

August 19, 2007  
Pentecost 12

*"The Man of Faith Falters"*

## GENESIS 16

**N**ow Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; <sup>2</sup> so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. <sup>3</sup> So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. <sup>4</sup> He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. <sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me." <sup>6</sup> "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." <sup>11</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. <sup>12</sup> He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers." <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup> So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Have you ever seen a butterfly that was once a caterpillar struggle to get out its confining cocoon or chrysalis? The struggle to break through the chrysalis seems to go on forever, wiggling, twisting, flexing and finally flapping wings. The person who sees this for first time is tempted to get a sharp knife and cut the chrysalis open to let the butterfly fall out freely. If you do that the butterfly will die. As you probably know the struggle is necessary to gain strength, for without the struggle the butterfly will never soar.

Abraham and Sarah have been struggling with God's promise they would have a son. From that son God promised many descendants and one descendant Jesus, who would bless all nations. Ten years have passed. Abraham is 85 and Sarah is 75. God doesn't seem to be coming through. They take matters in their hands. It looked like the perfect solution, humanly speaking. Have Abraham sleep with Sarah's handmaid and let her produce the child for them. It was so expedient, but not obedient. So pragmatic but not promise based.

This morning we want to take a closer look at what happened to Abraham and Sarah. We cannot throw stones and point fingers, for we will be painfully reminded of the times we

have not taken God at his Word as we should. We struggle to stay faithful to God's Word and his promises, and with the struggle comes the strength to soar and be lifted up by the promises of the Lord.

### **The man of faith falters**

How hard it was for Abraham and Sarah to wake up every morning without any evidence of a child beginning to develop in her womb. Don't you feel the pain in these words, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." That was a disgrace in those days, made even more shameful by a husband with the name of Abram which means father of people. To make matters worse God had promised them a son and now it appears that he is reneging on that promise. Can't you see Abraham and Sarah looking at a pregnant mother and then painfully at each other, "When will it be our turn? When will God come through and keep his promise that he made to us?"

There was an easy solution to the problem of having a child. It existed in the servant girl Hagar, the girl they had acquired in the land of Egypt. Hagar could become a surrogate mother by sleeping with Abraham. By the customs and laws of the time the child would belong to Sarah and Abraham. What is wrong with helping God a little, especially if he is not coming through and keeping his promise?

It is always part of our sinful nature to want to circumvent and take an easier way instead of the way of the cross. Jeremiah 17:6 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" I cannot fully understand how my heart could ever think I must add something of my own to what Christ has done to be truly worthy of God's love. Yet, lurking in me and in you is this evil inclination to want to add something. I know that God's ways are always the best ways, and yet the evil heart points me to a wrong path that goes contrary to God's will and says, "See how that path is more enjoyable and more fun. It is going to increase your joy and happiness if you follow that way." It is a struggle to wait on the Lord, but it is worth every minute of the wait as we grow in our faith.

Sarah, dear Sarah, such a noble wife, lauded in Scripture as a model for all women! She wants the promise fulfilled so badly. Her practical mind finds a solution and once she has convinced herself, she will stop at nothing to convince her husband Abraham to go along with plan. There is bitterness and emotion in her voice as she says, "The Lord has kept me from having children." The word used here is also used for stopping a plague or stopping violence. In her mind God has stopped up her womb and kept her from having a child. Look at how our twisted minds can come up with the strangest excuses for doing something wrong, maybe even blaming God.

Sarah becomes the boss. She takes charge. She is the head of the house. Nothing will get in the way of her plan. "Go!" she says to Abraham. Sleep with my maidservant." Sleep with her as often as necessary. "Perhaps I can build a family through her." Notice the word "I." When did it become about "you" dear Sarah? Where is the Lord in all this? He is pushed aside. The promise is forgotten. Being expedient became more important than being obedient.

"Abraham agreed to what Sarai said." Where is the spiritual leader in the marriage, the

head of the house, the man to whom God has spoken and said? "Look up at the stars! That's how many descendants you will have someday!" He listens to the voice of his wife just as Adam listen to his wife Eve and she convinced him to join her in eating the forbidden fruit. In a good marriage where two people are real close to each other, there is always the lurking danger that they become so close they will go along with each other, even if it means walking a path away from God instead of closer to God. A husband grumbles and complains about how bad everything is going in the world and the wife joins in. They pull each other down. One of them needs to step up and remind the other that no matter how badly things may be going in the world and how badly things may be going in our personal lives what Jesus said this morning in our gospel is true, "It is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom."

Abraham slept with Hagar and she conceived. The dastardly deed was done. How easy it was to justify having sex with a woman who was not his wife. His beloved princess Sarah had urged him to do this. They were helping God keep the promise. Remember how the children of Israel wanted Aaron to make them a golden calf when the law was given at Mount Sinai. Aaron called on the people to use the golden calf and dance around it as a way to worship the Lord. Worshipping a golden calf! What a sick excuse this was for beefing up their faith! There will always be excuses for sin. The angry sister says, "He hit me first!" The unfaithful husband says, "My wife was being a shrew." "The company has so much money it won't miss a few paper clips."

What looked humanly like a perfect solution now becomes a night mare. Hagar the handmaid becomes Hagar the horrible. She gloats over the child growing in her womb. I can almost see her as she asks Abraham to put his hand on her belly and feel the life of his son kicking inside of her? The growing child is a daily reminder of gross infidelity to each other and to the Lord. Resentment grows. Angry flashes. Jealous rages. Sarah even accuses Abraham with the words, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering." She even asks the Lord to judge between her and Abraham as if she has some righteous and just cause. Sin always has its consequences. It bears ugly, nasty, putrid smelling fruit that poisons relationships especially in the family.

Abraham, the great man of God who walked so close to God falters again and fails another test . His wife is crying out in pain, crying out for help, going ballistic, falsely accusing him, and even using the name of the Lord to justify what has happened. And what does Abraham do. He tells Sarah, "Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best." This was not a time to say, "You are in charge. You take care of it." This is a time to show compassion and love. This was a time to love your wife with understanding. This was a time to sit down and talk it out and get together and the same page with everything focused around the Lord and his promises. The man of faith falters, but as we shall now see God remains faithful.

### **The Lord remains faithful**

Hagar is alone, alone with Sarah. Abraham has stepped out of the picture. Sarah has no mercy on this servant girl who has been despising her and gloating over her. It says that Sarah mistreated her. The word used here is the same one used for the Egyptians afflicting God's people when they were slaves in Egypt. There was no mercy. Hagar has to flee from her fury and anger. Gone are the days when Abraham paid special attention to her and the

child in her womb.

But now we see a strange turn of events in this sordid story of man's unfaithfulness. Hagar takes refuge near a spring in the desert where the Lord God himself appears to her and reaches out to her with his protecting hand. "The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert." How true, the Lord finds us, we don't find him. This is the first mention in the Old Testament of "the angel of the Lord" which we know as the Lord God, our Lord Jesus, appearing to people in human form. We know this from the responses that people such as Gideon or the parents of Samson or even Hagar had to this angel of the Lord. They called him God.

The Lord has a message of Hagar. "Go back to your mistress and submit to her. I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." The Lord even told her that she should name her son Ishmael. He predicted that he would be like a wild donkey and not get along with other people. The Ishmaelites did not get along with other people, and even to this day the Arab people have been in conflict with other people, especially the nation of Israel. When Isaac was born it was the 12 year old Ishmael who teased and tormented his little brother, so badly that Abraham and Sarah had to send him out of their home.

The story of Hagar is another story of God's amazing grace. It says, "She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are the God who sees me.'" Then she confessed her faith in the true God by saying, "I have now seen the one who sees me." She confessed her faith and trust in the true God who had watched over her and appeared to her. The word of the Lord that changed the heart of Abraham also changed this woman's heart. She went back to Sarah and submitted herself to her and served her with a changed heart. God has amazing ways to testify to his grace and mercy. The changed life of Hagar and the message she brought back to Abraham and Sarah was needed very much at that time in their lives. They had faltered, but God had remained faithful. They needed the promised Savior God to forgive them and give them peace. Hagar named her son "Ishmael" which means, "The Lord hears." What a daily reminder of God's grace for Abraham and Sarah. God is faithful. "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." Man proposes but God disposes. His mercy is new to us every morning, great is his faithfulness. The Lord is in your struggle. He gives you the strength to soar and not falter.