

Nevertheless, She Persisted: Listening to Women of the Bible

Week One: Sarah and Hagar

by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander

Countryside Community Church

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I. Intentional Listening

Scripture: Genesis 16

16Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.⁷The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." ⁹The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."¹⁰The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." ¹¹And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. ¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."¹³So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

This series is designed for us to intentionally listen to six women of the Bible who have their own stories to tell. The six women's stories we chose are Sarah and Hagar, wives to the prophet Abraham and mothers of his children; Esther, the Queen of Susa, whose story gave rise to the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim; Ruth and Naomi, widows who made their own way, relying on each other; The Syrophenician woman who dared to touch Jesus's garment as he walked by so that she might be healed of her affliction; The Samaritan Woman at the Well who has an in-depth conversation with Jesus; and Mary Magdalene, the woman who is said to be a disciple of Jesus.

Each of these women has a wonderful story to tell. Some are named, some are not, but each brings a unique perspective to the role of women in their time and they inform us of the culture in which these stories were lived out. As important as these things are for our reflection, what we are listening for from these women's stories is what these voices are saying about who God is and how God is at work in the world. Different voices give us a diverse perspective on God, and women's voices often tell stories in a wholly different way from their male counterparts. Because of this it is helpful for us to be intentional listeners of these women's stories.

In today's conversation we will listen to the stories of Sarah and Hagar, mothers to Abraham's children. How do the women relate to the founding of these three "Abrahamic" faiths? What were the roles of

Sarah and Hagar within this heritage? Do they have a voice in this heritage? Maybe we should consider calling our three faiths “Abraham, Sarah and Hagar Faiths”? Was Abraham any more important a prophet for our faith traditions than either Sarah or Hagar? Putting this story into the context of our present culture, our worship planning team wondered, would Abraham withstand a confirmation hearing today as the founding prophet of our three Tri-Faith traditions?

Remember, that throughout history and into our time, God’s voice is always mingled with ours, male and female – and that all our conversations, all our stories, point us to listen for God’s voice among us. In today’s story, God totally shifts our conversation. Love and creation rests on what God is doing, not what we do.

Throughout this series we will also be showing small videos representing many of the women’s voices we hear in our current context. This morning’s video is about Israeli and Palestinian women who walk together. Our readers can find this video by following this link: (Cup Of Jane Video Week 1: https://www.facebook.com/search/str/cup+o+jane+Women+power/keywords_top)

II. Confirmation

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15

18The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

CONFIRMATION HEARING OF ABRAHAM

CAST:

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Chris Alexander

HAGAR: Amy Luckenbill

SARAH: France Blanchard

GOD: Dinah Gomez

SETTING: Sarah, Hagar, and Committee Chair sitting in chairs within hearing room. God is a disembodied voice from the back of the sanctuary.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Welcome to all of you. This is the confirmation hearing of Abraham, one who is known as the founding prophet of Islam, Judaism and by extension, Christianity. The purpose of this hearing is to determine if Abraham is properly suited for this calling. Our first examiner will be Hagar, Egyptian handmaid to Abraham's wife Sarah, and mother of Abraham's Son, Ishmael.

HAGAR: I never wanted to be a Mother. As a slave, I was never given the choice. Sarah and Abraham, my masters, had yet to bear children in their many years of trying. One day, my mistress directed me to be as a wife of Abraham. And so I did. That night my master Abraham, planted a child within me. I was filled with contempt. And so were they. So I left.

At a spring where I rested on my way to Shur, I met "El-roi," an angel of the Lord. He told me to return to my mistress and submit. But, and you may not believe this, he also told me I was to have so many children that they could not be counted. He told me I was to bear a son whose life would not be easy. But, he said the Lord has heard me, so I should call him "Ishmael," which means, "The Lord hears." So I went back.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Thank you Hagar for beginning this process for us. The chair now recognizes the Senior member of our committee, Sarah, wife of Abraham.

SARAH: I was a young woman when Abe took me as his wife. We moved around a lot throughout our life together. One year, there was a famine where we were staying so we moved to Egypt. On our way there, Abe asked me to tell the Egyptians that I was his sister, because if I was introduced as his wife, they might kill him. It seemed like a good plan until Pharaoh took me into his house. After that Pharaoh was afflicted with a great many plagues. One night, he asked me, "What's going on?" So I told him that I was Abe's wife. The Pharaoh panicked. He went straight to Abe and told him to take his wife and all his belongings and get out of Egypt. We left as quickly as we could and eventually we settled in Canaan, near the Oaks at Mamre.

It was here where I realized that I might never be able to bear children with Abe, and came up with a brilliant idea. I would give my husband a wife of my choosing. This wife would need to be capable of bearing a child, not too good looking, and needed to follow orders as directed. I settled on Hagar. I told Abe to have our child through Hagar. My plan worked. Our child was conceived. But Hagar disrespected me from that point on. So I told Abe, he and his God needed to keep her in her place. She is a handmaid, not a wife. Abe refused to deal with the conflict and told me to handle my own handmaid. When I went to talk to Hagar, she had run away. I thought my problem had solved itself, but then she came back.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Thank you Sarah. The chair has received a special request. The floor is now open for the Lord of all creation.

GOD: Thank you. I would like to offer a story about Abraham that may pertain to this preceding. I trust Abraham. One day we were wandering in the desert and came upon Abraham's tent near Mamre. When he saw us, Abraham ran to meet us and bowed before us, though he had never met us and had no idea who we were. He brought us water for our feet, and offered the shade of his tree for our rest. He asked his wife to make us some bread and ordered his servant to prepare us a tender calf for our meal. He stood beside us under the tree while we ate. He welcomed us as strangers into his house and was the consummate host, even though he had only recently been circumcised and was still resting in recovery.

We asked him where his wife Sarah was, to make sure she was within hearing distance of what we were about to say to Abraham. We conveyed that we would return to Abraham "in due season" and that by then Sarah would have a son. Because Sarah did in fact hear our pronouncement, she laughed, thinking we could not hear her, but we did. We asked Abraham why Sarah would doubt that she would bear a

child in her advanced age. Does Sarah doubt that “anything is too wonderful for the Lord?” Sarah was the one who denied her doubt and her laughter, not Abraham. We said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

SARAH: Madame Chair, As much as I appreciate, and am grateful for the Lord of all Creation’s trust in my husband, I would like to offer further evidence as to Abraham’s incapacity to be the founding prophet of our faiths, from my own experience.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: The Chair recognizes our senior committee member, Sarah, wife of Abraham.

SARAH: My husband never seems to learn from his mistakes. Shortly after this promise of a son was made to Abraham at Mamre, we settled in Gerar, a place between Kadesh and Shur. Because we were aliens in this land, Abe was yet again afraid of their King, Abimelech, and chose to introduce me as his sister, just like he had in Egypt. And, you, Lord of all creation, had to step in yet again to correct the mistake. Abimelech had a dream telling him that I was Abraham’s wife, before he took me as his own. Granted we were vindicated and you restored the land of Gerar to its full abundance once the King presented us with silver and invited us to settle wherever we chose. But tell me, how is this man, who continues to cower before kings, fit to be the founding prophet of our faiths?

Even after our son Isaac was born Abraham did not take a stand between our child, Isaac, the one promised and delivered by the Lord God of all creation, and the son born to him by an Egyptian handmaid. I tried keeping the children apart, since her child had become such a handful and could never seem to get along with anyone. Was the whole of the nations promised to Abraham put at risk because of this bad influence on our child? It wasn’t until I put my foot down and demanded that Abraham send this handmaid and her child away did Abraham even consider the negative influence this boy was having on our son. And it wasn’t until you, the Lord of all creation, told Abraham to not be distressed about the boy and his mother because you would take care of them that he finally did as I asked for the sake of his true son.

HAGAR: Madame chair, though I have my own struggles with this woman who dares to call my son a bad influence on her son, when it was all her idea to conceive my son in the first place, I too would like to reiterate my question of Abraham’s fitness as a founding prophet.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: The Chair recognizes our junior committee member, Hagar, mother of Ishmael.

HAGAR: In truth, neither of my masters seem to learn from their mistakes. Once again, when my son was seen to show affection to the newborn Isaac, he and I were sent away from the family. And although you, Lord of all creation, told Abraham not to be distressed because my son would also make a great nation, he did nothing to stop his wife from exiling us. He made sure we had bread and water, but that did not last long in the desert. My son and I were left to die. I was forced to lay my son beneath a bush and sit far from view of him, so I did not have to watch my child die.

Even though “El-roi” - and now I am beginning to realize that “El-roi,” must be you, Lord of all creation – heard my son’s cries, and provided a well of water for us to drink, we still were exiled from the family and were forced to live in the wilderness of Paran for the rest of our days. So again, I ask, how is this man Abraham fit to be the founding prophet of our faith?

GOD: Thank you. My daughters, I understand your concerns. I have heard your cries. But please do not forget that what makes Abraham a founding prophet is my love for him. Abraham does not need to fit a list of requirements to be my child. I created him. I chose him. He is my child. The love I have for Abraham

is the same love I have for all my children. Which makes you, Sarah, and you, Hagar, founding prophets of these faiths as well.

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Let the people say, Amen... **THE END**

Poem: ***Reconciliation*** by **Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro**

The threat of our salvation is the clash of peoples:

Jews and Arabs

Offspring of a single father,

Separated in youth by jealousy,

In adolescence by fear,

In adulthood by power,

In old age by habit.

It is time to break these habits of hate

And create new habits:

Habits of the heart

That will awake within us

The causeless love of redemption and peace.