

Genesis 16:1-16

“Trust me,” the gas station attendant said to the confused motorist, “...if you follow those directions I gave you, they will take you right where you need to go. I’ve lived here a long time and I’m telling you, that’s the best way to get there.” And so the driver, encouraged by this, hops in the car and pulls out of the gas station, faithfully following the instructions she has been given.

However, after a while she begins to wonder and second-guess the attendant’s instructions. At first the directions seemed to be right, but now they seemed to be taking her away from her destination. “What if the attendant was confused?” she asked herself. Perhaps the attendant didn’t have any idea what he was talking about, or maybe he left out one vital detail. Maybe he said “left” when he should have said “right”. Even worse, maybe it was all a practical joke, designed to get her hopelessly lost.

And so, after a few minutes of this sort of second-guessing, and going back and forth on the issue, the driver decides to abandon the instructions she has been given for something which, to her mind at least, seems like it will achieve the desired result.

Four hours later, after throwing her front end out of alignment from hitting several large potholes, and after having to change a tire that went flat, and after having to stop and fill up for gas, and after having to make several other stops for directions - after all of that she finally arrives, tired and frustrated, at her destination only to discover, through her conversations January 15, 2006there, that the original directions were, in fact, correct and would have saved her a lot of time and spared her un-necessary trouble, frustration and embarrassment - IF she had only been patient and followed the instructions through to the end.

Ever find yourself in a situation something like that? Maybe it wasn’t when you were driving the car. Maybe it was a different situation but with a similar theme - where you decided to follow your own advice or the advice of others, over against previous advice or instruction that you had been given and which would have steered you in a different direction. But instead of following that previous advice, you decided to ignore it - whatever it was - and instead followed your own, and soon found yourself in a world of hurt that, in hindsight, you now realize could have been avoided. Ever been in a situation like that? Or perhaps I should ask, *how many times* have you been in a situation like that? I know I have been in those situations more times than I care to admit. In the passage before us this morning - Genesis 16 - we are going to look at a real-life situation that, while differing in the setting and details is in many ways an illustration of this very thing.

Now in the verses leading up to this we have been looking steadily at the Life of Abram. And starting back in Genesis 12, we have seen a number of important things about this person who figures so prominently in the Bible’s developing plot line, including the fact that while he was certainly a man of faith who was capable of trusting God in big ways, he was also a man who was capable of fluctuating - sometimes very quickly - in that faith. And so Abram’s life - seen from that perspective - was an up and down sort of existence.

However, alongside Abram’s variable faith we have seen *God’s* constant, unshakeable

faithfulness and commitment to bring all that He has promised and planned to pass. Sometimes in doing that God has worked out His purposes in and through Abram and Sarai's faith and obedience. At other times, God worked his purposes out *in spite of* Abram and Sarai's doubts and even *against their* sometimes foolish actions which would have wrecked everything, if God had not intervened. The account of Genesis 16 is another example of God doing just such a thing. Before we look at that, let's pray together.....

Father in heaven, as you are the one who has authored these words before us now, and as you are the author of our salvation and the reason we are here this morning - would you please then make the meaning of these words clear to us - and not just the bare meaning, but the application of them, the significance of them. Impress them upon us in a way that is lasting and even permanent - like carving letters into a tree. What we are asking, Father, is that you would cause these truths to follow us home, and follow us into our conversations, into our relationships, and into our places of work or study, and into our recreations and relaxations. Lord pursue us with THESE truths until we own them or even better - until they own us. Only you can do this sort of thing.....So.....would you?

(Read Genesis 16:1-6)

In the first part of this story, which goes through about verse 6, we see what has become a somewhat familiar scenario in the Abram story thus far - we see this aging couple who have been given some very significant, even amazing, promises, in a situation where they are now *waiting on God* to act. They are waiting for God to fulfill these promises He has so freely given.

And so a lot of time has now passed. Ten years have come and gone, and still no child. What seemed unlikely and impossible ten years ago, seems even *more* so now. And you can certainly empathize somewhat with Sarai's situation, can't you? Barren-ness is a difficult thing for any woman to take - no matter how strong and faithful she may be. It's difficult partially because of what it is in itself - the denial of children - and partially because of its impact upon a woman *as* a woman. What I mean is that, for the barren woman who desires a child the one thing that is absolutely unique to her, in a way that nothing else is - namely, the ability to conceive and bear children who bear God's image - *that* ability is missing and with ITS loss is often a certain loss of identity. All of which is to say, it has been a *long* ten years for Sarai. And not just long, but disheartening.

You see, before any of these things had happened, Sarai had very likely already resigned herself to the fact that she was never going to have children of her own. She had already worked through all that. And then out of the blue God appears to Abram and makes all these wonderful promises - including this promise of natural-born children to Abram and Sarai. All of the sudden, hopes which had long ago been abandoned, are renewed.

But ten years have passed since that promise was first given - ten years of living with that renewed hope. To be sure, things have happened along the way. The promise has been re-affirmed on several occasions and that has, no doubt, been helpful.

But at the end of the day - nothing has changed. Sarai is still childless. She is not even expecting. *Nothing* is happening on that side of things. The anxiety must have been great. The pressure must have been terrific. It seems like something was bound to give. Someone was going to crack under that pressure. And someone did. In this case, it was Sarai.

After ten years of waiting, Sarai decides that things are just not going to work out exactly as God had said. Who knows? Maybe she wondered whether or not they had misunderstood God. Maybe they thought God meant one thing when He really meant something else. After all, in that day and age, there were OTHER ways of going about obtaining an heir - even if it wasn't *exactly* a natural born one. Her words in verse 2 seem to indicate that she *may* have been thinking this way.

Indeed, with regard to this other way of obtaining an heir - there was, in fact, this custom in those days that a child-less couple could have a surrogate child by means of one of their servants and, if everything turned out alright, the child could be accepted by the couple and even adopted as one of their own and become a legitimate heir, bearing the family name - even if he didn't bear the family resemblance or bloodline.

Now, none of these realities excuse Sarai from the fact that in making the suggestion that she has made with regard to Hagar, she is clearly indicating her loss of confidence in God's ability to deliver on His promises *exactly* as He said He would. No amount of explanation can clear her from that charge. She has taken matters into her own hands. She has departed from the path laid out for her and her husband by God, and she has headed off in a new direction.

But she is certainly not alone in taking this step of faithlessness. Because when she presents this suggestion to Abram, he immediately, *without hesitation*, agrees to the plan. Who knows? It may well have been the case that Abram was already thinking this way but did not want to be the one to bring it up or suggest it. But it may well have been that Abram was sitting there hoping that Sarai *would bring it up*. Whatever the case, Abram wastes no time in saying yes.

And in all these things you hear the strong echo of Genesis 3, don't you? There we saw a situation where a woman - Eve - had been tempted and deceived into abandoning a clear path for one of her own making. And she too was *followed* by her husband - Adam - who should have been *leading* her - but who, nevertheless, seems to go right along with things, not offering up a single word of objection or even the slightest suggestion that, in light of what God had already said, perhaps they needed to stop and think about things for a minute. The very same dynamic occurs between Abram and Sarai.

Well, from there, things move along pretty quickly. And before we know it, Abram has taken Hagar as his wife, slept with her and she has conceived. The text then tells us that she "looked with contempt upon Sarai". This, of course, is a bad move on Hagar's part and Sarai, understandably, is hurt by all of this. However her response surely would have been made more extreme and was much more exaggerated because of her own sinful jealousy and envy. The result is that an intolerable situation between Sarai and Hagar breaks out.

Sarai has no intention of putting up with this and so she, as the first and preferred wife, comes to Abram to force him to do something to harm or at least humble Hagar so that her contemptuous behavior will cease. And the reason she comes to Abram first, rather than just hauling off and doing things straight away, is because, in *giving* Hagar to Abram, she was making a *legal transaction*. Before all this happened, Hagar was *her* maidservant and she could do with her what she wanted. But having now giving Hagar to Abram as his wife, Sarai no longer has any authority over her. As a result, she has to come to Abram in order to get *him* to do something about Hagar.

And the problems just continue from there. Because, instead of dealing with things in another, and better, way, Abram simply - and sadly - abdicates his responsibility and gives permission to Sarai to do what she wants - i.e., to treat Hagar as if she was her own maidservant again. In short, Abram abandons Hagar and any responsibility he had for her, thus leaving her completely exposed and un-protected, utterly at the mercy - or lack thereof - of Sarai.

Sarai then wastes no time in heaping on the abuse and mistreatment, possibly with the intention of causing her to mis-carry, with the result that Hagar runs away into the desert, moving in the direction of her home country - Egypt.

That's a historical description of what happened. Let me give you a more pastoral and theological summary of what has taken place in verses 1-6. Namely this: Sarai's sinful suggestion to *abandon God's way* is followed by a weak and sinful acquiescence by Abram. This then led to a very foolish action - Abram taking Hagar as his wife and sleeping with her. This leads to a very predictable result - Hagar conceives, which is followed by an even *more* predictable consequence - pride on the one side and jealousy and envy on the other. This is followed further by Abram's shameful abdication of his responsibilities to protect Hagar and a child he has fathered. This results, not surprisingly, in cruelty and injustice on Sarai's part, followed by her laughable display of self-righteousness and a seeming blindness as to how her own sin has been the greatest single factor in the present difficulty. And this, finally, is followed by the tragic and desperate flight of a pregnant mother into what, surely, would have been a suicidal attempt to cross the wilderness on her own.

In short, it's an absolute soap opera. The avalanche of sin and destruction that has resulted from that initial bad decision to depart from God's way and take matters into their own hands is just breath-taking. And it's not just *breath-taking*, it's breathtakingly *familiar*, isn't it?

How many times have you seen - in your own life and in the lives of others - these same sorts of things play out? I cannot tell you how many times I have seen this very progression take place. For example, I have seen this very same thing take place in *marital relationships* where people knew what the right path was for them, they knew what a biblical response to their situation would require and/or what a biblical response would *forbid*, but instead they chose another way that seemed to them right-ER, or better, or wis-ER than God's way. And then from that initial mis-step the avalanche of hurt and confusion and needless complication begins until

things become almost impossible to sort out.

That's what sin *always* does. It makes a mess of things. Of us, of other people, of institutions, of whole cultures. Why? Because we cannot possibly have the foresight and wisdom and perspective that God has. And because of those limitations, and because of our own sin, the paths that we offer up as alternatives to God's way inevitably fall short and get blockaded by all the things we didn't know, or couldn't imagine, or didn't account for, or couldn't foresee, when we first set out *on* that alternative path.

That's certainly what happened with Abram and Sarai. The train was running on the right track all along, but they jumped tracks and got onto what they thought was a better path - but it wasn't. And it didn't take them where they thought it would, nor did it get them the result they thought it would produce....

(Read Genesis 16:7-16)

As a result of Sarai's cruelty and Abram's weakness and passivity - and as a result of both of their lack of trust in God - the reality is that they are no better off than before and, in fact, things are worse as Hagar is now pregnant with Abram's son and is wandering in the wilderness in a vain attempt to escape to her situation.

Tellingly I think, we do not read in these verses of any attempts on Abram's part to go and find Hagar and convince her to come back. Nor do we see any efforts on Sarai's behalf. Of course, given her attitude and behavior up to this point, we probably shouldn't expect to see her lifting a finger in search of Hagar.

Indeed, the only one who goes in search of Hagar, the only person who responds with *any* compassion toward her whatsoever - is *God*. Despite the fact that Hagar is not the one through whom the promised seed will eventually come, and despite the fact that, if anything, her presence in the developing storyline signals the beginning of endless trouble - the reality is that God knows the injustice that has been done to her and very mercifully, by means of this representative Angel, goes to visit Hagar in her distress.

To be sure, Hagar is not innocent. She did behave contemptuously in her attitude toward Sarai. And she too wears Adam's curse. But the reality is, she did not enter into these particular circumstances by her own choice. Her future was entirely in the hands of Sarai and Abram who *used her* for their own purposes, and then victimized her for it - a fact which does not seem to have weighed upon their consciences in any way up to this point. And so God responds to Hagar, and assures her that her situation has not escaped his notice.

Now, the very fact that God came to her at all should have been a great re-assurance in itself, even if His words to her were somewhat bitter/sweet. And the reason that they are so mixed in their nature is because, in spite of their mis-behavior, Abram and Sarai remained the

chosen recipients of God's promise, and were *still* going to be the particular vehicle for the working out of His purposes. As such, all the comfort and words to Hagar, as real as they are, have to always be interpreted within the framework of that larger reality.

And so God's first words to Hagar, by means of this angel, are to instruct her to return to her mistress and submit - which would have likely been the thing she most wanted NOT to hear. The reason she was IN the wilderness in the first place was because of Sarai. Now God is asking her to go back? Even worse, he is asking her to submit to this woman who has treated her *so* harshly? Was God really asking her to do this?

Indeed He was.

And yet, as Hagar's mind was no doubt reeling from this surely unexpected command, God went on to soften the blow by telling her that she - just like Abram and Sarai - would have *innumerable* offspring. Many nations will come from her descendants. Now, at first glance, those may not seem to be the most comforting of words, but they actually were, for a couple reasons. Firstly, because it meant her life would be spared and even protected as she mothered and raised her offspring. Secondly, it said that, in contrast to how her own life has turned out, her descendants would be their own people and would not be the servants of others.

To be sure, the angel's words indicated prophetically that her son - and his descendants after him - would find themselves in frequent conflict on every side, continually at odds with those around them. But the reality is that *they would at least face these difficulties as an independent people*. And so, while words of blessing and promise are noticeably absent, the bitter/sweet words spoken to her were not without hope, and certainly were more gracious than anything she had known or experienced from Abram and Sarai up until that point.

And so Hagar returns, commemorating this occasion of God's appearing to her by calling the Lord "The God who sees" since it was God who saw her in her distress and came to her. And Moses reminds his readers, at this point, that her description of God on that occasion was memorialized in the name of the well where she was when she was discovered - Beer-lahai-roi.

And so, again, Hagar returns. And it seems to me that this return of Hagar would have been humbling for Abram and Sarai. Because in her return, she would have related the whole account of what happened to her in the wilderness. And Abram's receiving and believing her account is indicated in the fact that he not only retained Hagar as his wife, but he also went on to name the child Ishmael - a name which was given to the child by God in the desert, and which Abram would not have been present to hear. As such, Abram would only know about this name because Hagar told him about it. And his taking that name and giving it to Ishmael and calling him his son indicate to me that he had been humbled and rebuked by God's response to Hagar.

In the same way that someone else's stopping to help the person with the flat tire that we have just convinced ourselves is not our responsibility tends to rebuke us for our busyness and self-centeredness, so too does God's pursuit and rescue of Hagar rebuke the harshness and callousness of Abram and Sarai and *shows them up as the un-deserving recipients of God's blessing that they truly are*. Their position within God's covenant plans and purposes did not give them a license to act with injustice or cruelty, or to act as if they could just sin with impunity, or to destroy the lives of other people, and then just sweep it all under the carpet as if it's no big deal.

God does not and will not let them get away with that. He goes and brings Hagar back and so forces Abram and Sarai to have to live with the consequences of their actions. For the rest of their lives, indeed, for the rest of their *descendants' lives* they will have to live - and contend - with this on-going, permanent reminder of what can happen when you abandon the way that God has set before you.

Does this mean God's attitude toward Abram and Sarai has changed? Certainly not! God's faithfulness toward Abram and Sarai is not lessened in any way by these things. All this shows is that God loves them too much to just give them a "Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free" Card, every time they blow it. Abram and Sarai have made this bed. And they're going to have to lie in it. And their doing so will, in the end, only reveal God's goodness and mercy all the more clearly.....

Now, for the people of God who were with Moses, waiting on the edge of the Promised Land, these verses would have been important ones for them to hear because they would have, among other things, settled a question that might have been in the minds of some of the people who were there. And the question had to do with this matter of exactly *which* descendants of Abram belonged to the line of promise and which ones did *not*. The Israelites would likely have been aware of the whole story of Ishmael. And if they were, then they would have known that he was a legitimate son of Abram's and, in fact, was the first and eldest son, even if he wasn't a natural born son.

This account would have clarified to them the events that lay behind Ishmael's becoming a son in the first place and would have confirmed them as the legitimate heirs of the promise because they knew that they were *not* from Ishmael's line, but from Isaac's.

An even more important lesson for them came from seeing the way that Abram continued to be haunted by his own mistakes. If you recall, in an earlier chapter Abram and Sarai were in the midst of a terrible famine and as a result of that they left the promised land and traveled south into Egypt where food could still be found. In making that journey Abram, instead of trusting

God, engaged in a deception with Pharaoh's people and almost lost his wife in the process. One of the consequences of that whole fiasco was that Abram, quite undeservedly mind you, received many gifts from Pharaoh, including *maidservants*, one of whom was very likely *Hagar*. And now this same Hagar, whom he acquired as a consequence of a previous act of faithlessness, has become the source of *further* trouble for Abram and Sarai as they once again act faithlessly.

And all of this would have been, as we've already seen, a permanent illustration of the crazy, messed up things that can happen when God's people think and act as if they know better than Him, or as if they can just bypass his truth, or act as if they can see things more clearly than God, or think that they know things that God hasn't taken into consideration. In short, the whole Hagar and Ishmael thing would have been a kind of *live-in, residential object lesson*. The last time God's people were preparing to enter the promised land, they, like Abram and Sarai, also decided that they would take an alternative path than the one God had for them. 40 years and thousands of funerals later, they are again at the edge of the land, being reminded through this story to not be foolish again.

And then, moving forward from God's people in Moses' day to the people of God in the Apostle Paul's day we see that there was a further significance to these verses which Paul highlights in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 4, verses 21-31.

Now, I'm not going to read that to you but, in a nutshell, what Paul was saying there, somewhat allegorically, was that there was a contrast between the way that a child was obtained through Hagar, and the way that a child was obtained through Sarai. The child obtained through Hagar was the product of doubting God and engaging in an act of self-effort and self-reliance. The child obtained through Sarai was the product of trusting God to bring about what only He could do.

By this contrast, Paul was making the point that those who truly belong to Christ are like the child of Sarai - a product of God's gracious working - and not like the child of Hagar - a product of their own efforts and self-salvation. And that sort of symbolic significance was important for Paul as he found himself trying to stop certain people who were coming into the churches and perverting the Gospel into a religion of works. Such a thing was out of step with the nature of the Gospel and, as we have seen in the Abram story, with the nature of how God has related to his people all along.

And so it is that these verses have been very significant for God's people throughout the ages, and they continue to be significant in our own day, in more ways than we can discuss. However, let me quickly review and summarize, in case you've missed it, the 4 ways they continue to be relevant for us today:

- 1) Picking up with this last point first - These verses are important because of what they symbolize - this contrast of the two ways seen in the two women, Sarai and Hagar. We, as true descendants of Abram, are children of the promise, not children of the maidservant. Our

“spiritual birth” has come about because of God’s grace - not because of our self-effort and works. That is how we have become part of the family of God. But the lesson to be remembered here is that this is not just the way we *come into* the life of faith, it is the way we *continue in the life of faith*. That whole dynamic of how God uses grace to make us like Jesus is the subject of Bryan Chapell’s book, *Holiness by Grace* - and I would commend it to you as it is one of the most mis-understand realities of the Christian life....

2) Secondly, these verses serve for us the same role that they served for God’s people in Moses’ day - as a permanent and cautionary reminder of the absolute messes we make of things when we abandon God’s way for one which we imagine to be better. *That* battle is one which you are faced with every single day - many times a day - and at its very core, it is a battle of faith. *Who are you gonna believe? Who do you trust?*

3) Thirdly, as we see God showing compassion to people who are within the covenant as well as people outside, we are challenged and perhaps rebuked in our selectivity, or in our evangelical smugness which, at times, almost seems to delight in pointing out the misery that faces those who do not know God and which fails to recognize that people - all people - are not just sinful but they are *sinned against* and they are the real victims of *real injustices* - injustices which call for our compassion and mercy. Because at the end of the day, when nothing else makes sense, *mercy always does. Mercy always makes sense.*

4) Finally, while we may look at Abram and Sarai and see a reflection of our own manipulations and self-reliance that is disturbingly familiar, we can look past those realities to see how amazingly patient and forgiving God has been toward them, and continues to be toward his people in every age. His compassion always seems to be that much bigger than our foolishness. As we see the depths of our own sin ever more deeply, the cross just seems to get bigger and bigger - and it will continue to do so for the rest of your life until it takes up your entire field of vision, until it dominates the landscape of your heart.....