

It's a family affair
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Ordinary 12A

With a title like “It’s a Family Affair,” I’m guessing a few of you immediately went to that Sly and the Family Stone song, “*It’s a family affair.*” I discovered the title this week, when re-reading a chapter in Bill Moyer’s wonderful book, Genesis¹, which covers the story of Abraham and all that transpired with him.

If you were here last week, you might remember Matt taught the kids “Father Abraham,” introducing us to the notion that Abraham, though very old, became the father to descendants too many to number. Today, we have the story of Abraham and messiness that comes when we humans try to get what we want, without waiting on God.

Ah, yes, but Abraham and Sarah had already waited a really long time for children.

The very human story of Abraham and Sarah includes their infertility. I find it interesting that we have such very human stories of intimate matters, matters that still affect us today.

Sarah is one woman in the Bible with whom I can relate. My husband and I waited, what felt like forever, to have children. We wrestled with matters of faith and how far we wanted to go to deal with our own infertility. I remember one day walking through the grocery store spotting a very pregnant, teenager shopping with her mom, and getting just really angry at the unfairness of it all. Her situation was very likely not her choice and mine was not my choice either.

Sarah and Abraham really wanted to have children. Sarah must have felt like a failure in that primary role of providing the next generation, especially a male heir. She is described as barren, in the lineage description of Abraham, earlier in the book of Genesis. Yeah, **barren** is a word describing a woman that is right up there with spinster. Barren is an adjective often used to

¹ Bill D. Moyers, Genesis: A Living Conversation, “It’s a Family Affair” chapter on story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

describe a desert and dry as a bone. Yet, when I was in my mid-thirties and unable to conceive, the streaks of tears down my face were anything but dry. It seemed so unfair.

The story of Sarah and Abraham gets messy when they travel to Egypt to escape a famine. Abraham was worried that, because Sarah was so beautiful, the Pharaoh would kill Abraham so he could take Sarah into his household. Abraham somehow convinces Sarah to say they are siblings. When Sarah is indeed taken into the Pharaoh's household, Abraham receives much wealth, but the Pharaoh's household is struck with plagues as a result. So, when Pharaoh discovers that Abraham and Sarah are man and wife, they are told to get out of town, and in a hurry. It's about this time that we hear that Sarah now has an Egyptian slave-girl, named Hagar.

The story of Hagar is when things get really messy, in this story of family life without children.

God makes a covenant with Abraham regarding lineage and land. He is to be a father with so many ancestors, they will be like stars in the sky or grains of sand on the beach. But Abraham is really getting up there in years, not to mention his wife too. Sarah has an idea. In Genesis chapter 16, Sarah wants a child so desperately, she tells her husband to sleep with her slave-girl so she can have a child this way. Here is mention of surrogacy in the Bible, but I don't read that Hagar had any say, nor did she agree. Unfair once more.

One verse in chapter 16 changes the course of the story. In reading the footnotes in my study bible in chapter 16, I discovered that Hagar's original so-called crime was giving Sarah a **look** that implied she did not look up to Hagar quite as she did before. It is a look that Sarah took one way and was deeply offended by her perceived understanding of what she thought was in Hagar's heart. Is it any wonder? Hagar had no choice in the surrogacy since she was a slave to Sarah. And it was clear that Sarah intended to raise Hagar's child as her own. But that **look** Hagar gave to Sarah changed everything. Sarah treated Hagar harshly, some theologians even described as violently, which caused Hagar to flee into the desert in escape.

It is in the desert that Hagar first encounters God, in the form of an angel. This angel convinces Hagar to return and promises to multiply Hagar's offspring, reminiscent of the promise given to Abraham, her father of the child in her womb. She speaks to God, gives God a name, which means "El-roi" which means God who sees. She described the reason for the name as,

“I have seen God and remained alive.” Later, Hagar gives her son-by-Abraham the name Ishmael.

All of these things happened before last week’s passage, during which Sarah is promised a child of her own, within a year.

At least a year has passed, and Sarah’s son is born. He is named Isaac meaning “he laughs”, because God brought laughter to Sarah that she was able to have a child at so old an age. All this backstory leads to today’s gospel passage.

We have a wealthy, older mom.

We have slavery, including a young, foreign-born, slave-girl, who is also a mother—to the older mom’s husband’s eldest son.

Messy, messy

We have jealousy, disrespect, contempt,

We have heroes of the story of the family of God with very clay feet.

We have a child who reaches a milestone in their life...being weaned and now a full-fledged member of the household, perhaps a bit like **Henry** who reached a milestone today of baptism.

Abraham is so excited to see his son grow up, that he throws a feast! It is time to party. To get all the cousins together and celebrate this milestone.

Alas, the half-brother has the audacity to play with Isaac, and make him laugh.

Uh oh. Sarah does not like this one little bit. How dare this “son of the slave woman” do what children do, play laugh? It reminded Sarah that her son came second. Perhaps that whole, “I’ll get my slave-girl to give me her son when he is born” idea was not so brilliant after all. My goodness, who would have thought that the slave would actually want to keep her son? Who would ever guess that she might be a good mother? Messy, messy.

Sarah decides to rid herself of the messiness, the oldest child (worse yet—SON) of her husband, by getting her husband to kick the two of them out of the household. Talk about unfair!

Abraham was distressed by this possibility. He loved his son, well he loved both of them, actually. He too had waited a very long time for children and loved having them around. He loved his boys.

Here is where the story gets really messy and puts a really bad taste in my mouth about most of the characters, I believe we are supposed to be rooting for.

1. Sarah wants to cast out her slave-girl, mother of her husband's eldest son and the eldest son into the desert.
2. God okays this plan
3. Abraham goes ahead and gives Hagar a bit of water, some bread and kicks her and her son out, nothing at all like the absolute feast he throws in honor of his youngest.

I find myself siding, not with the formerly barren heroine, nor her husband the Patriarch of **three** world religions. Rather, I find myself siding with the lowest of the household: the unmarried mother of the eldest son, who is banished to live on her own in the desert, with no way to support herself in an inhospitable country.

Ah, but that's what God does, isn't it? God flips the script and shows us that the lowest of humanity can show those much further up the societal ladder that all are worthy of respect and care.

Sarah, whose infertility has resonated with me for decades, is not much of a heroine in today's scripture.

Sarah dehumanizes Hagar in not deigning to name her, but rather describe Hagar as "that slave woman" and Hagar's son as, "that son of the slave-woman." When we refuse to name people and recognize the humanity of others, we might slip into "othering" people by showing how different and perhaps how very unlike us, unwelcome and lowering them below our own place, as if there were some level besides human. Unfair.

Abraham is caught between a rock and a hard place and deeply distressed. He loves his children, but his wife wants to get rid of the daily reminder that Isaac, her flesh and blood with Abraham, was not the first-born. Isaac's older half-brother could easily rival for an inheritance, even being awarded the

larger share of the inheritance due to his birthright No, this just would not do. Abraham turns to God in prayer who tells Abraham not to be distressed, do what your wife asks, because the covenant will be through Isaac. Also, because Abraham is also the father of “this son of the slave woman,” God will make a nation of him as well.

Abraham wants peace in his household and of course he wants that heir, and with the assurance that Ishmael will be okay, Abraham goes ahead early the next morning and casts Hagar and Ishmael out, with bread and water. Nothing else. Nothing.

I can only imagine what it must have felt like to Hagar, who was:

Young

Vulnerable

Unmarried woman with a child in a male-dominant society

Foreign born

Poor

No means of support

Carrying the only food they would have

But the story does not end when Abraham casts out Hagar and Ishmael. We hear that she wanders about in the desert of Beer-sheba. The container of water runs out, and Hagar loses all hope. She puts Ishmael down for a rest under a bush, then walks a good way off (about the distance of a bow-shot) because she did not want to watch her son die. She weeps...I can only imagine the awful sound of the wail of a mother who is certain her child will die.

The next thing we learn is that God calls to Hagar, letting her know that God had heard “the voice of the boy.” Yowzah, God doesn’t seem to have heard Hagar, but did hear her son. God offers some assurance though. God calls Hagar by name and says, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes, so she saw a well of water and gave Ishmael a drink. (Genesis 21:17-19)

The last we hear of Hagar is that she got an Egyptian wife for her son, who grew up and lived in the wilderness, becoming an expert with a bow. We will

hear more of Ishmael later in Genesis, on the occasion of Abraham's death, where we learn he had **twelve** sons.

When I read today's scriptures prescribed by the lectionary, I wanted to avoid our Old Testament so much. But the story called to me. I kept trying to figure out why: where was the good news in a story referred to as the banishment of Hagar and her son? What a lovely story to tell on a baptism Sunday! Casting out anyone, from the family?

But it occurred to me that there really is good news here.

God had a plan for Hagar and Ishmael.
 God hears their cries.
 God sees.
 God provides a way.
 God is faithful, even to outsiders.
 God is with them.

One reflection on today's Genesis passage noted, "God loves the Hagers and Ishmaels of our world. God hears their cries, sees their suffering, and brings about their redemption. This is the gospel story...the Good News."²

As people of the Good News, there is meaning for us, in this passage about Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael. There is an invitation for us to attend to, bless, and embody God's love and care to those outside of our community of faith, particularly to those who are most vulnerable.

I am reminded of the kids who get kicked out of their homes, or the many people who make treacherous journeys for the goal of being able to feed their families, like those in the barren deserts of Mexico and Arizona as well as those on board the overloaded ship that sank in the Mediterranean Sea this past week.

For just as God loves the Ishmaels and Hagers of the world, so should we.

And may it be so.

²Amanda Benckhuysen in <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12/commentary-on-genesis-218-21>