolishly? Why?

2. Try to imagine, as difficult as it is, what it would be like to be enslaved – to be treated as the property of another person who controls your life and holds the power of life and death over you. What do you think would be hardest about being a slave?

3. Hagar is not only a slave, but she is from a different people and culture, so she is truly alone and without support. Then she's told by Sarai – the woman who is her "owner" but who has been unable to bear children - to sleep with her husband Abram to produce an heir. What could possibly go wrong in such a scenario?

4. Hagar is mistreated more than once and she flees into a very hostile environment in an attempt, most likely, to get back to Egypt and her own people, perhaps even her family. Twice at her lowest point she hears a message of hope and promise from God. Have you ever heard from the Lord when you were at a low point in life? What was going on and what happened?

5. Hagar and Ishmael are banished into the wilderness with only a little bread and some water – virtually a death sentence. God hears their cries and opens Hagar's eyes to see a well of water. Have you ever had the experience of being down and in a very desperate position and the Lord enabled you to see resources and help that you had missed in the midst of your ordeal? Do you know any other stories like that?

6. Hagar believed the word of the Lord and she acted on what she was told. Abraham, even with his faults, is remembered for his great faith. What difference do faith and obedience make in our own lives?