

**“When our backs are up against the wall”, a sermon based on
Genesis 21:8-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday
21 June 2020.**

“At some time in all our lives, whether we are black or white, we are all Hagar’s daughters. When our backs are up against a wall; when we feel abandoned, when we find ourselves in need of another woman’s help; we, like Hagar, are in need of a woman who will ‘sister’ us, not exploit us. In those times we are frequently just a sister away from our healing. We need a woman, a sister, who will see in our destitution a jagged image of what one day could be her own story. We need a sister whose genuine mercy—not pity which is episodic, random, and moody—is steadfast, consistent, and free.” Renita Weems was commenting on the reading from Genesis 21.

Let me retell the story. Last week we heard how God promised that in their old age Abraham and Sarah would have a child. It was a laughable promise because they were so old. But a child was born to them as promised, Isaac. Before this, because they had not been able to have children, Sarah gave Abraham permission to have sex with Sarah’s slave woman, Hagar an Egyptian. He did. Hagar conceived. A son was born, Ishmael. Now we come to today’s scene, where Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac. Many of the struggles of Genesis have to do with inheritance. Who will inherit from Abraham and Sarah? Isaac alone, or Isaac and Ishmael. Sarah was clear. Only Isaac should inherit. She tells Abraham to cast out Ishmael and Hagar. God intervenes. God says to Abraham, yes, do as Sarah says, but ...”As for Ishmael I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring ...” Two peoples will live together. So Abraham sent Hagar away and provided for her, including with water. When the water was gone and the provisions ran out, she put Ishmael under a bush, anticipating that Ishmael would die. It seemed her only option. She moved back and sat down a way off, because she did not want to see her son die. And she wept. Now God sent a messenger to say that God had heard the voice of the crying boy. God asked Hagar to take hold of Ishmael and water was supplied to enable the boy to live. Ishmael grew up and flourished.

As Renita Weems says, the easiest thing would be to make a case out of the ethnic differences that separated Hagar and Sarah, differences that would manifest itself today between an African woman and a Hebrew woman, a

woman of colour and a white woman, a Third World woman and a First World woman.

The differences relate to the question - who will inherit the earth? The similarities between this story and the reality of relationships across racial lines are undeniable. Here is a story of ethnic prejudice but it is exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation. The situation of Sarah was at a time when woman's self-worth and social status pivoted around her family – the reputation of her husband and the number of children she had. Yes, she was wife of someone socially prominent. Yes, she had wealth and standing. But society depended on the replenishing of the population, so as Weems says, a woman's womb was her destiny. Sarah had standing but she didn't have standing.

By contrast Hagar was young and able to bear children. But she was poor. More than that, she was a slave and so she was powerless. So the differences were not just ethnic. They were economic. Hagar was Sarah's slave, and any child born to the slave belonged to the mistress. Hagar was never asked her opinion. She was never asked to make a choice. But by bearing a child, relationships changed. Hagar went from being a defenceless slave to being a protected woman in Abram's household. It awakened something in Hagar, but Sarah was determined to show who was boss. The slave-woman Hagar was punished for humiliating Sarah. As Weems points out, this is very similar to the accounts of black slave-women and white mistresses during slavery. Those experiences continue to shape women's experience now. Black Lives Matter arises from that place. My own family history in this land include experiences like this.

But this story is about more than ethnic prejudice. It is also about the economic stratification of women. Hagar was a worker; Sarah was her employer. And within a capitalist society, disparate economic relationships among women can affect how people are viewed, superiority for people with wealth, inferiority for people without. Sarah took advantage of Hagar's slave-woman status. We are reminded of the inequity among people, and women in particular. Yet, as Weems says, and as COVID has shown, we are all just one pay from Hagar.

In many ways, reflecting the time, this is not the story of Hagar or Sarah. It is Abram's story. The two women are used to demonstrate God's promise to Abram. And Sarah lost sight of who she was in that world. She forgot that in a

patriarchal society she had more in common with Hagar than what divided them. Their fate as women in society that seemed to reward only men should have brought them together. And Hagar? She saw herself as a slave. She was free of her mistress, but still enslaved.

Weems calls this story a piercing portrayal of one woman's exploitation of another woman. Could Sarah not remember what it was like to be rejected and scorned? There is much sorrow and pain in this story. It reminds us of the ethnic divides in our own country. It reminds us of the economic divides between those whose wellbeing keeps improving and those whose wellbeing keeps getting worse. And it reminds us of what happens in relationships with men. Betrayal. Exploitation. Denial. Resentment. Suspicion. Anger. Silence. How do we reach beyond the enormous gulf of distrust that exists in so much of our society? Our future as a people depends on our ability to bridge over the memories of our scars, and our willingness to tunnel through the tragedies of our past encounters. Hope is emerging from the generations of Ishmael and Isaac, from our children and our children's children, as they march on the street. May the reign of God come in fulness. Amen.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net