

Faith in God's Promises

Sarah, Hagar and Abraham

Texts: Genesis chapters. 12:16 - 18:15; 20 - 21:20.

The Book of Genesis is a narrative that records the history of the Hebrew people. It begins with the creation narratives, the birth of humanity, consequences of disobedience to God and God's covenant through Noah and his descendants. Abraham is a descendant of Noah. The story of Abraham and Sarah, his wife, is an ancestral story through which God's promises are fulfilled. Faith and hope in God's promises sustain Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave, through the twists and turns of the story.

God's promises to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar.

God promised Abraham to 'make of you a great nation.' (12:3). But Sarah was barren. There was no hope of descendants to perpetuate the family line. God promised Sarah a son in her old age. God also protected Sarah when Abraham protected himself by passing her off as his sister. God promised Hagar to protect her and her son when they were banished from the household of Abraham.

Retelling their story: What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Sarah reflects. My life was not easy. I survived long journeys with my husband Abraham. I survived our time in Egypt when he gave me to Pharaoh saying I was his sister (12:11-13). After Pharaoh discovered the deception he gave me back to my husband. We left Egypt and continued our journey.

There came the day when I heard God speaking to Abraham and asking him not to be afraid. That he would be great one day. As happens often, I heard Abraham complaining that I was barren and that he had no children. However God reminded him of the promises that were made and the protection that would be given to us till we reached the land promised to us. (15:1-6). After the required ritual sacrifice Abraham fell asleep. He told me later that he had heard God's voice repeating earlier promises. God then made a covenant with Abraham that would last for generations to come (15:7-21).

However Abraham continued to lament that I was barren. I decided to take control. As was the accepted custom among my people, I offered him my slave woman Hagar. She would sleep with him and become pregnant. The child would be ours. The plan was set in motion and Hagar became pregnant (16:1-4),

Hagar reflects: *I was shocked. I was a slave to my mistress Sarah and had never spoken with her husband. Now she sends me – not asks me – to sleep with him and become pregnant. Why? So she can own the child as hers? So the child will fulfil a promise made by God? And she says it must be a son. A son? What certainty is there that the child won't be a daughter? For that matter what certainty is there that I would become pregnant?*

Sarah reflects. *I watched Hagar's pregnancy grow. She looked at me with contempt. It was believed that barrenness was a result of previous sins. I was alone. My husband was silent. I grew angrier with each day. I would put Hagar to work at tasks that were difficult. I would shout at her. There were times when I would be physically violent towards her. I had changed. So had she. We were not the same two women who came out of Egypt many years ago. I took control. I gave my husband an ultimatum. I accused him of being the cause of my suffering. I called on God to be the judge between my husband and me. My husband gave me power over the slave-girl Hagar. I drove her out of our house (16:1-6).*

PAUSE. Reflect on the relationship between Sarah and Hagar.

Are there similarities to surrogacy that is an accepted practice today?

How do we respond to the 'Hagars' of today? Women who have suffered rejection, pregnant young women alone, homeless persons, refugees, and those who are struggling to survive?

Hagar reflects. *I ran. I didn't know where to go. My instinct was to run to my home in Egypt. As I ran I saw a well in the distance. An angel of the Lord found me near the well and spoke to me by name, "Where have you come from and where are you going?". "I am running away from my mistress Sarah." The Angel said, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." (16:8-9) I was speechless. Why would I want to return to work for a woman who has been violent towards me? What would happen to my baby? Then I heard the voice say that I have conceived a son and that I should name him Ishmael. Had I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him? I named the well 'Beer-lahai-roi' after the name I gave to God (16:10-16). As God had instructed, I returned*

to the household of Abraham and Sarah. Once again I suffered much violence from Sarah as I waited for my son to be born. I could see that it was jealousy that drove her to violence. Perhaps I provoked her by looking at her with contempt. After all she was barren and I was not. I had expected Abraham as the father of my child to protect me from his wife. But he stayed silent. So I clung to the promise that God had given me at the well. Finally my son was born and I named him Ishmael.

PAUSE. Reflect on similarities in violent relationships in our society.

How likely is it that we would stay silent like Abraham?

How do we respond to violence arising from cultural, ethnic, religious or political ideology?

Sarah reflects: *One day when my husband was 99 years old, I heard him laughing loudly. When questioned, he replied that God had spoken and promised that I would have a child. I laughed loudly too. Yet God gave me a name for the child although I was still barren. He was to be named Isaac. God then asked me why I had laughed and didn't I believe that I would have a son. Because I was afraid I denied that I had laughed. "Oh yes you did laugh," was God's reply. (18:9-15)*

Hagar reflects: *My son Ishmael was 13 years old when God made another covenant with Abraham. I heard that God had promised to make him the 'ancestor of a multitude of nations' (17: 4). As a fulfilment of this covenant Abraham circumcised Ishmael and all the males in our household. Sarah was now 90 years old. I didn't believe that she would ever become pregnant.*

Sarah reflects: *Our travels continued. I often wondered if God's promise would really come true. While living in Gerar, once again Abraham referred to me as his sister and gave me to King Abimelech. Thankfully God saved me by revealing to the King that I was not Abraham's sister. King Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of that you did this thing?". The King gave me back to Abraham together with silver and land in which to settle. It was in Gerar that I became pregnant and that Isaac was born and named. God had promised us a son. Joy and laughter returned to our household (20. 21:7). As Isaac grew I watched him play with Ishmael. The two boys were growing close. Once again fear grew within me. I resented the friendship between my son and the son of the slave woman. I confronted Abraham and insisted that the slave woman and her son be sent away. Our inheritance would never be shared with Ishmael. We acted together and sent Hagar and her son away, never ever to return to our household.*

Hagar reflects: *Once again we were alone and afraid. We had little water and food as we wandered through the desert wilderness. I watched my son grow closer to death when a messenger appeared before us. I pleaded that my child should not die. God heard my pleading and the messenger asked, "What troubles you Hagar? Do not be afraid. Come, lift up the boy and hold him. I will make a great nation of him." I believed that it was God who was speaking to me again. I saw the well of water. I gave Ishmael a drink. (21:8-21). We continued our journey knowing that God would keep the promise to care for us.*

PAUSE. Reflect. The relationships between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and the two boys would have worked out as: Abraham-Sarah-Isaac. Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael. Isaac-Ishmael. Sarah-Hagar.

Are there different family structures today reflected in the household of Abraham?

REFLECTION

Genesis chapter 22 onwards, records the continuing story of Abraham and his household. The family of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and their relationships are no longer central to the story. Sarah dies aged 127 years and is believed to be buried in Hebron. (Gen. 23:2). Abraham dies aged 175 years. He is buried in Beersheba. It was the last time that Isaac and Ishmael came together when they arrived to bury their father (Gen. 25:7).

Has the word 'promise' and its implications changed today? What is implied when we make promises within relationships? Or when we say "God promised to heal me"? Do we expect God to fulfil promises according to our requests?

Does faith guarantee the fulfilment of God's promises?

Does our faith strengthen us when WE make promises to God?

God of unbroken promises,
give me the wisdom to discern your promises to me.