

**“Redemption of the Slave Surrogate”**

**Genesis 16; 21:8-21**

**Rev. Kit Ripley**

**January 3, 2010- Chiang Mai Community Church**

I’ve been in Chiang Mai for about 6 years. And, like some of you, I employ a house helper. It’s one of the great blessings of working in Thailand that I can afford to have someone help me with the cleaning and gardening. Her name is “Laa”. Well, about a month ago, I met a man who works at the Gawila Army Base. So I mentioned to him that Laa’s husband, Chaiwan works there too, and inquired as to whether he knew Chaiwan. So the man asked me what their family name is. And do you know...for the life of me...I didn’t know what their last name is! Now this is a woman whom I have known for 6 years. I cried with her when her son was drafted into military service. I went to her brother’s funeral. But I thought to myself, “Now what is her last name?!” Well, you can be sure, I asked her for her family name the next day. So now I know it.

Today we are going to explore the story of another maid whose employers never called her by name. It’s the ancient story of Hagar. And there are several scenes in this play, so we will explore two sections from the book of Genesis. As the play opens in the mid-22<sup>nd</sup> Century BC, Abram and his wife, Sarai have moved from Ur in Southeast Mesopotamia, which is now Iraq, and followed God’s leading, eventually coming to Canaan. God then promises Abram that he will give this land to Abram’s descendants. But when a famine strikes, Abram and Sarai head off to plentiful Egypt. There, Abram is afraid that the Egyptians will kill him so that they can take his wife. So he passes Sarai off as a “sister”, and says “so that it may go well with me because of you”. (Gen 12:13) And, just as Abram had expected, Pharaoh decides to marry Sarai, and takes her into his palace. So God has to intervene and rescue poor Sarai from Pharaoh’s house. After they return to Canaan, Abram complains to God in Chapter 15 that he still doesn’t have a son to inherit his estate. Well, how is God supposed to give him the promised son when he’s been pawning his wife off into another man’s arms, and jeopardizing the fulfillment of the promise?! God responds to Abram not by chastising him, but by renewing his promise that Abram *will* have a son, and will father countless descendants through him. Enter chapter 16: Abram is 86 and his wife, Sarai is 76 years old. And this is how the story goes:

READ: Genesis 16

Here are the parents of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition - Abraham and Sarah, as they would soon be named. And yet they are portrayed with blatant honesty. The story is a story of the formation of character over time, with their all-too-human mistakes written right into the historical record. God has made very clear promises to Abraham that he will be the father of descendants as numerous as the stars. And just one chapter later, old Sarah doubts the promise. After all, she’s 76 years old, and God’s own trustworthiness is at stake, here. So she decides to take the matter into her own hands. God’s not forthcoming here, so I’d better do something! I can identify with that!

So she hatches a plan to help God (and herself) save face. She says, “Let’s use the maid as a surrogate mother so that I can adopt the baby and be built up through her!” There were no consent forms to be signed, and the maid had no choice because she was a slave. This was the culturally acceptable way to solve the problem of infertility. Sarah threw that familiar trump card, “It’s a cultural thing!”

I wonder how Hagar perceived this turn of events. We’ll never know because the narrator never tells us. What we do know is that when Hagar became pregnant, her “mistress was lowered in her esteem”. Poor Sarah. The very plan she came up with to build herself up and gain honor for herself has resulted in her being lowered in esteem by her maid. So she lashes out in fury at her husband, and then goes and humiliates the maid. And in the end, she never does adopt the child, Ishmael, as she had intended, and she’s left childless for another 13 years. What tragic and inevitable consequences! Had Sarah simply trusted God to unfold his plans over time, this sad story would never have taken place.

But it did happen. And who takes the brunt of it all, but the poor, unfortunate foreign maid. And Abraham and Sarah never call the maid by her name. She’s referred to as “my servant” or later on, “that

slave woman". The only reason we know her name is because the Lord, Himself, knew her name. When Hagar flees to the desert, she encounters the Lord's angelic messenger. And he addresses her by name, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" He invites her into conversation. For the first time in history, she is no longer, "that slave woman." She is called by name. And she is given a voice. This woman who had spent her life being acted upon, ordered around and undervalued. This woman is called forth by God himself and is given a voice. Can't you hear him? Step forward, Daughter, and Be Heard! Hagar speaks from the very depths of anonymity. And as the sound rises in her throat, she speaks the truth and begins to tell her story.

But even in this rich and glorious moment, the Lord then gives a command which sounds abrasive to our modern ears. "Return to your mistress and submit to her." What!? How could the Lord be so callous?! Return to her oppressor? It isn't easy to understand or to accept. But realistically, when we look at Hagar's situation, what choices did she have? There was no Wildflower Home or House of New Hope shelter for unwed mothers at that time. As a pregnant woman alone in the wilderness, she was vulnerable to bandits, wild animals, thirst, and starvation. In the desert alone, she was bound for certain death. She needed the provision and legal protection that Abraham's house could offer her. And her son needed his father.

But even more than that, God had a plan for Hagar and her child. God did not intend for them to perish in the desert. The Lord tells Hagar that she will have a son named Ishmael, meaning "God hears", because "the Lord has heard of your misery". Truly, Hagar has been heard. And the Lord knows her situation.

And Hagar is not simply heard...she is also seen by God. She calls the Lord "El-Roi, the God who sees me". "Because", she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."

You know, from the very earliest moment of childhood, human beings experience a deep desire to be seen. In fact, in every culture, there is a game which in America we call "Peek-a-boo". Little children cover their face or hide behind a desk or a door and peek out from behind it while mommy declares joyfully, "Peek-a-boo! I SEE you!" In Thai we hear it as, "Ja-Eh!" But what happens if there is no moment of declared joy from Mommy when baby peeks around the corner? The child realizes with deep dread that he has NOT been seen. He is invisible. And it continues as we get older. We all long to be seen - truly seen. And there is a terrible grief when we have been "overlooked", or by a friend, an employer or a lover. So as the counselors at Cornerstone Counseling know, the most validating way to return dignity to a hurting person is to see and hear them. Being recognized restores the soul. So when Hagar receives the Lord's promise of a son and says that she has "seen the One who sees me", what she is saying is, "Today, I have been given honor and dignity".

After her encounter with the Lord, Hagar obediently returns to Abraham and Sarah, and gives birth to her son. She presses forward and raises her son in Abraham and Sarah's home. Thirteen years pass, and finally, a 90-year old Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac. God promises that he will establish a special covenant with the promised son, Isaac, and will give him the land of Canaan. God also promises to bless the first son, Ishmael, and make him the father of 12 leaders. God's plan is finally unfolding.

Several years later, Isaac has successfully reached age 3 and is weaned from his mother. The boy, Ishmael, has become a teenager. It is here that the second scene unfolds.

Read Genesis 21:8-21

Verse 9 says that Sarah notices Ishmael, and the Hebrew isn't clear about what exactly she sees. The NIV we are using today says she sees Ishmael "mocking", but there's no object. What's he "mocking"? Some translations say the boy was "playing". One scholar says Sarah saw Hagar and Abram's son "laughing", and the Hebrew seems to support this translation. If this is true, it would certainly be one of those delightful plays on words that is so common throughout the Old Testament. The meaning of Sarah's son, Isaac's name is "laughter". So if Sarah saw this teenaged boy, Ishmael, "laughing", in the ancient mindset, she could easily have perceived it as a threat to usurp her son's authority. And Ishmael was certainly coming "of age", and would assume the right to inherit his father's estate. So now that Isaac is

three, Sarah is ready to abandon the backup plan: Hagar and Ishmael must go! So she urges Abraham to throw them out of the house.

Sounds to me like a horrible, nasty, vindictive thing for Sarah to do. But the Lord actually confirms this horrible plan, and tells Abraham to go along with it. Again...another unexpected move from God, given the loving character of the God we know. Is this really the same God that we see in the face of Jesus?

I suggest that it was because God's longstanding promise to prosper Ishmael could only take place if he was removed to a different place, where his descendants would not threaten Isaac's promised descendants and land of Canaan. These two brothers could not have both prospered if they were competing for the same land. So 16-year old Ishmael, and his mother are sent away. But even though Abraham tragically abandons them, GOD does NOT. The text says that God heard the boy's cries in the desert, and provided water for them when they were dying of thirst. God was with Ishmael as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. He married an Egyptian woman, and they had 12 sons who became great leaders. And in the end, Ishmael and Isaac return to bury their father together. Ishmael prospered and was counted as an honored son.

God never abandons Hagar and Ishmael. Even though Hagar was an Egyptian slave, and not a part of God's chosen people. Even though she and Ishmael represent Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith in God's provision. And even though they are not a part of God's original plan for Abraham, God does not abandon them. He does not abandon them because this God is a God who has mercy on the weakest of society. This is the first glimpse of God's care and advocacy on behalf of the oppressed. He allows Hagar and Ishmael to live safely under Abraham's care for the first 16 years of the boy's life. And Hagar and Ishmael were sent off in God's own timing, but He continued to provide for them every step of the way, prospering them, and giving them their own land. God will not allow Abraham and Sarah's mistake to determine Hagar and Ishmael's future. Because this God is a God of redemption. Just like we take old cans and papers to redeem them at the recycling shop, weighing them kilo by kilo...God redeems the old, used-up, thrown-out refuse of humanity.

In our work at the New Life Center Foundation, we work with tribal teenaged girls who have come from many different backgrounds. Some of our girls come from abusive homes, are orphaned, neglected or simply live in crushing abject poverty. Others have been victims of labor exploitation and human trafficking. "Lucy" came to us several years ago, with 3 other girls from a Lahu tribal village. This particular village is a center for drug trafficking in the region, and the parents of these girls were in and out of jail, like a tag team. Lucy doesn't know who her real father is because there was such a parade of men through the house when she was growing up. When Lucy got to the New Life Center, we had to send her straight into 2 months of drug rehabilitation for her methamphetamine addiction. She was 12 years old. Lucy had never been to school, but she knew the Thai alphabet and could do a little addition, so we placed her in the second grade. When Lucy turned 16, she went home to visit her family for the summer break in April. Her parents decided that it was time for Lucy to get married. There was a nice man in the village who liked Lucy and was prepared to pay her parents a good bridal price for her. He gave her gold jewelry, and told her he loved her. So Lucy agreed to marry him, and a wedding ceremony was held immediately. Only later did she find out that this man was already married to another woman. When Lucy did not come back to start the new school term, we began to get worried, so our staff contacted the village to find out what had happened to Lucy. We learned about her marriage and discovered that her new husband had taken her to the city. When they got to the city, Lucy's husband took the gold jewelry back from her, and forced her to start selling drugs for him. It wasn't long after that, that he left her. She returned home to her family in shame. So what did our staff do? They went after her. One of our senior staff, named Fay, got into a truck, and drove up to that village, 3 hours away, in pursuit of Lucy. Fay persuaded her parents to let Lucy come back to the New Life Center. Lucy slumped, relieved, into the front seat of the truck and left with Fay. In March, 2008, Lucy proudly received her 6<sup>th</sup> grade diploma. Lucy has a long road ahead of her. It will not be easy for her to overcome her history. She has been snatched back from the captivity of drugs, and we proclaim LIFE for her, in Jesus' name.

At the New Life Center, we bring our girls before the feet of our Lord in prayer every day. We know that each and every one of them is precious to Him. And in their own time, we are delighted to hear each one

begin to share her story, and gain her own voice. And our residents know that in this place, they will be heard, and seen and given dignity.

To us, Hagar represents many people. She is the faithful maid, exploited; the abused slave; the surrogate mother; the foreigner without recourse; the abandoned “mia noi”; the runaway pregnant woman; the refugee fleeing oppression; the divorced single mother; the homeless wanderer. She is “Lucy”.

And God tenderly grasps the chin of all of this overlooked humanity and says, “I’m not done with you”. He knows the names of each and every one of them. He calls out tenderly, and invites them into a dialogue with him. He gazes into their lives with compassion and sees their suffering, just like he saw Hagar so many years ago.

There may be days when you, too, experience a glimpse of Hagar’s suffering. You may feel nameless, lonely or overlooked at times. You may work with people who are nameless, lonely or overlooked, and feel helpless to make a difference in this tidal wave of darkness. You may have pieces of your own family story which are messy and tragic. You may have experienced broken promises. You may sometimes feel like you are wandering in a spiritual desert, dying of thirst for the Lord. Fortunately, this story is a message of hope for YOU! All of these things are NOT the final word about your life. No matter how many twists and turns your life may have taken, God has not and will not abandon you. He knows your name. God hears your cries, and invites you to share your story with him. Won’t you call out to him, today? Because *your* story is not over.