

## “God Opened Her Eyes”

Genesis 21:8-21

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The story of Hagar and Ishmael is painful, to say the least. Hagar had served as Sarah's handmaiden. When Sarah saw that she was not able to conceive, she sent Hagar to lie with her husband, Abraham, to start a family for her. Hagar did as she was instructed. She did conceive and she bore a son, Ishmael. But soon, now in her old age, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. One can only imagine the stresses in that family. Sarah makes up her mind that HER offspring, not Hagar's, will carry the family name forward. And she acts boldly on that decision. Abraham isn't all that thrilled about it, but he goes along with Sarah's wishes.

Thus, a story of rejection is born and is found in the early pages of Genesis. Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the wilderness to die. The skin of water they carry won't last long. They will surely perish. But God ushers in a new day. They may be cast out by Abraham and Sarah but not by God! God hears their cry; comes to them in their affliction; raises them up; and walks with them into their future.

Hagar and Ishmael become symbols of rejection. At the same time, they become symbols of God's mercy. What Abraham and Sarah have de-valued, God has embraced and cherished. God looks upon the rejected ones and says in effect, “You also are my people.”

So this story carries us into an exploration of the human fear of rejection. This may be the most common of all fears. Rejection.

Is this not why we hesitate to ask someone for a date. What if she says no? It's why high school seniors dread receiving that business-looking envelope from the Director of Admissions of the college we had hoped to attend. It's why we hold back from sending our resume to yet another employment agency. There probably isn't anyone here who can't relate on some level to Hagar and Ishmael. In my senior year in high school, I applied to three colleges: Trinity in San Antonio, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Springfield College. I was so afraid of rejection that when the acceptance letter arrived from San Antonio, I leaped at it; didn't even wait to hear from the other schools. Why chance suffering rejection? So, I can relate to this Bible story!

It's an important story to be included in the Bible. It could easily have been omitted; after all, it reveals a dark side of Abraham and Sarah, the progenitors of our faith. Yet, it IS included! It is included, in my view, for its theology; that is, for what it reveals of the nature of God. God shows mercy. God hears the cry of those rejected and acts decisively to restore hope and dignity. Mercy is God's middle name.

Hagar has placed her infant in the shade of a tree. She sits several yards away. She can't bear to witness the boy's death. All she can do is weep. It is an intimate scene. God takes her by the hand and she opens her eyes. She sees a well of water and her hope soars; her fear seems to evaporate. She picks up her child. And God informs her that God will make a new nation of this child. A new day has dawned for Hagar and Ishmael. In Malawi, we would be shouting, "Kwacha!" A new day has dawned.

In some of the Genesis stories, Abraham and Sarah are lifted up as role models. They leave the comfort of their home in Ur of the Chaldeans to follow the leading of God. They are pillars of faith. But in this story they are not the magnanimous ones.

The storyteller seems to use them as a way of illustrating, by contrast, the surprising nature of God, a source of mercy.

In some religious traditions, there is a need to paint the pioneers of the faith as perfect, blameless, super-human. But I rejoice that Abraham and Sarah have a shadow side. It makes them more human, more relatable, more loveable, more believable.

A few years ago, on one of those long, trans-Atlantic flights, I watched the movie 42, the story of Jackie Robinson. In one scene after another, the filmmaker describes rejection: rejection by teammates, by opposing managers, by a gas station attendant, by fans in various ball parks, by nearly everybody. Then comes the scene where Peeewe Reese walks over from his infield position to where Jackie Robinson is stationed at first base, puts his arms around him, and welcomes him to the major leagues. You want to shout out “Kwacha!” A new day has dawned. Mercy has won the day. I forget who won the game that day in the movie, but it was mercy that won the hearts of anyone viewing the picture. At least on THAT day, Peeewe Reese was a God-like figure.

Last week, in Boston, middle school youth and their advisors encountered a lot of homeless people who had experienced rejection from family, from neighbors, from employers, even from strangers. But we also experienced ministries of mercy. At Pilgrim Church, we witnessed the mercy of shopping carts full of fresh fruits and vegetables. At the City Rescue Mission, we witnessed how lives are literally turned around by people who offer mercy instead of rejection. At Community Servings, no one was judging; everyone was cooking delicious food for folks living with AIDS. At the Waltham drop-in center, it was the same.

Monday through Thursday, we witnessed a steady parade of mercy. It was mercy that made all the difference.

This is why I believe the Hagar and Ishmael story is found in the first book of the Bible, because it reveals the primal dread of rejection and the even more powerful impact of mercy.

Almost thirty years ago, I was doing dishes in the kitchen of the old church. Millie Hollister was washing; I was drying. We chatted about many things. I had been raised in the Congregational Church, she in the Catholic Church. She asked me something that got my attention. "When I die," she said, "will you say the rosary?" I asked Millie what the rosary is. She said, "You know, the mercy prayer." Well, I didn't know it. But when Millie died, I went down to St. Paul's Church and Father Quinn taught it to me. That moment with Mrs. Hollister in the old kitchen pushed its way into my consciousness this week as I read the Hagar and Ishmael story and worked on this sermon.

Maybe we all need a little bit of mercy today. Maybe that's why we're here. The good news is that the God we worship is a God of mercy. God meets us in the darkness of rejection, takes us by the hand, shows us a well of water, and promises to walk with us into a new day. It was true for Hagar and Ishmael. It is true for you and me, too. This is why we live each day in the greatest of hope. Amen.