

**New Life Episcopal Church
Uniontown, Ohio**



Camille Corot – Hagar in the Wilderness 1835

**A Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2026**

Preacher – Charlyn Bridges

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalms 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Last week we heard about the promise that God made to Abram and Sarai. In the chapters leading up to today, we heard that Abram's descendants were to be "as numerous as the stars"

Today, we're going to consider what happens when we try to force God's promises on our own terms.

The LORD had brought Abram outside and had him look up toward Heaven and promised "Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars..."

Abram reminded God that there weren't any descendants. Abram was 75 and his wife, Sarai, would have been 65, well past the child-bearing age. How could they have descendants as numerous as the stars?

Sarai had an idea: She had this Egyptian maid, Hagar. She instructed her husband "You go into my maid; perhaps I will obtain children by her..."

Now you and I are surrounding the scene like characters out of a Greek chorus and we're saying through the generations: "Sarai, don't do it! God has another plan!"

But Sarah has logic on her side. In that day, it was perfectly acceptable for a servant to be a surrogate for her mistress. From a legal standpoint, she had a point. And ten years had passed since God's promise. When you're in your 70's and 80's as Abram and Sarai were, ten years is a long time.

Abram did as his wife said and we know what happened. Hagar conceived. Immediately, we see the situation go off the rails. Hagar, who had gotten pretty good performance reviews up to this point, became arrogant and hateful. Her mistress was humiliated. When she complained to Abram, he passed the situation back to her: "Your maid; your problem."

Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar led her to flee to the wilderness where an Angel of the LORD found her and sent her back to Sarai. Notice that Hagar didn't ask for help. The Angel of the LORD saw that she needed help and gave her guidance. Hagar would be the first person in scripture to receive an

annunciation from the Angel of the Lord. It was at this meeting that Hagar learned about the child she was carrying – that he would be important and that his name would be “Ishmael.”

We know that Hagar returned to Sarai because Ishmael was born. Abram was 86. When he was 99 years old God spoke to Abram again, told him he would be the father of many nations but that the lineage would come through Sarai.

Now we have specifics of the timing. The son of promise would come from Sarai, and she would bear this son within the next year. She would be 90 and Abram would be 100. They even knew what the child would be named: Isaac. Their own names would change as well. Abram would become Abraham and Sarai would be called Sarah.

Sarah had a promised date for the arrival of her son. She would become the mother of nations and God would establish his covenant with Isaac.

Now Sarah had a clearer understanding of God’s plan. Isaac was the child of Divine Promise. Ishmael was the child of Human Initiative. Ishmael came about because Sarah took matters into her own hands.

Isaac was the child she carried. The child she nursed and bonded with; the child who brought her joy and laughter. Ishmael was Hagar’s son. Every time she saw Ishmael, she was reminded of her decision to manipulate God’s plan. It became a source of torment.

The final straw came when Abraham planned a feast for the day Isaac was weaned. Ishmael scoffed at the elderly couple and their young toddler. That was enough. He shattered the spirit of the celebration and besides, he was a teenager. She wanted Ishmael gone and Hagar with him.

She turned to Abraham again to delegate the deed and said, “Cast out this bondswoman and her son for this son shall not be heir with my son, namely Isaac.”

Abraham was very displeased. This may not have been Sarah’s son, but he was Abraham’s son. Eighty-six years is a long time to wait to become a father and Abraham loved Ishmael. He was the first-born son and was the only son for a number of years.

In addition, the culture of that time, it would have been reprehensible to send Ishmael away. When a surrogate wife had borne a son to one's husband, that mother and child could not be dismissed even if the first wife had subsequently given birth to a son.

Abraham only changed his mind because of the direct intervention of God who told Abraham to "Listen to Sarah's voice."

God reassured the 100-year-old Abraham that his son Isaac would be called but that Ishmael would also become a nation "Because he is your seed..."

With that Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and sent Hagar and Ishmael into the Wilderness of Beersheba. As they wandered into the wilderness, the cool of the morning dissipated, and their provisions were used up. With what seemed like an imminent death for both of them, Hagar placed Ishmael under a bush. She sat some distance away and made this pitiful plea: "Let me not see the death of the boy."

God heard her plea and he also heard Ishmael's voice. Do you find it interesting that neither Hagar or Ishmael are part of the select line, but God hears – and responds to -- their petition. God's promise extends beyond the chosen line.

God sees the marginalized and hears their cry. Hagar even gave God a name. El Roi, the God who Sees ME.

What happened next reveals the tenderest part of the heart of God. God could have directed Ishmael to the source of water but he went back to Hagar. She, who didn't want to see her son perish in the wilderness, now becomes the instrument to save his life. God directed Hagar to the nearby well and she was able to refill the skin with water and bring this life-giving water to Ishmael. We've learned from other places in the Old Testament, that water is a symbol of spiritual salvation as well as physical salvation.

God also assures Hagar that he has a plan for her son. "I will make him a great nation..." History tells us that Ishmael became an archer and that Hagar chose for him a wife – an Egyptian wife – one of her own people.

God had also given Hagar a heads-up that this son would be a "wild man" that is "his hand will be against every man and every man against him." If you're wondering if that's true, you only need to listen to the international

news each day. In the 4000 years that have passed since these events, keeping the peace has been --and is -- an ongoing challenge. The question is “How do we live as children of promise in a world full of conflict and competing claims?”

In this story, God hears the cry of the boy and the cry of the mother. God hears the cry of the promised child and the cry of the cast-out child. And God hears our cries too—whether we are at the center of the story or lost in the wilderness.

I came upon a prayer online not long ago. It was short but heartfelt: “God please let the sons of Abraham live in peace.”

Amen