



November 17, 2013 Messages from the Wilderness

Scripture: Genesis 16:1-6

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave- girl whose name was Hagar, and 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. So, 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. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then 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!" But 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.

MONDAY 11.18.13 Psalm 118:1-9 God's faithful love lasts forever

This psalm was part of a hymn collection rooted in God's action at the time of the Exodus to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt. Its message fits perfectly with the story we'll study this week: the story of Hagar, an Egyptian slave girl who twice found herself cast off and alone in the wilderness. Her story, like Psalm 118, said we are never abandoned, because God is always with us.

- This psalm began with the invitation to "Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever." Then it invited specific groups to repeat, "God's faithful love lasts forever!" What can make it hard for you to keep focused on the truth that God's faithful love lasts forever? In what practical ways can you build daily reminders that God's faithful love lasts forever into your life?
- Verse 6 said, "The Lord is for me [or "with me"]—I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Our first thought may be, "People could do plenty to me." It's only when we look below life's surface that the psalmist's assertion begins to make sense. What bad things in your life has God's presence helped you survive, or even turned to a good purpose? How does that affect your trust in God moving forward?

Prayer: Father God, as the hymn says, "I need you, oh, I need you." Nourish my soul with the wonder and glory of the truth that I have you – that your presence will never leave me. Amen.

TUESDAY 11.19.13 Genesis 16:1-6 A slave who didn't know her place

Sarai and Abram had waited ten years for God to fulfill the promise that they would have a son. Sarai gave Abram her servant Hagar as a “wife” (verse 3), but a secondary one, a common practice in their culture. After Hagar got pregnant, she too lived out their culture’s values, seeing her ability to become pregnant as a sign of superiority to her barren mistress.

- Sarai set this whole chain of events in motion, yet she was very unhappy with the results. Verse 5 quotes her as telling Abram, “This harassment is your fault.” Have you ever felt like blaming the results of your own choices or actions on someone else? What has helped you to take responsibility for the things you do, so that you do not allow blaming to further damage relationships?
- Last week we studied about “wildernesses” of our own making. To what extent is there an element of that in the predicament in which Hagar found herself? Have you ever seen (or been) a person who drew mistaken, hurtful conclusions from some bit of good fortune which came their way? What can you learn for your life today from watching Hagar’s story unfold?

Prayer: O God, teach me wisdom as I read about the lack of wisdom that both Sarai and Hagar showed in this story. Teach me how to build relationships rather than tearing them down. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 11.20.13 Genesis 16:7-15 Hagar met “God who sees”

Hagar’s lack of respect angered Sarai, who treated her harshly. Hagar, probably young and inexperienced, fled from Sarai’s abuse into the desert—a harsh and desolate landscape, in which a pregnant woman alone was unlikely to survive. But God’s messenger met her in the desert, and gave her the same promise God gave Abram: so many descendants “they can’t be counted!” (verse 10). Hagar was amazed that God saw and cared about her.

- God’s messenger (a Hebrew word that is also translated “angel”) met Hagar in the desert, and along with a challenge to bear the challenges of living with Sarai gave her a tremendous promise: “I will give you many children, so many they can’t be counted!” In what ways has God sent messengers into your life? What has helped you to move your belief that God sees you from your intellect to your heart, to deeper inner reality?
- It’s easy to overlook one remarkable aspect of this story. The Israelites usually didn’t like Ishmael’s descendants (and still don’t). Yet for centuries they faithfully repeated, first orally and then in writing, the story of God seeing Hagar and caring for her and her offspring. In what ways did this episode begin to make real God’s promise that through Abraham “all the families of the earth” would be blessed (Genesis 12:3)? What reasons do you have for being glad that “there’s a wideness in God’s mercy”?

Prayer: Lord God, when I find myself feeling lost in the wilderness, remind me that you see me, too. I thank you that your vision, and your care, will follow me wherever I may wander. Amen.

THURSDAY 11.21.13 Genesis 21:1-11 To the wilderness again

In God's own time, the promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah (God changed their names; cf. Genesis 17) became reality. They named their son Isaac (Hebrew "laughter"). When they celebrated his weaning, Sarah saw Ishmael laugh. She demanded that Abraham evict Hagar and Ishmael, so that there could not be any doubt that Isaac was Abraham's promised heir.

- It had been a long wait for Abraham and Sarah, but God's promise proved reliable. At times (cf. Hebrews 11:39-40) we don't see God's promises realized in this life at all, but wait for eternity. When have you had to wait longer than you wished for a divine promise to come true? Are there promises you are still waiting for? What helps you to hold onto faith and trust as you wait?
- Genesis honestly depicted a sharp difference in Abraham and Sarah's emotions. For Sarah, it was clear-cut: she saw Hagar and Ishmael as rivals, and wanted them gone. For Abraham, it meant divorcing Hagar (remember Genesis 16:3), and disowning Ishmael, who was his son though not Sarah's. When have you faced a situation, in family, friendship or workplace, in which loyalties and emotions conflicted? How did God's principles help you to sort things out and make your way through?

Prayer: O Lord, give me patience and trust in your goodness, even when your timing is very different than I would wish it to be. Help me to trust that your wisdom can guide me through even complicated, painful situations. Amen.

FRIDAY 11.22.13 Genesis 21:12-21, 25:8-9 "Hagar! What's wrong? Don't be afraid."

Abraham was sad to send Hagar and Ishmael away, and tried to give them a few provisions. But bread and water could hardly keep them safe in the desert. Hagar was again cast off and abandoned, but again God did not let her and Ishmael perish. God heard their cries for help, and showed Hagar a well of life-giving water. Ishmael and Isaac went their own ways, but not in hatred or hostility. In the end, they reunited to bury their father Abraham.

- Hagar and Ishmael were in despair in the wilderness. Ishmael collapsed, dying of thirst, and his mother wept. Ishmael's name meant "God hears." God did hear their cries, and responded: "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is" (verse 17). God was the same yesterday as he is today (cf. Hebrews 13:8), so you can count on God hearing you, too. When have you sensed God hearing your cries in the midst of a wilderness experience?
- Hagar was divorced, rejected, and abandoned with her son, Ishmael. Their chances of survival were minimal—except for God's care and provision. But God intervened and "opened her eyes" so that they could find water. God still provides today, and one of the ways he often provides is through people like us. How can you join God and help to "provide" for your friends/family? Your church family? Your community? Your world?

Prayer: O Lord, I recall times that might seem ordinary to someone else in which I knew you were providing for my needs. Lead me onward, continuing to trust that you are a God who provides. Amen.

SATURDAY 11.23.13 Hebrews 13:5-8 “I will never leave you or abandon you”

We mean well when we tell a child or a lover, “I will always be there for you.” But we cannot guarantee that promise on this earth. Our mortality, if not our changeability, tells us that. Only God can actually promise to always be there for us—and God makes that promise. The writer of Hebrews quoted Psalm 118, and alluded to the Genesis stories of God’s faithful care for God’s people, to tell all God’s children that we can trust that God will never, ever abandon us.

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “It is in the nature of things that all earthly leaders must come and go. They have their part in the drama of life and then the curtain comes down. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His pre-eminence is permanent; his leadership is forever.” What experiences and insights have helped you to place your ultimate trust, not in any human leader or institution, but in Jesus? How have you found your trust in Jesus to be a source of “hope, which is a safe and secure anchor for our whole being” (Hebrews 6:19)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are creative and dynamic, yet your steadfast love, the core of your character, never changes. Teach me day by day how to more firmly anchor all my hope in you. Amen.

Family Activity: Read Psalm 91:1-2. Whether in the midst of disappointment or joy, we can always trust God. Gather as a family in a favorite room in your home. Talk about why that particular room is a favorite. Is it extra comfortable? Does it have more lighting? Now, move together to the least favorite room in your home (maybe the garage or laundry room). Discuss why it is the least favorite. Is it the dirtiest or the darkest? Back up in the comfortable room, talk about where each person experiences God’s presence most deeply. Ask each person to choose one uncomfortable or unfamiliar place this week to spend a bit of time and remember God is always present with everyone. Pray and thank God for always being with you and your family.