

## **Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21**

The story of Sarah and Hagar, and Abraham, is painful. Nobody comes off looking good. But for this reason it's worth examining, figuring where where things go wrong and whether they could go righter, also trawling for signs that God is on the job, since you would think God could do something about it.

We all know that in the ancient near east, a woman's value really depended on her bearing healthy children--well, healthy sons. Now Sarah and Abraham have been together for decades AND God has promised to make of them a great nation AND those three angels had said that despite her age Sarah would bear a son. That was ten. years. ago. It's painful enough to want children and not be able to have them, but the stakes here are so very high--and Sarah has not even been granted the grace of knowing the window of possibility has closed so that she can reconcile herself to barrenness. It would be very difficult to maintain equanimity in such a situation.

When Sarah offers Hagar to Abraham, that raises lots of red flags for us about human dignity. But it's a way--maybe the only way--that Sarah can have a child. Hagar is her surrogate. And then Hagar conceives, and it seems to Sarah that the balance of power has shifted, and she deals harshly with Hagar so that the girl runs away. An angel meets her though and sends her back with the assurance that she'll have many children, and the one she's carrying now will grow up to be a "wild ass" of a man.

So Sarah bears Isaac, but when she sees the two little brothers playing together, she can't stand it and she once again causes Hagar to be expelled from the home. Assured by God that Isaac will carry his lineage forward, Abraham gives Hagar a few supplies and sends her and

her son out into the desert, where they almost die, and Hagar moves away from the child so she won't have to see his agony. As we know, though, God sustains them miraculously, and Hagar does survive to raise a boy any mother would be proud of. As an additional grace to us, the Qur'an picks up the story and gives much more detail and texture to their lives, since tradition has it that the Prophet was descended from Ishmael. You just hate to see them disappear from the story, so it's good that the Qur'an picks it up.

But this is a story in which nobody can win. Sarah's really put up with this sense of failure for so many years, you can't blame her for her desperation. And yet Hagar is powerless in this story--an Egyptian, far from home, enslaved and living in the household of someone who at best tolerates her. Abraham is sort of oblivious. He's strangely passive in the whole matter, agreeing to "go in to" Hagar, letting Sarah treat Hagar badly, expelling Hagar when Sarah tells him to (and, to be fair, God gives a stamp of approval). I wonder if part of Sarah's desperation comes from having lived with the guy for decades and know that he could just drift into liking Hagar better than her, after all this time. Sarah has sunk everything into making this guy successful, and he doesn't seem to be as invested in the outcome as she is.

This situation in which nobody can win kind of reminds me of Pieper Lewis. She's the young woman who, as a teen, ran away from an abusive home and ended up finding shelter with a sex trafficker. In desperation one night she stabbed him to death. She was arrested, sentenced, and made to pay restitution to his family, but when there was a public outcry and her high school math teacher established a GoFundMe to pay the restitution, the justice system took another look at her and decided to put her in a sort of halfway house for women.

We all groaned and threw up her hands when it was reported that Ms. Lewis had cut off

her ankle bracelet and run away. How could she be so short-sighted? How could she throw away the second chance she'd been given by the grace and strenuous efforts of so many people who sympathized with her? She was caught, of course, and jailed, and then it came out why she had done it: she had been housed with older women who were using drugs. She was afraid of them. When she went to work, she was harassed at the bus stop by people she'd known in her rapist's circles. And then one of her housemates got COVID and she was quarantined, and she just broke and ran.

None of this is to excuse her, but it explains a lot. Pieper Lewis was in one bad situation after another, and the situation into which the justice system put her was also not good. Whether anyone had the power to change the situation, and whether she could reach such a person, she clearly didn't know and I don't either. So she did a desperate thing. Where is God in this?

Well, where is God in the painful story of Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah? It would be nice if God would do some of that problem-solving-by-fiat that the Bible occasionally reports, but I think God is improvising. When Hagar runs away, she is a pregnant woman without resources. It is true that the angel sends her back to Sarah. But the angel also emphasizes her role as a mother, rather than as a slave, and promises her an uncountable multitude of offspring. Further, Hagar is allowed to address God with her own name for God: El-Roi, I have seen God and lived. AND she knows she's been seen. The angel doesn't make any excuses for the situation she's in, but clearly knows that it's bad, and wants her to hang in there because there are better things in store. As a pregnant woman alone, she needs to be in a household, even though it's bad.

Later, though, after she has borne Ishmael, when Sarah has Abraham throw her out,

Hagar is sustained in the wilderness. It's not her best moment when she leaves the dying child so she doesn't have to watch his agony, but God hears *the boy's* cries and sends water and later a caravan (as per the Qur'an), and her brighter future begins. Now Hagar is better off in the wilderness than trapped forever in that household; that situation was doomed.

In the system they'd been given, the women make some poor moral choices. And Abraham is at best naive; he hasn't thought through his responsibilities. Unaware of the complexities of the situation, he just wants to have an heir, but he contributes to a situation that's really hard on the women in his life. Where is God for Abraham and Sarah? Keeping the original promises, I think.

The other important thing God does in this story, though, is witness what people are going through and let them know that they are seen. When you're in a terrible situation and trying to figure out what to do, with no good options, it makes a huge difference to know that someone sees you. I think that's what was missing for Pieper Lewis. She didn't have a witness or a community--not that they would have solved her problems, you know that. But cutting off the ankle bracelet and running away--that just shouts "I'm all alone and thinking in circles and I can't any more." Sometimes community solves your problems, but when it can't, it's still transformative to have your problems and be seen.

The *Washington Post* reported recently that high school students in Ft. Wayne pushed back successfully against their school's decision to cancel their spring play.<sup>i</sup> Auditions had just wrapped up for "Marian," a gender-bending version of Robin Hood. But some parents had objected, and the principal acceded to their demands. The students were devastated--but why? They could do another play, right? No. They were devastated because representation matters.

Queer students had just been told that they should be invisible, not seen.

This is a glorious story of triumph, though. The students took all the right steps, speaking to the school board and contacting the press, and although the school board refused to budge, the publicity yielded them a path forward. A former teacher stepped up to direct the play, and they found funding and other adults to help them put it on in an outdoor theater in the community. The students managed all their end-of-semester work, AP exams, and so forth, and put on the play at the end of May to riotous acclaim.

Close to 8:15 p.m. on opening night, the play more than halfway over, Fia Knipp's fears were deflating.

The security officers had had nothing to do. The audience had laughed, sighed and clapped at all the right moments.

When Sydney-as-Alanna confessed her love for a woman, the audience hooted approval. When Fia-as-Much declared, "I think that I'm not a man or a woman," no one hissed or booed.

Now came the lines Sydney liked most.

Will Scarlett, a member of Marian/Robin's troupe of Merry Men, was questioning Much's new gender identity. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, you can't stop being one thing," said Will, acted by sophomore Everly Salyers, "and start being another thing."

Sydney took two steps toward the people who had come to watch her defy what she called censorship.

"Yes, you can," she said. "You could wake up in love. You could wake up feeling a whole new way you never felt before."

She raised both arms in the air, half-pleading, half-triumphant.

"Anything," she shouted, "could happen!"

I don't think God has a "plan", other than the overarching plan of the kingdom. But no

predestination, no determinism. I think God improvises with what we and chance throw at God. In a bad situation for Hagar and Sarah, God did not turn patriarchy upside down or miraculously whisk Hagar away to a magical kingdom. But God did send an angel to listen to Hagar and assure her that she was blessed. God did bring Isaac into being and reassure Sarah that she had a place. God heard the cries of the thirsty Ishmael, and caused Hagar to see a well that she had not known was there. God improvises, so it behooves us to be observant, to look for people who need to be seen, who need a community or a good listening to, so that we can participate in God's improvisation.

God,  
we sometimes wonder why our lives take the paths they do.  
We seem to find ourselves in all sorts of situations we had never envisaged,  
and we wonder what you are doing and where you are.

Keep close to us, we pray,  
and give us the faith to trust you. Help us to be witnesses for one another, and send us witnesses when we feel alone. In your providence, may we know your glory and grace. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/31/marian-school-theater-lgbtq-indiana/>