

*Great Women of the Bible – Hagar*  
*Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:1-16*  
*June 10, 2007*

Today I am beginning a new sermon series that will last for the next six weeks on Great Women of the Bible. I will explore the characters of three women in the Old Testament – Hagar, Hannah and Ruth – and three women of the New Testament – the Syro-Phoenician woman from the Gospel of Luke, the woman at the well from John’s gospel and Mary Magdalene. Now some might object that is disingenuous to focus a study of Bible characters simply because of gender. It is fair to ask the question, “Why study women of the Bible as a category?” Let me make an attempt to explain myself and my motivations. Character studies of Biblical characters can be a bit tricky. Characters in the Bible, just like in good fiction, can take on lives of their own. Their value to inform us can go beyond the writer’s original intent. It reminds me of a story of the great T. S. Eliot. After a public reading of his work *Little Giddings* an eager English Literature graduate student approached him enthusiastically about a persuasive device that Eliot had used in his writing. Eliot responded, “You know you are right. I had not ever intended it that way, but your insight is absolutely correct. The art form takes on a life of its own.” So do great characters in the Bible take on their own lives. The second reason for looking at these great female Bible characters is that it also helps us to remember to focus not only on inclusive language in church, but on inclusive story-telling. A final and most important motivation that I have is to look at the way that Feminist Bible scholars have brought new methods to the way that we look at the Bible stories themselves. Women characters are relatively rare in the Bible and often unnamed; all of these characters are developed by men and reach out to us through the patriarchal systems in which the Bible

emerged. All of these women struggle in a system that valued them as little more than property, bearers of children, and as characters which set up male characters who are the greater protagonists in God's salvation history. Because of this great female scholars have taught us new tools with which to read the Bible. Sometimes the plot or the characters seem unlikely to us, and these women Bible scholars term this a "hermeneutic of suspicion." This is to Bible interpretation what cognitive dissonance is to human psychology. This suggests a new way of interpreting Scripture that looks behind questionable facts or characters. Rosemary Reuther, a feminist Bible scholar of the 80s in her landmark book "Sexism and God-Talk," says it best: "What is, is not what it ought to be. Not only that, but what we have been told is, is not always what is, and what we have told what ought to be, is not always what ought to be."

It is with cognitive dissonance or this suspicion that I introduce our first character – Hagar from a two-act play in Genesis 16 and 21. I will overview this story for you first of all and then read just a couple of key verses in these two chapters that cause our eyes to open in a bit of surprise – with suspicion and a bit of humor. Hagar was a young, Egyptian girl and the attendant to Sarai, the wife of Abram. Now God promises Abram in chapter 12 of Genesis to make his family a great nation. He promises land and offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky. Specifically God promises him a son. Now after this promise to Abram ten years pass and he and Sarai are now in their mid-seventies and they are childless. Ten years pass after God's promise. No baby. So as they approach their mid-eighties Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands. She goes to her husband Abram giving her attendant to Abram as a concubine, a kind of surrogate mother. So Abram listens to his wife and sleeps with Hagar and she becomes

pregnant. Hagar, now growing with child, somehow offends Sarai. Sarai complains to her husband about the disdain that Hagar shows her mistress and Abram says, “She’s your attendant, do with her what you want.” So Sarai starts to treat Hagar very badly and she runs away into the desert. Alone and pregnant in the desert an angel comes to Hagar and says this: “Go back to Sarai and submit to her. I will make your descendants too numerous to count. You are pregnant and you will bear a child and call him Ishmael – God hears – for God has heard you in your sorrow.” The angel goes on to describe the character defects of this future son. Hagar believes the messenger, is obedient to him, and commemorates the event by naming the water well where she encounters this angel the “Well of the living One who sees me.” The text concludes by saying that “Hagar bore a son and Abram named him Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore a son.” With that the first act is concluded. Fourteen years pass and Sarai has borne no children. Finally she bears a son named Isaac (which means laughter) as she grows close to 100 years old.

Now we are ready for the second act of this play. In chapter 21 there is family gathering and Hagar, now 14 years old, is playing with the toddler Isaac who is being weaned. Somehow Sarai looks at the two boys together and feels very uneasy. Most likely she realizes that the older boy of Hagar’s is due  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the family inheritance over her son Isaac. Sarai demands that Abram get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Worse, Abram has a vision from God who says, “Do what your wife says, for your great nation will pass through your son, Isaac.” God later says he will make another great nation through the older son, Ishmael. So Abram, greatly grieved for Ishmael, takes them out in the desert and releases them, providing only bread and water. Let me read this as you listen

carefully: “Then, placing the child on her back, he sent her away.” Later, as they walk out in the desert, running out of bread and water, and desperate: “God heard the child crying...do not be afraid, for God has heard the child’s cry. Get up, lift up the child and hold his hand; for I will make of him a great nation.” Miraculously she opens her eyes and finds a fresh well of water. We are told that they make it somehow out of that desert for Ishmael becomes a great archer and his mother finds him a wife in Egypt. The curtain falls on our two-act play. Now of course it is through Ishmael that the Arabic nations are born and through the other son Isaac that Israel emerges.

The value of this two-act narrative is that it shows the change in our characters. And the value of our suspicion is that it can raise new meaning when we see flaws in the plot. What are we to believe about Hagar carrying her teenage son on her back like a baby? Are we to believe that mother takes him by the hand as the text suggests? Is the text just flawed in its credibility or can we read a metaphorical meaning?

I am not sure about the answers to all these questions as our eyebrows are raised, but the contrast in our character from act one to act two suggests at least a few of her heroic character traits, particularly in light of the utter powerlessness and hopelessness of her social position in relation to men and to Sarai. First, I see remarkable faith throughout the story in being obedient in first returning to Sarai and then in her ability to survive a situation of abandonment, of utter hopelessness, as this forgotten single mother. Second, even if she didn’t carry the teenager Ishmael on her back or lift him up by the hand or even find him a wife, she shows remarkable strength, of fortitude, in the face of hopelessness and bitter physical conditions in the desert. Finally she trusted throughout in the particular promises of God made to her in this story.

Whether you are a parent or single parent, you can find direct affinity with Hagar in the powerlessness of her situation. But for every one of us, the more general question that we identify with Hagar here is, “are you powerless in a situation in your life right now?” As I look out over our congregation I think of these situations: Perhaps you are in a dead-end job, in an abusive relationship, abandoned by a loved one? Are you in a situation in which you wish that you would be shown the door just like Abram showed Hagar and Ishmael the door? When you have no power and are paralyzed, what is left? That is the dark and small place in which I imagine Hagar. Even from that small, dark place Hagar gives us a way out.

First, Hagar gives us a way out of the desert through Faith – to trust God for direction. When Hudson Taylor went to China, he made the voyage on a sailing vessel. As it neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, the missionary heard an urgent knock on his stateroom door. He opened it, and there stood the captain of the ship. "Mr. Taylor," he said, "we have no wind. We are drifting toward an island where the people are heathen, and I fear they are cannibals." "What can I do?" asked Taylor. "I understand that you believe in God. I want you to pray for wind." "All right, Captain, I will, but you must set the sail." "Why that's ridiculous! There's not even the slightest breeze. Besides, the sailors will think I'm crazy." But finally, because of Taylor's insistence, he agreed. Forty- five minutes later he returned and found the missionary still on his knees. "You can stop praying now," said the captain. "We've got more wind than we know what to do with!" It's one thing to say you have faith and to pray for God's direction. It's altogether another thing to drop our sail

expecting the wind for which we have no evidence. Hagar had no reason to have faith to get out of that desert with her son, but she did.

Because of that trust, that faith, she could have Fortitude. Fortitude is to just keep one foot in front of the other in the desert. In the recent film, “Pursuit of Happyness,” Will Smith plays a real character that faces homelessness carrying every day around the streets of San Francisco his suitcase, a medical imaging device (that he is trying desperately to sell) and his young son’s hand. At the same time he is trying to qualify for a prized position at a prestigious brokerage firm. He is competing with thirty other promising brokers for one position. Each night at five he gets into line at Glide Memorial UMC to live in the homeless shelter. For Will is broke. He doesn’t have a dime to his name. His brokerage internship carries no pay. He tries to peddle his medical imaging device so that he can get enough rent money to move back into his fleabag motel and pay for childcare for his five-year-old son. Exhausted, with almost no sleep as he studies for his financial broker’s exam, he makes a heroic push and lands the prized job, beating out all 30 competitors for this broker’s position. The look of satisfaction, the look of victory as he learns that he has walked up the hill out of poverty and homelessness, is a look of victory that I have never seen before. That is Hagar’s victory as she walks out of the desert carrying her child. Do you need that kind of fortitude right now? It starts with faith, and through that faith you can have the fuel of fortitude.

Finally Hagar found the specific promises of God through her son Ishmael. I can imagine what gave her the will to go on, to face hardship and rejection, to put behind her the demons that say “you are not good enough” and “you are not worthy” was that

steadfast louder voice in her head that was not of her own speaking. It was the voice of the messenger that said, “you are precious, Hagar...you have a purpose – to raise this child who will parent a great nation. You will be the grandparent of a great nation.” For me I can get past the suspicion of the writer who gave favor to Isaac with the strong promise that God has for all of God’s children. Hagar refused to believe the doubt in her own head and instead held on to the great promises of her God. She found it in her Ishmael. Friends, where is your Ishmael? In God’s salvation story there are promises for you and for me. If we keep faith, if we keep strong putting one foot in front of another, if we hear the promises of God over the noises in our head, we’ll find our Ishmael. What is God’s promise to you? “I will never leave you...I am your shield...I will help you...all things work together for good to them who love God...Come to me, all who labor and our heavy laden and I will give you rest.” These are the promises from God to each of you. Hear them in your own head today from God’s messengers who come to encourage you.