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A New Way | *Suffering Promise*

Genesis 21

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Have you found yourself in a situation where you were suffering? A relationship went wrong, a mistake at work put your job in jeopardy? Your family isn't acting like family? Whatever the situation, in the midst of that suffering at times we are tempted to push all that suffering down within. But what we really need is for someone to hear us. Not to just listen, but for the other to hear our suffering, knowing what that suffering is and means for us. To know that we are not alone. And simply being heard can make all the difference.

I have some good friends who went through a painful divorce and through all the counseling they simply refused to hear each other. They listened to all kinds of things, but they couldn't or wouldn't hear each other. They were not interested in knowing the other's suffering. I do not know if hearing one another in that process would have saved their marriage, but in the hearing of one another in the midst of that suffering it would have brought some reconciliation. It wasn't until years later, after the damage had been done, that they finally heard one another. They heard each other's suffering and they finally have come to a healthy place.

This happens all the time in our world. Which is often reflected in our biblical story.

We are a people who have been brought to life by the breath of God, called to be God breathers as we name others into relationship and community who live in the merciful justice of God.

It's a beginning, a place for us to start but it doesn't hold everything. What do we do with suffering then? How does God breathe life into us when we are suffering? We are called to trust the story as we will see in Hagar's story. Hagar's story is our story.

But we don't start with suffering. We start with a promise. So... God Abraham of the promise God originally made to him.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵ He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen 15:1-5 NRS)

Here are a couple of interesting pieces and a quick literary note here. God comes to remind Abraham of the promise but Abraham, as you can imagine is a bit skeptical and responds with a question. "What will you give me?" Abraham says.

And then Abraham accuses – you have given me nothing. Whenever this happens in the biblical story it means that God didn't answer Abraham's question. And that silence is then filled with Abraham's real fear which causes Abraham to not trust the story and so he lashes out with an accusation. God's silence prompts Abraham to get to real with his own suffering. Abraham believes that his line will die with him. God has given him this huge promise but in the midst of his suffering he cannot see it. In the midst of his suffering all he can see is his suffering. And God is silent? And if you've experienced suffering, you know that there are times when you experience the silence of God. But God eventually responds by repeating the promise again, for the third time and then sends Abraham into a deep sleep and God walks the blood path, doing for Abraham what Abraham could not do for himself –

But that is what happens when we suffer. So often our suffering causes us to only see our suffering which causes us to suffer even more. We will see that laid out in the story of Hagar.

Scripture tells us that Hagar is an Egyptian and is the servant of Sarah. But Sarah and Abraham are unable to have kids – not just causing suffering to Abraham but also causing great suffering to Sarah – so in Sarah's suffering she comes up with a solution. She is going to give Hagar to Abraham as a wife so maybe Hagar can produce a child for the family and promise would be fulfilled. But do you see the setup here. The power dynamic is about to shift in major ways.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ² and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go (to) my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her."

Wait a minute. Sarah is going to take Hagar's children to be her own?

And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ 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. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵ 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!" ⁶ 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. (Gen 16:1-6 NRS)

Do you see the repetition here? The story is repeating itself because it's trying to make a point. It repeats the notion of Sarah being the wife... Hagar being the servant... but then Hagar becomes wife... the equal of Sarah... but when Hagar becomes pregnant, we now see Hagar as mother... above Sarah and Hagar shows it and Sarah sees it. Sarah's suffering cannot deal with it and in her suffering, Sarah bullies Hagar and Hagar runs away. But here is just one of the crazy parts of this story. Hagar runs away – with the promise! Hagar had not given birth yet. So in her womb is the promise and

Sarah bullies the promise carrier and the promise holder runs away. Lots and lots of suffering.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And 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." ⁹ The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." ¹⁰ The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." ¹¹ And 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. (Gen 16:7-11 NRS)

I find part of this to be some of most interesting commentary on suffering in our scripture. God finds Hagar, hears her suffering and then says, "I hear your suffering, Hagar, now go back and suffer some more". What? doesn't God take away her suffering? Certainly, God would not send Hagar back into suffering. But God sends Hagar back into suffering and here is why. God has made a promise, and Hagar is part of how that promise is going to come true. Suffering and promise are linked. Jesus even says in Matthew 16:24, "take up your cross and follow me" and Jesus is supposed to be the touch feely guy.

And so, Hagar, the carrier of the promise will suffer because that's the way it is. But Hagar is not only carrying the promise, but Hagar also receives a promise all her own and it's basically the exact same promise that was given to Abraham. So, at this point in the story Hagar is the only one in the history of humanity who is carrying two promises at the same time. Amazing. Hagar, the slave. Hagar, the bullied. Hagar, the less then. Hagar the blessed, double blessed.

And as expected Hagar does suffer at the hands of the suffering Sarah, but she has a boy named Ishmael. Then it's at this point we need to fast forward the story and catch up to where Pastor Sarah took us last week. Finally, Sarah and Abraham have a child, and they name him Isaac.

But Sarah is still suffering, whose child will fulfill the promise. Sarah, now the mother, simply cannot see anything other than her suffering and turning that suffering energy onto Hagar and has Abraham banish Hagar and Ismael.

It's harsh, but if someone is only focused on their suffering you can do some pretty harsh things. So, with only a bit of water and food, Hagar, the promise carrier, and Ishmael head out to the wild. They run out of water and Hagar, in her suffering, lays the suffering Ishmael under a bush and walks a bowshot away which depending on the bow would be about 200 yards away. She leaves Ishmael because she cannot bear to watch Ismael die.

And this is the ultimate victory that suffering seeks. Suffering seeks our attention. Suffering tugs at us and shouts louder than anything – look at me – here I am – I am your suffering – and that's all we see and that's all we react to – and suffering owns us. In Hagar's suffering she forgot who she was. Hagar was the promise carrier, she carried two promises, that's who she was. She was Promise Carrier Hagar, the double blessed Hagar, but suffering beat her down and she became Hagar the Sufferer. But again, God comes because God hears the sufferer.

What is very clear in scripture is that God doesn't wave a magic wand and take away suffering – we know that scripture tells us of a long desire of humanity to come to a point, one day, that suffering would end but in the mean time suffering is a here, a reality and one that God doesn't expect us to run from – but what is also very true, and is repeated time and time again, is that God hears us in our suffering.

¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation

of him." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. (Gen 21:16-19 NRS)

Just like with Abraham, God responds in the midst of the suffering with a reminder of the promise. And in that reminder of the promise – hope is restored. Hagar's eyes were opened, and she was able to see beyond her suffering to the promise. Her circumstance changed and what she couldn't see – the well of water – because of her suffering – she could now see because of the promise. The well didn't magically appear, it was there the whole time. Suffering blinded her to it.

And that's what suffering does. It can blind us to the promise. There are many promises that God gives to us that aren't necessarily connected to how many kids we will have. But in the midst of suffering this is a promise that I lean quite heavily on.

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39 NRS)

But as we've seen, suffering is very powerful, damaging and not something that we seek but something that's real in our lives. We can all identify with the suffering of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and their reactions to it. But what is also real is the promise that comes to us and just like Abraham and Hagar we need to be reminded of that promise.

Because the same Jesus so calls us to take up the cross and follow him is the same Jesus that says:

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Mat 11:28-30 NRS)